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Why the Critical Race Theory Fight Is Harder for Educators Than the Common Core Battle

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Roughly a decade before Republicans nationwide made critical race theory a cudgel in their attack on teaching and curricula they deem biased and divisive, the common core was the education world's political crucible.

It was a concrete set of K-12 academic standards launched by the nation's governors and schools chiefs, not—like critical race theory—a broad lens to analyze the lasting impact of racism in American society. But that didn't insulate the Common Core State Standards from an ideological firestorm.

Supporters and critics fought over the standards' quality and implementation, with some critiques more based in fact than others. State lawmakers and school officials, feeling the heat, rushed to dump the common core—or at least pantomimed doing so. Even defining what the standards were and weren't could prompt fierce debate.

It was a moment when K-12 education—often ignored at the national level—moved further into the realm of "general-purpose politics," in the words of one education scholar, even embedding itself in Republican campaign rhetoric. How educators felt, and what they did, was often left out of the debate.

Now it's critical race theory's turn.

The term itself has been commandeered by conservative critics, who've stretched it to cover various ways in which schools address issues like racism and sexism. Angry encounters about the issue roil school board meetings. Districts' strategic plans or classroom lessons that deal with race rapidly make the rounds on social media. Political action committees opposing critical race theory supersede anti-common-core PACs of past years. State lawmakers target it as part of sweeping new restrictions on teaching "divisive concepts." Political actors probe for the best way to leverage the issue, with an eye toward looming elections.

The political playbook might be similar. But the fundamental differences between the two issues also show how the hub of education politics has shifted.

Tension about the common core stemmed largely from disputes about the federal role in schools, and how teachers teach math. It represented perhaps the most prominent moment for an

education policy community that for decades has focused on standards, accountability, and assessments. But it didn't touch on profound divisions over American history and identity.

Now, however, the divide in how people think about the role of race in America's past and present, driven by events like the 2020 murder of George Floyd by a police officer, is reflected in the struggle over how schools should address racism as well as issues like sexism. The issue is more personal and profound than any government white paper or policy decision, and schools are grappling with it once again in a heated and fragmented political culture. Partisans, in turn, have used it to push schools farther into the national political spotlight.

Conservative criticisms about how schools are addressing these issues are "more tied to broader cultural critiques" than what goes in classrooms and how it's measured, said Jay Barth, a former member of Arkansas state board of education.

Once again, those in charge of schools and classrooms are forced to navigate between instructional imperatives and the political and cultural battles raging around them.

Genelle Faulkner, a middle school science teacher in the Boston public schools, said she teaches students about how her subject area was used in the past to uphold ugly rationales for enslavement and belief that Black people were inferior.

She said debates over issues like critical race theory and the common core can inflame rather than inform. But she sees a long road ahead for schools trying to focus on equity and social justice.

"I think this will be a harder battle than the common core," Faulkner said.

The common core fight did not involve the same sort of fundamental tensions as critical race theory and all it has come to represent, said Jason Glass, Kentucky's education commissioner, who previously served as Iowa's chief state school officer and as a district superintendent.

But he said conservatives who feared the way the federal government supported the common core should remember those concerns before demanding official sanctions for teachers for how they teach about racism, or the micromanagement of classrooms.

Addressing "misinformation and political hot air directly, but in a nonconfrontational way," as the conversations about the common core sometimes required, should also drive school leaders' approach in the current debate, he said.

"We're not the legal defense team for critical race theory. But we are advancing equity, and that's not the same as critical race theory," said Glass.

As experts battle critics, educators are caught in the middle

Sandy Boyd, a former official at Achieve, an education nonprofit that helped develop the common-core standards, said some of the same tactics used by common-core opponents are being used today by those who are politicizing policy to achieve tangible outcomes outside classrooms.

"Teachers, parents, students and school board members need to know how to talk about this stuff because it does have day-to-day impacts on teaching and learning. ... But fundamentally this is a political issue," said Boyd, who's now the CEO of Seek Common Ground, a group that seeks to

engage communities in state and local education decision-making. “And the people who’ve ginned it up, they’ve got political goals, just as the Tea Party did during the common core days.”

Those who oppose what they see as the encroachment of critical race theory and damaging discussions of race in classrooms say the public deserves to know what it means when their local schools commit to things like addressing systemic racism. They’ve used tactics like official information requests and federal civil rights complaints as part of their strategy.

“Social media, as it does with many other things, played a role with the common core, but it’s grown even more,” said Chip Slaven, the chief advocacy officer at the National School Boards Association, who is hearing more questions and concerns from members recently about critical race theory and related issues. “You can have people in the field sometimes explaining what something is, and people will not believe them.”

But discussing the common core was straightforward in a way talking about critical race theory is not.

The common core, a set of math and English/language arts standards, had high-profile official supporters when it was unveiled in 2010, from government officials to business executives. At its height, it was adopted by all but four states. It is still widely used.

Meanwhile, whether schools are even using or influenced by critical race theory is the subject of disagreement and vitriol. Educators and others who flatly deny critical race theory is taught in schools, for example, are met with suspicion from those who see initiatives focused on things like equity as inextricably tied to the concept.

To combat misinformation or misunderstanding, Slaven stressed that local officials should emphasize in public forums what schools are not doing, such as clarifying that critical race theory is not used in schools, as well as what they are doing.

Others aren’t so sure that those kind of technical explanations will calm the waters.

“Different sides are claiming different definitions of what it means, and so it becomes harder. Different tribes might hear the same words in very different ways,” said Michael Petrilli, the president of the conservative Thomas B. Fordham Institute, who’s supported the common core and opposes the ways he believes critical race theory is influencing some schools.

Neal McCluskey, the director of the Center for Education Freedom at the libertarian Cato Institute, said he’s concerned that new state laws dealing with racism and sexism might wrongly place certain topics off limits. But he is also skeptical of people who casually and unfairly dismiss concerns from members of the public about the topic.

“The critical race theory debate has quickly gotten marked by accusations that one side or the other doesn’t know what they’re talking about. This is the same thing that happened with the common core debate,” he said.

Parents who are concerned about how their schools are addressing topics like white supremacy, McCluskey said, shouldn’t be scorned by those who rely on denials that teachers are using critical race theory in classrooms, he said.

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Sandy Boyd

He said he saw the same sort of hairsplitting arguments from supporters of the common core. In both instances, a gulf defined the discourse that wasn't strictly about policy or practice

"It's a problem whenever experts try to sit in judgment of nonexperts," McCluskey said.

More broadly, regardless of how politicians and commentators like Fox News' Tucker Carlson have exploited the issue, it would be "a mistake for anyone to view this as just a case of Astroturf," Petrilli said, referring to groups that are presented as grassroots efforts but are actually run by professional political operatives.

"You can't get this kind of reaction from the grassroots if there's not some there there," he said.

Opposition to the standards was driven by different political considerations

Also notable: Critical race theory and common core don't share all of the same enemies.

A significant share of the backlash to the common core came from people critical of the tests that assessment groups developed in alignment with the standards. This also evolved into a protest, backed by teachers' unions as well as some who identified as progressives, against federally mandated standardized tests themselves, a requirement that predated the common core.

Since those battles played out, education levels as well as race have increasingly determined partisan affiliation. While not all skeptics of concepts like critical race theory are conservatives, virtually all the official backlash to it in the context of schools has come from Republican lawmakers.

At least one incident that intensified backlash to the standards also foreshadowed the potency of combining racial politics with national education issues.

In 2014, an author of the common core's English/language arts standards, David Pook, a teacher at a New Hampshire private school, said he recognized his relatively privileged place in America as a white man, and that one of his reasons for contributing to the common core was to help "all kids get an equal opportunity to learn how to read."

His remarks were picked up by Fox News and other conservatives outlets, one of which presented his comments as an "attack on white people." (Separately, in 2018, Pook pleaded guilty to misdemeanor charges related to interactions with a former student.) That sort of uproar involving education and race, while not frequent during common core debates, is par for the course during today's strife over how schools address race.

"It's white backlash plus moral panic, whereas common core was mostly just moral panic," said Nate Bowling, the 2016 Washington state teacher of the year who teaches social studies.

Educators' opinions of the common core and issues like systemic racism have proven to be more nuanced than many might have assumed. How the current uproar swirling around educators changes their knowledge and opinions over time could be crucial.

"If you were a proponent of critical race theory, you couldn't ask for a better moment to make it better known," Glass said of today's debate. "You will not be able to stop people from learning about it, either independently or in groups on their own."

Assessing the federal role in national education politics can be difficult

Incentives for national politicians to respond to these controversies can be strong and have a long-lasting impact.

In 2013, then-U.S. Rep. Martha Roby, R-Ala., introduced legislation to prohibit the U.S. Department of Education from using legal waivers or grant money to incentivize states to adopt content standards. The bill itself didn't get traction. However, when members of Congress revamped the main federal K-12 law in 2015 and created the Every Student Succeeds Act, they essentially barred the federal government from getting involved in states' decisions about standards.

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This year, in response to a growing furor over schools' approaches to issues like systemic racism, GOP lawmakers have introduced legislation to bar Washington from supporting critical race theory in schools, as well as a bill to withhold funding from schools that use the 1619 Project—a New York Times Magazine series that puts slavery and racism at the center of American history—in classrooms lessons.

These proposals are “messaging” bills and stand virtually no chance of advancing in this Congress. Moreover, the kind of deal policymakers struck when it came to the common core might prove elusive today. McCluskey said there is “no one thing anyone can do” on Capitol Hill or elsewhere to settle the current dispute over race, racism, and how schools address it.

But Boyd, of Seek Common Ground, said Virginia is an important place to watch to gauge the effectiveness at the ballot box of grievances over critical race theory. That's because Virginia has “off-year” statewide elections this year, and could provide lessons for those seeking to leverage the issue for congressional elections in 2022.

The state's proximity to the Beltway and a large class of people whose profession is politics could also bolster Virginia's status as a proving ground for the issue.

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Last month, most candidates seeking the Republican nomination in the state's gubernatorial race pledged opposition to critical race theory. And a fight over the issue in Virginia's Loudoun County resulted in an arrest at a recent school board meeting.

Boyd said that ultimately, “It's about who wins in the midterms. It's about drawing out anxious white suburban voters.”

How the focus of big education disputes shifted during the Trump administration

Donald Trump's two presidential campaigns and his time as president demonstrate how the political gravity has shifted.

He was elected in 2016 promising, among other things, to end the common core—something he lacked the power to do—and empower local leaders and parents in education.

But in his last year in office, he stumped for “patriotic education” and attacked what he deemed to be left-wing and subversive trends in what students learned about America’s history with race. And a Trump executive order from last year banned trainings about diversity in the federal government. The common core had basically disappeared from his rhetoric.

This year, state lawmakers have included language from Trump’s executive order in legislation restricting how educators deal with racism and other issues.

Beyond new state laws and fiery rhetoric, the impact of the debate on classroom practices will take time to discern.

Faulkner, the Boston teacher, said she’s still watching to see how her own district approaches issues involving race and social justice. And she doesn’t want America’s history with racism to define her entire message to students. “I want my students to know: There are endless opportunities, there are tragic atrocities,” she said.

And while Bowling thinks the current furor over critical race theory will fade, he worries the new restrictive laws have created “a target on the backs of teachers” that will endure when it comes to speech.

“It’s one thing to have state standards. It’s another to ban whole areas of exploration,” Bowling said.