

AlterNet

Here's the truth behind the right-wing attacks on critical race theory

Jeff Bryant

May 28, 2021

When North Carolina public school teacher Justin Parmenter penned an opinion piece for the Charlotte Observer about the difficulties of teaching in hybrid mode during the pandemic, with students both in-person in the classroom and remote online, he didn't expect to get called out by a legislator on the floor of the state House of Representatives.

The main point of his editorial, Parmenter told me in a phone call, was that teaching his seventh-grade class in the hybrid model isn't sustainable because it forces teachers to make compromises that limit the learning opportunities of their students.

But that point was not what Iredell County Republican Representative Jeff McNeely was compelled to comment on. Instead, he attacked Parmenter, who was named a finalist for Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools Teacher of the Year in 2016, for attempting to "indoctrinate" his students about "environmental pollution."

As Parmenter explains on his personal blog, McNeely's remarks referred to a piece of writing Parmenter asked his students to respond to that happened to be about pollution, and McNeely made his comment in the context of a discussion in the House about a new bill, HB 755, that "would require schools to post online a comprehensive list of all teaching, classroom, and assignment materials used by every teacher in every class session," according to WRAL. McNeely spoke out in support of the bill in the House Education Committee meeting because he felt it would "help the parents going to the next grade be able to look and see what that teacher taught the year before" and, apparently, avoid having their children exposed to teachers who would "teach 'em in a certain way to make 'em believe something other than the facts."

Aside from pollution being, indeed, a fact, what HB 755 proposes is impractical, to say the least, Parmenter told me. "Teaching is an art form," he said, with multiple opportunities for "teachable moments" to arise spontaneously during every lesson. Having to document that would not only be tedious busywork, but it could also discourage teachers from tailoring instruction to students.

Parmenter suspects that McNeely's comment, rather than being an honest discourse on pedagogy, is more likely a ham-handed attempt at making a "cheap political point."

"It's not surprising," Parmenter said, "given the current national context."

The national context he was referring to is the wave of agitation drummed up by right-wing political organizations and Republican politicians over the perceived "indoctrination" of students that occurs in public schools.

'None of This Is Really About Critical Race Theory'

A prominent flashpoint in this upheaval is the supposed infiltration of the teaching of critical race theory (CRT) in public school curricula. The controversy "exploded in the public arena this spring," reports Education Week, "especially in K-12, where numerous state legislatures are debating bills seeking to ban... [CRT's] use in the classroom."

The bills have surfaced in at least 15 states, according to Education Week. That includes North Carolina's version, which debuted in May, NC Policy Watch reported.

The bills repeat a nearly identical set of prohibitions on "how teachers can discuss racism, sexism, and other social issues," according to Education Week, using language similar to that of an "executive order former President Donald Trump put in place to ban diversity training for federal workers." President Biden has rescinded that order, but efforts to ban diversity training are continuing in universities and school districts, according to the Washington Post, where the focus of legislation has extended beyond employee training to include school curricula and teaching practices.

The specifics in these bills ban teachers from addressing concepts related to race and gender, for instance, prohibiting teachers from making anyone "feel discomfort or guilt" because of their race or gender. But the list of transgressions seems purposefully vague and general, almost as if to invite a lawsuit, explains Adam Harris in the Atlantic. And proponents of the bills have adopted critical race theory, an academic idea dating back to the 1970s, as a "shorthand" for their concerns.

"But none of this is really about CRT," James Ford told me in a phone call. Ford is a former North Carolina Teacher of the Year who currently represents the Southwest Education Region on the North Carolina State Board of Education and serves as the executive director of the Center for Racial Equity in Education.

"First, in these calls to stop the teaching of CRT," he said, "there is no clarification of what CRT really is. There's no argumentative critique of the actual concept." Indeed, many of the bills don't even mention the term.

The real target, Ford explained, is "divisiveness." For the people who criticize teachers and promote these bills, Ford believes, there can be "no nuance at all" in discussing "matters of religion and customs and the values of rugged individualism and free-market ideology." There can be no challenges of assumptions and no revising of long-standing mythologies about America and American society.

According to Ford, these people see education as a process about "making kids assimilate," and "simply talking about a subject like pollution takes on a heightened sense of alarm about society being undermined."

Outlawing 'Divisiveness' in Schools

Many of the bills specifically target the banning of teaching "divisive concepts," according to Politico, with one bill, in West Virginia, going so far as to call for teachers to be "dismissed or not reemployed for teaching... divisive concepts."

Proposed laws against "divisiveness" in schools prompt Ford to question, "Divisive for who?" and he notes that the people behind all these bills are overwhelmingly white, wealthier folks who have generally benefited most from the nation's education system. Ford suggests they may be provoking white resentment against public schools because schools are now more populated with Black and Brown children who may express doubts about a prevailing narrative about the country that may not include people who look like them.

Ford also finds it ironic that people who are intent on outlawing school "indoctrination" have chosen to impose their own agenda by attacking critical thinking and questioning of cultural norms, which, to him, is what truly sounds like indoctrination.

From a practical standpoint, it would be nearly impossible to police what goes on inside hundreds of thousands of classrooms. And it's hard to imagine how teachers of American history would steer clear of violating these laws while teaching about the Trail of Tears, slavery, the Civil War, and the suffragette and Civil Rights movements, or how English teachers could engage students in writing while avoiding current events and topics that are apt to elicit meaningful responses from students.

Because these concerted attacks on public schools and teachers make little sense academically, they have prompted many observers to consider whether there is more of a political intent behind the effort.

Parmenter suggested that attacks on schools and teachers are an attempt to change political momentum at a time when national leadership under a Democratic presidential administration enjoys high approval ratings.

New York Times columnist Michelle Goldberg seems to agree, writing, "Part of the reason the right is putting so much energy into this crusade [against the teaching of CRT] is because it can't whip up much opposition to the bulk of Joe Biden's agenda." She concludes, "Telling parents

that liberals want to make their kids hate their country and feel guilty for being white might be absurd and cynical. It also looks like it might be effective."

But that argument makes sense only if you ignore the other education agenda right-wing politicians have rolled out at the very same time they are whipping up white resentment over diversity in schools.

School Choice's 'Best Year Ever'

It's certainly no coincidence that in many states where there are bills attacking the teaching of divisive topics—including Georgia, Missouri, Arkansas, Iowa, South Dakota, and West Virginia—state lawmakers are also considering or enacting new "school choice" laws to create or expand programs that give parents vouchers so they can remove their children from public schools and send them to private schools at taxpayer expense. Other school choice acts create or expand programs that give parents taxpayer dollars to spend on homeschooling and other educational expenses they incur for their children.

The 2020-2021 school year has been the "best year ever" for school choice advocates, says Alan Greenblatt on Governing: The Future of States and Localities. Greenblatt notes the proliferation of new laws has created education savings accounts that give parents public funds to pay for "a wide range of education-related services." Other laws create or expand state tax-credit programs that funnel donations from businesses and wealthy people into school vouchers for parents.

Many of these new provisions have been passed in states that had previously resisted school choice programs—such as Arkansas, Kentucky, Missouri, and West Virginia—or that—like Georgia, Maryland, Montana, and South Dakota—had very small programs that are now ballooning into massive redistributions of public funds for education.

"States that were long resistant [to school choice] have now opened up," Greenblatt observes, and once the programs start up, regardless of how small, "they tend to expand, not contract."

Greenblatt credits the pandemic for creating a lot of the momentum for this expansion of school laws. But he also quotes education historian Jack Schneider who notes that the drive for more school choice was accelerating long before COVID-19, during the expansions of charter schools under former President Barack Obama and through the fiery denunciations of "government schools" by former President Donald Trump's Education Secretary Betsy DeVos.

Indeed, school choice proponents like the conservative Manhattan Institute have long contended that a public school system funded by government, but with private entities providing the education services, should be "the democratic norm" for the nation. They call privatization of the school system "educational pluralism," as opposed to the apparent divisiveness of publicly operated institutions.

"Public schooling forces zero-sum conflict such as we are seeing over CRT," writes Neal McCluskey, the director of the libertarian Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, in

RealClearPolicy. Of course, this "conflict" is "zero-sum," as James Ford points out, only if you insist it is.

But school choice proponents like McCluskey argue that having a public system that allows people from different backgrounds to come together and share varying points of view is not "diverse" at all because it might open a window to a critique of America that potentially "demonizes" the country.

Instead, in this up-is-down and down-is-up view of the world, the only way to solve divisiveness, according to McCluskey, is by "letting millions of families and educators choose for themselves" by funding a system of privately operated schools that cater only to those parents who already share the same ideologies.

McCluskey might be correct that such a system could "end heated disagreement over ideas like CRT" in schools, but it certainly would guarantee these conflicts spill over into other arenas for these students later in life, when they become adults whose views have hardened and become more resistant to change because they never experienced real diversity of thought during their formative years.

"[A] new era of school choice vouchers may be parents' best defense against public school curricula," warned former Attorney General William Barr, according to Just the News, in his first public speech since leaving office under the Trump administration in December.

"Barr suggested," Just the News reports, that "some of the new woke curricula pushed by the left might infringe religious and speech freedoms and impose a secular theology that violates the Constitution's Establishment Clause prohibiting government from imposing religious beliefs."

No doubt, as the effects of the pandemic wane in many places due to vaccinations, fearmongering over supposed divisiveness in public schools will only grow. It is likely that there will be a ratcheting up of the rhetoric for greater school choice to enable parents to escape the supposed adverse consequences of being exposed to anything other than long-accepted narratives about subjects, regardless of a changing world.

A new nonprofit launched in March, Parents Defending Education (PDE), has targeted "woke indoctrination" in schools, Fox News reports. PDE "is just the latest" organization to take up the cause, according to the article, which also lists Discovery Institute, Oregonians for Liberty in Education, and Parents Against Critical Race Theory.

According to Education Week, PDE has already targeted school districts around the country with federal civil rights complaints against schools that address systemic racism. The article notes that "[PDE] staffers work or previously worked at organizations such as the Cato Institute,"—where McCluskey works—the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, and Coalition for TJ. The Cato and Fordham institutes are ardent proponents of school choice, and Coalition for TJ has filed a lawsuit to stop changes to admission standards that would allow more enrollment diversity at a Virginia high school.

Ford agrees that these attacks on "woke" indoctrination in schools are "unequivocally related to efforts to privatize education," and he points out that many of the same people orchestrating these new laws targeting public education are strong proponents of school choice. "Historically, there is a pattern connecting race issues and privatization," he says.

Numerous studies have found evidence supporting Ford's argument, but it's not at all hard to imagine that an effective strategy for pushing white families out of public schools is to raise fears that their children are being indoctrinated with values and beliefs that could divide them ideologically or emotionally and draw a wedge between them and their families and neighbors.

Nor is it a stretch to believe that families of color, seeing white families become enraged about the teaching of structural racism, would consider fleeing a public school to find a privately operated alternative that would be more culturally affirming for their children.

'I Don't Think That's Funny at All'

In the meantime, public school teachers will be increasingly scapegoated by conservative advocates who are stigmatizing the idea of addressing controversial topics in schools. Proponents of these laws seem to not know teachers "have to leave our politics at the door," Parmenter told me, and these conservative advocates seem to believe teachers "don't have the integrity and professionalism to understand that [they] know there are lines you simply don't cross."

Parmenter senses that the negative impact these laws will have on the teaching corps, already reeling from the stress caused by the pandemic, may discourage future teachers from entering a profession where they're constantly under the watchful eye of people who may not respect them and understand how they do their job.

"Less mysterious" to him are the negative impacts these attacks on public schools and teaching will have on students.

"For children to learn how to read and write, they need to engage with a variety of different texts," he says, and while he found Representative McNeely's accusations of "indoctrination" somewhat comedic—"like because I just happened to mention that the piece of writing my class focused on was about pollution, that made him think, 'I just caught one of these Commies admitting what they are up to'"—Parmenter fears any new law that is so "invasive of teachers" will ultimately be harmful to their students. "And I don't think that's funny at all."