



## **The Critical Race Theory Debate Wouldn't Matter if We Had More School Choice**

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A recent school board meeting in Loudon County, Virginia, turned so heated that attendees faced off in dueling protests and people were hauled off in handcuffs. The main point of disagreement was over the teaching (real or imaginary) of critical race theory (CRT) in public school classrooms, and parents' feelings over that controversial nominally anti-racist but really racially obsessed ideology. The conflict represented an escalation in the ongoing national curriculum wars that, like all such battles, could be peacefully settled by recognizing families' rights to choose educational approaches instead of surrendering children to the whims of government bureaucrats.

"Parents protesting against critical race theory broke into the national anthem when the Loudoun Co., Virginia school board ended public comment because the crowd got too out of hand," Reuters' Gabriella Borter tweeted June 22. "The Loudoun County sheriff's office declared the school board meeting an unlawful assembly. Everyone told to get out or will be trespassing. Two arrests made."

The confrontation in Loudon County is part of a national debate over critical race theory (a subset of overarching critical theory) and related belief systems which, in the guise of deconstructing oppressive and hierarchical human relationships instead strip people of individuality and reduce them to representatives of group identities. This intellectual movement rejects rationalism and objectivity, and brands the West, in general, and the United States, in particular, as irredeemably racist—but its collectivism breeds racism every bit as pernicious as anything cooked up by the Ku Klux Klan.

In response, some states are banning the teaching of CRT—an approach that threatens to turn advocates of the ideology into free speech martyrs fighting the entrenched establishment. Trinity College's Isaac Kamola argues that many Americans oppose the ideology "because academic, journalistic and movement efforts to critically interrogate the lasting impact of slavery and American racism fundamentally challenge the free market fundamentalist ideology." That's a wildly tendentious claim, but ideological bans lend it a gloss of credibility.

Bans also run afoul of the difficulty inherent in trying to filter ideas which can be taught without use of a red-flag brand name, or by teachers who unknowingly absorb assumptions which permeate academia and then pass them on to students without reference to specific scholarly sources. Removing ideas from their origins makes it easier to pretend the ideology has little presence in classrooms.

"No, 6-year-olds are not being taught Derrick Bell — or forced to read Judith Butler, or God help them, Kimberlé Crenshaw," observes writer Andrew Sullivan. "Of course they aren't — and I don't know anyone who says they are. But they are being taught popularized terms, new words, and a whole new epistemology that is directly downstream of academic critical theory."

Sullivan compares the role of CRT in many schools' curricula to lessons in Catholic school, which don't dwell on theological intricacies but do pass along the religion's values. Also, he points out, CRT rejects the foundations of the liberal order in free and open societies. That ups the ante on the decades-long national battles over what is taught in public school classrooms.

"Rather than build bridges, public schooling often forces people into wrenching, zero-sum conflict," notes the Cato Institute's Public Schooling Battle Map, which tracked such debates long before the current controversy. "Think creationism versus evolution, or assigned readings containing racial slurs. The conflicts are often intensely personal, and guarantee if one fundamental value wins, another *loses*."

That said, families that choose how their children learn—my own included—rather than defaulting to government-run institutions don't have to lose *anything* because we have largely escaped these battles. By homeschooling, or micro-schooling, or picking private or charter schools, we can avoid curricula permeated with ideas we find toxic and select those that present ideas of which we approve or, even better from my perspective, that encourage open debate among opposing perspectives.

"The kids break into two groups at lunch," my son tells me of his private high school. "The smaller group is really woke and always angry about something. I sit with the larger group of normal kids."

My wife and I aren't worried that the school will suddenly turn into a CRT seminary. We like and trust the administrators and teachers, but we also pay tuition. If the school abandons its open embrace of discussion and debate, we'll stop those payments and educate our son elsewhere.

That's not to say that we're emulating conservative lawmakers by trying to shield our kid from ideas we dislike. Our son is going to encounter them one way or another, so we prepare him to

engage with CRT's advocates. This summer, alongside time devoted to fun activities, he's reading *Cynical Theories* by Helen Pluckrose and James Lindsay, as well as materials that support enlightenment values, individualism, and open debate. You don't fight bad ideas by ignoring them; you have to understand them and their flaws.

Parents that reject liberalism and support CRT also have alternatives to battling over the content of schoolroom lessons. They can introduce their tykes to Ibram X. Kendi's *Antiracist Baby Picture Book*, marinate their kids in CRT-infused homeschooling, or send them to one of many private schools that offer willing families an education steeped in the ideology. That sounds like a tour through hell, to me, but if that's what they want their kids to learn, let them do so in peace, and without zero-sum arguments about what children are taught in shared institutions.

Then our kids can engage with each other's ideas in a society of diverse viewpoints.

The curriculum wars were nasty enough when they were over competing editions of textbooks spun for conservative school boards in Texas and liberal educators in California, or about whether to call the United States a "democracy" or a "republic." Now that the debate is escalating over more fundamental differences involving the value of liberal ideas, individualism, and rationality, it's difficult to see how Americans of opposing viewpoints can share tax-funded schools that fall on one side or the other of the ideological divide. So let's not even try when we can encourage the growing exodus from public schools to alternatives of all sorts.

We don't need to wage the curriculum wars at all. Instead, let's pick where and how our children are educated, and encourage others to do the same. Then they can hash out their ideas in a society that remains open to disagreement and debate.