

FEE Stories

Private Schools Shouldn't Be a Political Battleground for Critical Race Theory

Lawmakers should resist the temptation to interfere in private schools.

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Colleen Hroncich

Remote instruction during COVID-19 let parents see first-hand what their children were learning at school. Many weren't happy with what they consider political indoctrination in the classroom, particularly around "critical race theory" (CRT) and sexual content. When parents disagree with what their public schools are doing, they often must resort to political action to change things.

But for families in private schools, there's a different solution. If they can't convince the school to change, they can leave—and take their tuition dollars with them. This is an exemplary approach, but it only works if private schools are allowed to decide their own curriculum. If lawmakers are given the authority to mandate or ban certain topics in private classrooms, families are inevitably left with fewer choices. That's why efforts like Georgia Senate Bill 613, the Common Humanity in Private Education Act, are ill-considered.

The initial response to the CRT-related outcries was often to deny CRT was in schools, which may be technically true but deflects from the concerns raised by these parents. Rightly or wrongly, CRT has now been adopted as a catch-all label for many race-based teachings.

Black, Asian, Hispanic, white, and biracial parents have spoken out against CRT-inspired teachings in schools, such as privilege walks, telling white kids they're oppressors and black kids they're oppressed, or ideas like math is racist.

Conversely, some parents believe these teachings are needed to reduce inequality. Some black parents believe their voices have been left out of the CRT discussion. Virginia mom Rakelle Mullenix told the *Washington Post*, "It seems as though Black and Brown voices were ignored, and the voices were centered on White parents and their concerns."

When it comes to sexual content, many parents were shocked to find graphic novels in their schools that included literally graphic images of sexual acts. Some were even ousted from meetings for reading aloud books like *Gender Queer*, a sexually explicit book in some school libraries.

Maia Kobabe, author of *Gender Queer*, says “queer kids need queer stories” and implies the controversy is due to it being “queer sexuality.” While there can be value in diverse kids seeing themselves in books, most people would agree not every book belongs in school libraries. Realistically, the parents objecting to this content would probably protest graphic images of straight sex in their children’s school libraries, too.

Since public schools are, in fact, government schools, these controversies have pushed parents into the political arena. Across the country, parents are running for school board and organizing board recalls—even in very progressive San Francisco.

Parents have also turned to state government. Since January 2021, restrictions on instruction about racial and sexual issues have been introduced in 41 states and approved in 15. Iowa, for example, passed a law forbidding public schools from teaching concepts like one race or sex is superior to others, or any form of race or sex scapegoating or stereotyping.

There is logic to looking to the state for relief since state legislatures typically set learning standards for public schools. But when the legislature rules in favor of some parents, others necessarily lose. This is the nature of a government-run school system—the side with more political might wins and the side with less loses. It’s been this way since the earliest days of public schooling in America, when sometimes brutal fights revolved around issues such as which version of the Bible would be taught in public schools.

The Cato Institute’s Public Schooling Battle Map has consistently chronicled these battles since roughly 2006, and we’ve certainly seen an uptick in recent years.

Fortunately, there’s a better way. Funding students instead of a particular system would reduce these conflicts by allowing families to freely choose the education that fits their values and needs rather than having to fight for supremacy.

Georgia’s proposed SB 613 would increase these battles by inserting winner-take-all government control over private school teachings as well. The legislation would prohibit many racial, sexual, and gender identity teachings in private schools.

SB 613 would be a massive government overreach. And it could open the door for government intrusion on other private school teachings, including religious teachings about marriage and sexuality.

Political battles, and resulting inequality under the law for losers, are part and parcel of government-run public schools. The remedy is freedom; by letting parents choose the educational environment that works for their families, we can minimize political battles around education.

Lawmakers should resist the temptation to interfere in private schools. Rather than impose their view of “right” via political power, they should focus on winning minds in the marketplace of ideas.

Colleen Hroncich is a policy analyst at the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.