



## Government indoctrination, whether 'critical' or 'patriotic,' is wrong

Neal McCluskey

May 11, 2021

This week, former Trump administration Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson and South Dakota Gov. Kristi Noem (R) penned a Fox News op-ed that ran under the headline: “Biggest cultural challenge of our lifetime: Defeating anti-American indoctrination.” Their target was critical race theory (CRT) and any other approach to understanding the country focused, in their minds, too much on the failings of Founders such as George Washington, or opposition to the notion “that as individuals we are all created equal by God.”

Carson and Noem offered an understandable — maybe even compelling — argument for teaching “inspiring” American history focused on national ideals such as liberty and equality under the law. But their goal was not just to convince readers that this is the right approach to history. It was to have public schools — *government* schools — perpetuate it. And that is no less “indoctrination” than what many accuse critical race theorists of when they push for public schools to teach what they think is right.

Indeed, anyone who tries to make public schools teach or not teach something, is supporting government-forced indoctrination.

Unfortunately, good people on all sides of CRT — and myriad other issues — have no recourse if they care what their children learn. Public schooling makes such indoctrination inescapable: One school or district cannot treat two groups equally if, for instance, one says the social studies curriculum pays too little attention to systemic racism, and the other says it is just right.

We see the poisonous fruit of this in multiple states, including Idaho, New Hampshire, Texas, and Tennessee, which have passed or are debating bills prohibiting the teaching of “divisive concepts” in public schools. The acts are aimed at keeping tenets of critical race theory, such as that white people are inclined, even subconsciously, to perceive themselves as the norm and others as marginal, from being considered in schools.

On the flip side, New Jersey has mandated that all public school students “examine the impact that unconscious bias and economic disparities have at both an individual level and on society as a whole.” And the Rochester, Minn., school district just declared pro-Black Lives Matter expression official “government speech” in order to promote it without giving time to alternate views.

Not surprisingly, many people become enraged when governments push controversial views on their children, making already burning issues explosive.

As a resident in Texas's Carroll Independent School District observed about a battle over "inclusion training" for students and teachers, "I don't feel like we're at a place right now where either side is talking to the other side. I feel like people are lobbing grenades back and forth."

So public schooling not only requires indoctrination anathema to equality and free thought, it divides communities into warring camps.

What is the solution? Set people free: let education dollars follow students to the schools their families choose, while giving educators autonomy to teach how and what they think is right.

No more government control, no more need to fight. And the good news is choice is on the move this year, with numerous states creating new programs, expanding old ones, or looking to do so.

Some will object that such choice is unacceptable because it would enable families to select schools that adhere to beliefs, or teach versions of history, they find intolerant, or just wrong.

Of course, one person's "intolerance" is another's "morality." And just as we are seeing new state laws against CRT, many states are working to prohibit transgender girls from participating in girls' sports. The moral: If you do not let people with beliefs you dislike choose, they may well impose them on you. Indeed, they have no other recourse.

Another objection is that with choice, some children would be placed in schools where monolithic views are taught.

Could be. But as illustrated by some high-profile private schools having their own debates about CRT, such as the Brearley school in New York City, uniform thinking is unlikely. Their conflicts, however, are inherently lower stakes and less sweeping than in public schools. Families that do not like what a private school is teaching can leave or never enroll.

It is also nearly impossible to wall one's children off from the larger world. Whether through the Internet, television, or just billboards on a drive, greater society is not only easy to access, it can be quite intrusive.

No matter where you stand on burning issues like critical race theory, you should oppose government indoctrination. And if you do, you will demand school choice for all.

*Neal McCluskey directs the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom and runs Cato's Public Schooling Battle Map*