

# Discussing race & racism in public K-12 schools



## Executive Summary

During the 2021 legislative session, several Missouri bills ([HB 952](#), [SB 586](#), [HA1 to HA3](#) to [HB 1141](#)) were introduced with the intention of prohibiting schools from teaching “curriculum implementing critical race theory” and/or teaching “divisive concepts.” While the definitions of restricted practices vary between bills, the common intent is to bar schools from using characteristics such as race, gender, income, sexual orientation, religion or ancestry to classify people into groups to discuss identity, establish stereotypes and assign blame to individuals.

## Highlights

- Public school educators may currently discuss race and racism as part of a broader social studies curriculum in order to meet specific state learning standards.
- Several organizations (e.g., 1619 Project, Learning for Justice, We Stories, Education Equity Consultants) offer additional training and curricular resources to assist educators in discussions about racism and American history.
- Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework used, originally by legal scholars, to describe the relationships between race, racism and power. CRT is predominantly taught and studied during graduate school.
- Five states (ID, OK, TX, IA, TN) have passed bills that restrict schools from teaching critical race theory or divisive concepts, and four others (UT, MT, GA, FL) have used other state level action (e.g., State Board of Education decisions) to achieve similar outcomes.

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## Research Background

### Defining race & racism

**Race** is a socially defined category based on physical characteristics that are commonly associated with a particular group of individuals (e.g., skin color). For additional information about how race and racial discrimination are legally defined by federal and state governments, refer to our Science Note- [Definitions of Race & Ethnicity in the United States](#).

Merriam-Webster defines **racism** as “a belief that race is a fundamental determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race.”<sup>1</sup> **Antiracism**, as defined by scholars who originated the term, is the practice of actively opposing policies and practices that sustain racial inequity between racial groups.<sup>2</sup>

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## **How are discussions about race & racism currently integrated into public K-12 education?**

The Missouri State Board of Education sets learning standards for American History.

Missouri's [Social Studies Learning Standards](#) outline the expectations for what K-12 students should learn about American history at each grade level. While most standards do not explicitly mention race, several specific learning objectives do require students to be able to examine historical events based on how they impacted specific groups (e.g., immigrants, African Americans, women) over time.

One of the seven core [K-5 standards](#) is "knowledge of relationships of the individual and groups to institutions and cultural traditions." In fourth and fifth grade, the standard specifies that students should be able to "examine the changing roles among Native Americans, Immigrants, African Americans, women and others" before 1800 (4th grade) and after 1800 (5th grade).

American History [standards for grades 6-12](#) include comparing "major patterns of population distribution, demographics and migrations in the United States and the impact of those patterns on cultures and community life" and analyzing "the changing relationship between individuals and their place in society including women, minorities, and children." In high school, students are also expected to be able to evaluate "the extent to which Supreme Court cases and legislation served to expand equal rights."

External groups may provide supplemental resources to educators.

While the State Board of Education sets the learning standards and assessment criteria in Missouri, local education agencies (LEAs) are primarily responsible for specific education and hiring decisions. Within state and district guidelines, teachers can create original lesson plans or incorporate additional resources from external groups. For example, science teachers can access additional resources from professional scientific and teaching societies (e.g., [National Science Teaching Association](#), [National Association of Biology Teachers](#)) or other groups ([Scholastic](#), [National Association of Academies of Science](#), [NASA Education](#)).

Several organizations offer educator training and/or resources for teachers who are interested in incorporating discussions about race and racism into their lessons, especially in cases where certain topics or viewpoints are not already represented in existing textbooks/coursework. Brief descriptions of the groups frequently highlighted in state legislation are included below.

[\*1619 Project\*](#): The *New York Times Magazine* released the 1619 Project in 2019. It uses long-form journalism to "reframe" United States history in a way that focuses on the role of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans. The Pulitzer Center has created and shared free [resources](#) that can be used in schools, including lesson plans, activities, reading guides and additional resources. Resources from the 1619 Project are typically incorporated into existing social studies curricula

(e.g., supplementing textbook chapter). In April 2021, the Pulitzer Center's [1619 Education Project](#) announced forty grant recipients (\$5000/award) meant "to support exploration of key questions of racial justice and other pressing issues." Kansas City Public Schools received one of the awards.

[Learning for Justice](#) (previously *Teaching Tolerance*): Learning for Justice provides free resources to educators meant to "supplement the curriculum, to inform their practices, and to create inclusive school communities where children and youth are respected, valued and welcome participants." Resources include lessons, learning plans, activities, texts, film and teaching strategies.

[Education Equity Consultants](#): Education Equity Consultants is a St. Louis-based organization whose mission is to "build the capacity of individuals, schools and other organizations to address racism in ways that enable ALL people to reclaim their inherent intelligence and nobility." They provide diversity training to a range of stakeholders, including schools. Education Equity Consultants has [worked with](#) 27 Missouri school districts, primarily in the St. Louis and Kansas City areas.

[We Stories](#): We Stories is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with the goal of "chang[ing] the conversation about and build[ing] momentum towards racial equity in St. Louis" through work with families, libraries and schools. The primary connection with public [schools](#) is through selling "We Stories Kit libraries," which come with 4-6 books, additional research & resources and discussion prompts. We Stories books range across various themes, but include diverse characters and are intended to help families and staff discuss race with children. Several (~15) St. Louis area elementary schools currently have We Stories library kits available.

## **Legislative Background**

During Missouri's 2021 regular session, several bills (HB 952, SB 586, HA1 to HA3 to HB 1141) were introduced with the purpose of limiting how race and racism can be taught in Missouri public schools, particularly when defined as "curriculum implementing critical race theory (CRT)" and "divisive concepts." While the definitions of restricted practices varied between bills, the common intent was to bar schools from using characteristics such as race, gender, income, sexual orientation, religion or ancestry to classify people into groups in order to:

- develop stereotypes
- place blame on categories of individuals
- identify groups as inherently or systemically biased, privileged or oppressed

## What is CRT?

Critical race theory provides a theoretical framework for analyzing the relationship between race, racism and power. Although CRT originated to examine questions within the legal field, it has

also been applied to education as a way to explain existing inequities.<sup>3,4</sup> The primary tenets of CRT are that:

- Racism is common and deeply ingrained in American life.
- Improvements in civil rights occur only when they also serve the interests of those in power (interest convergence).
- Race is socially constructed (not based on biology) & can change over time.<sup>3</sup>

CRT is taught primarily in graduate school courses and is not taught in public K-12 schools. However, some K-12 educational resources may be developed in a way that utilizes principles of critical race theory.

### Bills in other states

As of mid-June 2021, 25 states have introduced legislation to restrict the teaching of critical race theory and/or how schools can discuss racism and sexism. To date, five states (ID, OK, TX, IA, TN) have passed these bills, and four others (UT, MT, GA, FL) have instituted other state level action, primarily via decisions by the State Board of Education.

### **References**

1. Racism. 2021. In Merriam-Webster.com. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/racism>
2. Kendi, Ibram X. (2019). How to Be an Antiracist. New York: One World.
3. Delgado, R., & Stefancic, J. (2001). Critical race theory: An introduction. New York: New York University Press.
4. Ladson-Billings, G.J., & Tate, W. (1995). Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education. Teachers College Record, 97, 47-68. <https://www.unco.edu/education-behavioral-sciences/pdf/TowardaCRTEduca.pdf>