

THE DISPATCH

White House Tiptoes Into 'Anti-Racism' Culture War

A proposed Department of Education rule prioritizing civics projects concerning 'systemic marginalization' may be small, but critics are alarmed by what it symbolizes.

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The American History and Civics Education programs, through which the Department of Education distributes a handful of grants per year for teachers and high school students to learn more about their country and its history, are a tiny backwater of the sprawling \$74 billion department. But thanks to a new proposed rule, the longstanding program stands to become a culture-war flashpoint as the Biden administration's first foray into the world of "anti-racist" education.

The rule, a draft of which was entered into the Federal Register last week, would prioritize "projects that incorporate racially, ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse perspectives into teaching and learning."

To qualify for a grant under this priority, an applicant "must describe how its proposed project incorporates teaching and learning practices that take into account systemic marginalization, biases, inequities, and discriminatory policy and practice in American history."

In explaining the purpose behind the change, the rule elaborates:

There is growing acknowledgement of the importance of including, in the teaching and learning of our country's history, both the consequences of slavery, and the significant contributions of Black Americans to our society. This acknowledgement is reflected, for example, in the *New York Times*' landmark '1619 Project' and in the resources of the Smithsonian's National Museum of African American History. Accordingly, schools across the country are working to incorporate antiracist practices into teaching and learning.

Anti-racism is the principle—newly in vogue among progressives in recent years—that it is insufficient for white people to simply be "not racist," in the sense of not harboring personal prejudice against minorities. Rather, anti-racism theory states, there exists a society-wide moral imperative to actively work to fight systemic racism wherever it exists—which is, by definition, anywhere one racial group is doing better on aggregate than another.

Scholar Ibram X. Kendi, whom the proposed rule also cites, argued in his book *How to Be an Antiracist* that "racial discrimination is not inherently racist." In fact, racial discrimination can be *anti-racist* so long as it "is creating equity."

"The only remedy to racist discrimination," Kendi wrote, "is antiracist discrimination."

Both Kendi's work and the 1619 Project have been objects of culture-war controversy in recent years, and their citation in a grant priority rule is highly unusual. (The 1619 Project in

particular—which pledged “to reframe the country’s history” according to the understanding that 1619, the year the first black slaves were brought to America, was America’s “true founding”—has been dinged by historians across the ideological spectrum for a number of factual errors.)

Because the program is so small, as a practical matter, the proposed rule’s immediate concrete impact would be extremely muted. It’s rather what the move symbolizes that some critics find alarming: that the Biden administration is displaying a willingness to put a thumb on the scales in favor of schools teaching a particular and controversial view of U.S. history.

“Even though it’s quite small, and it’s still a draft, it’s the federal government more directly saying ‘You should teach or instruct in these things—critical race theory and all that’s connected with it,’” said Neal McCluskey, director of the Cato Institute’s Center for Educational Freedom. “The size, you might say, is negligible. But the principle of what they’re doing is pretty significant.”

It isn’t unprecedented for the White House to weigh in on the cultural debate over how slavery and racism should be taught in schools. In an attempt to counterprogram the 1619 Project with “patriotic history,” the Trump administration empaneled a “1776 Commission” in September 2020. Staffed by conservative educators and political theorists, the commission published a report in the last week of Trump’s term, which the White House hailed as “a definitive chronicle of the American founding, a powerful description of the effect the principles of the Declaration of Independence have had on this Nation’s history, and a dispositive rebuttal of reckless ‘re-education’ attempts that seek to reframe American history around the idea that the United States is not an exceptional country but an evil one.”

The commission report—which was more a work of apologia than of history and had its own large set of expert critics—was a high-profile enterprise far outstripping, both in funding and in visibility, Biden’s proposed rule change. But former Trump Department of Education officials point out one critical qualitative difference: The 1776 Commission entered the trenches of the history-of-racism debate, but the department under Trump never used federal funding to incentivize the teaching of either side of that debate in school curricula.

“Despite clear preferences and views on what is proper or appropriate, for four years Secretary DeVos and the Trump administration steadfastly avoided putting a thumb on the scale in terms of any curriculum decisions,” said Nate Bailey, who served as chief of staff to Betsy DeVos, Trump’s secretary of education. “I can’t tell you how many times Betsy said, to friends and foes alike, ‘There is no role for the federal government when it comes to curriculum.’ That’s a local decision.”

Since its inception, the Department of Education has been prohibited by law from mandating or prescribing curriculum content or standards. It’s a prohibition that has long been accompanied by general public hostility toward top-down curricular directives. Even efforts to standardize curricula via the voluntary adoption of national standards typically fail to evade suspicion that Washington is butting in where it doesn’t belong—think of the controversies surrounding Common Core during the Obama years.

A ban on mandating content doesn’t necessarily prevent the department from incentivizing specific types of programs by including funding for them in discretionary grants. Still, it’s unusual for grant priorities to focus on curriculum content. Other grant priorities for the

American History and Civics Education programs require an applicant's program to involve particular skills or resources, not a specific view of civics or history. Typically, they're downright anodyne: The same rule also proposes a priority for "promoting information literacy skills," and a preexisting priority exists for projects using the resources of U.S. National Parks.

"I think you'd be absolutely right to say this is skating pretty close to the edge of the general ban on the Education Department getting involved with curriculum," said Chester Finn, who served as an assistant secretary of education under George H.W. Bush and is now a distinguished senior fellow at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, a conservative education think tank. "It certainly is skating well into the left's fascination with this kind of history."

(A Department of Education spokesperson declined to comment beyond the text of the rule itself.)

Some conservative-media coverage of the proposed rule has characterized it as a bombshell move that will unleash a monsoon of woke ideology across U.S. public schools. A *Washington Free Beacon* [report](#) asserted it would "flood public schools with woke curricula" and "increase grants to woke groups across the country." Given the scope of the actual programs in question—which awarded [three total grants](#) in 2018—this seems premature.

Further, some question whether the anti-racism structure of the proposed grant priority itself is as controversial as the language in the rule that introduces it. Thomas B. Fordham Institute President Michael Petrilli said that the language in the preamble, including the citation of Kendi, is "way over the line."

"But what about the meat and potatoes of the priority itself?" Petrilli said. "Without reading malintent into it, I don't see anything that's horrible."

But what *is* unquestionably significant is what the rule signifies about what the Biden administration sees as the sort of civics education worth investing federal money in. That doesn't mean much now—but it's likely to become more important in the months ahead. Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have been tossing around the idea of dramatically beefing up federal investment in civics education. The Educating for Democracy Act, which would appropriate \$1 billion of federal money per year for new discretionary grants for teaching civics, was introduced last year with bipartisan cosponsors in both [the House](#) and [the Senate](#).

According to Finn, the question is what will happen "if the federal money gets authorized and appropriated in large quantities and is then administered through the same political sensibility as this little program we've been talking about."

"There is a larger-scale mischief on the horizon," he said, "if we get a big bucks program on the heels of this little one."