



Thanks to our coalition partner, the NAACP Education Committee, for creating this resource.

## **Background: What Critical Race Theory Is**

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is an intellectual approach to looking at U.S. society with a belief that racism is both a social construct and that racism is at the core of its laws and institutions. The term-coined by legal scholars Kimberle Crenshaw, Richard Delgado, and Derrick Bell in the 1970s and 80s-asserts that racism is not just the product of individual bias but rather is embedded within social institutions.

CRT is a framework for understanding how our country's history of excluding many communities from positions of power gave rise to systems that continue to disproportionately impact Black communities, other communities of color, and all marginalized groups (e.g., the disabled community and the queer and trans community). The theory itself is not typically taught in K-12 schools, but the facts underlying CRT are based on our country's history and are critical to understanding not only our country's past but also its present and future. CRT addresses the reasons for the continuing underrepresentation of people who are Native, Black, Latino, queer, disabled, and/or Asian in our country's systems of power.

Fundamental elements of Critical Race Theory include: racism is a normalized aspect of American culture, giving voice to people of color, interest convergence, social construction, intersectionality, and anti-essentialism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).

- **Racism as a normalized aspect of American culture**, speaks to the everyday experiences of people of color as racism is ingrained in our society (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).
- **Giving voice to people of color** offers counter-narratives by using storytelling to shed light on the lived experiences of people of color (Haynes, 2015).
- **Interest convergence** demonstrates how over time, "the interests of Blacks in achieving racial justice were accommodated only when, and for so long as those interests converged with the political and economic interests of Whites, which at the same time revolved around advancing the nation's foreign policy efforts" (Haynes, 2015, p. 143).
- **Social construction** calls attention to the fact that race is not a biological or genetic reality, but instead is socially construed and manipulated when convenient (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017).
- **Intersectionality and anti-essentialism** remind us that people of color are multidimensional and are not bound to a singular identity, "Everyone has potentially conflicting, overlapping identities, loyalties, and allegiances" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p. 11).



Thanks to our coalition partner, the NAACP Education Committee, for creating this resource.

Though it's not taught, it is a necessary framework for examining the persistence of racism in our schools. Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) were the first to introduce CRT into education. Education scholars use CRT to examine issues of "school discipline and hierarchy, tracking, affirmative action, high-stakes testing, controversies over curriculum and history, bilingual and multicultural education, and alternative and charter schools" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017, p 17). Ladson-Billings (1998) prescribes that Critical Race Theory analysis in education should focus on curriculum, instruction, assessment, school funding, and desegregation, as well as the failure of the US education system to appropriately educate historically underrepresented, under-resourced, and marginalized students.

### **What Critical Race Theory Is Not**

The term Critical Race Theory has recently been used (often, incorrectly) to encapsulate any conversation around the existence of racism and the acknowledgement of historical facts. What is being debated is a larger conversation about what should or should not be talked about in school.

CRT is not a diversity training or a way of shaming white students. It does not imply that one race is better or worse than another. It is not a particular curriculum or lesson plan. CRT does not claim that individuals are inherently bad or racist. It provides a perspective for teaching how our country's history of racism created systems of power that keep out people who have traditionally held less power. In this way, it can help students understand our country's history of racism in a way that empowers solutions. Failing to teach history accurately leaves students open to misinformation and bias.

### **What's Happening Nationally?**

- Conservative activist Christopher Rufo referred to CRT in a Fox News interview as "cult indoctrination" and claimed it was the "default ideology of the federal bureaucracy," painting it as a means of classifying *individuals* as good or bad rather than *policies and structures* as racist or anti-racist. Rufo's characterization was that CRT was about white people having bad intentions, when in reality the principles of CRT say that often policies that are color-blind in their language and intent can unintentionally perpetuate systems of oppression.



Thanks to our coalition partner, the NAACP Education Committee, for creating this resource.

- This interview spawned a moral panic over critical race theory after former President Trump issued a September 2020 executive order banning its use by federal agencies for employee training.
- Rufo's mischaracterization and the fear it stoked was intentional and hiding in plain sight. In a Twitter thread on March 21, 2020, Rufo stated the following:

"We have successfully frozen their brand - 'critical race theory' - into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that broad category. The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think 'critical race theory.' We have decodified the term and will recodify it to annex the entire range of cultural constructions that are unpopular with Americans."

- Rufo and others have been so successful in their self-admittedly disingenuous descriptions of critical race theory that the term has nearly lost all meaning. Nationally, over 20 states have introduced "anti-CRT" bills that apply specifically to K-12 schools, despite critical race theory itself being a graduate-level framework. The text of these bills, however, does not ban the theory itself; it often discourages teachers from teaching content that highlights *racial disparities of any kind*, as well as disparities arising from other systems of oppression.
- By labeling any realistic discussion of race as critical race theory (which it isn't), and critical race theory as extreme anti-white rhetoric (which it isn't), Rufo et al hope to scare teachers into submission and create a chilling effect. If educators - especially those in the seven states that have already passed anti-CRT laws - are afraid of running afoul of the new legislation, they may shy away from discussing racism at all, which is exactly what Rufo and his collaborators intended. In fact, a house bill sponsored by Rep. Buck of Colorado that is being marketed as an anti-CRT bill actually bans the use of the 1619 Project, a body of work developed by Nikole-Hannah Jones of the New York Times documenting the history of slavery in America.
- The hysteria around critical race theory is not a new political archetype; it is simply the latest in a long line of racist dog whistles that have been used to stir up racial tensions and anxieties for decades.
  - The Civil Rights era saw anti-busing rhetoric that claimed to be about "school choice" but actually stoked the fears of white families whose children would be attending school with Black children for the first time.
  - The 1980s saw the myth of the welfare queen, which sought to convince white families that Black mothers were scamming the government out of their tax dollars, despite the lack of evidence that welfare fraud was common among Black recipients, or common at all.



Thanks to our coalition partner, the NAACP Education Committee, for creating this resource.

- The 1990s saw tough-on-crime rhetoric, with racist ads featuring Willie Horton telling suburban white voters that Black prisoners would be released into their neighborhoods to wreak havoc and commit crimes, despite the fact that most crime victims are of the same race as the perpetrator.
- Anti-CRT rhetoric is continuing the tradition of dog-whistle politics by trying to convince white parents that teachers want to indoctrinate their children. The reality is that the sponsors of anti-CRT legislation would like to see all instances of racism whitewashed out of the US History curriculum in our schools, instead teaching their children that pointing out racism is worse than racism itself.

### **Similar Attacks**

We have seen similar attacks this year targeting students using wedge issues. Critics of Critical Race Theory pretended Critical Race Theory is racist and damaging to create fear and divide people. Similarly, in 2021 some conservative legislators also introduced bills to prevent trans girls from playing on girls sports teams, pretending that the goal was to make sports fair and protect girls. This was another opportunity to manufacture a perceived debate, while there is really no debate. Trans girls playing sports is fair and safe.