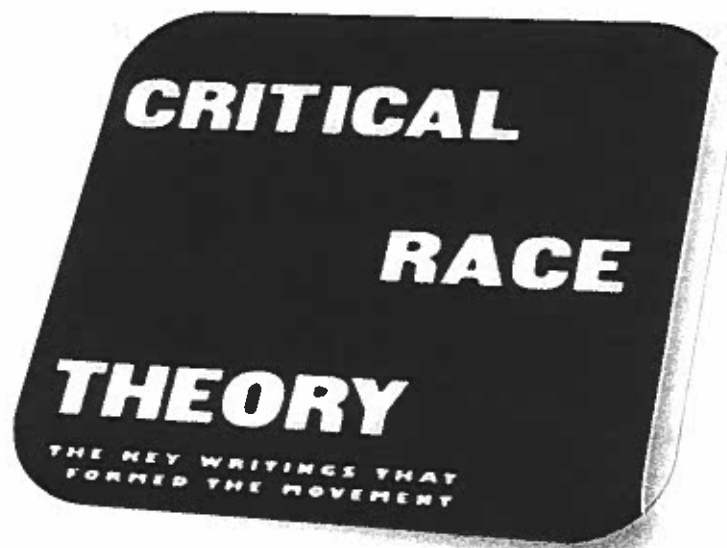




# Unpacking Our History Article Packet



**Critical Race Theory Part 2:**

**The CRT Battles**

**April 13, 2023**

**6:30 – 8:00 PM**

**Zoom ID: 823 648 5349 | Password: 691353**

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# Critical Race Theory: What It IS and How to Fight It

By Christopher Rufo

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"Americans are. . . outraged that critical race theory promotes three ideas-race essentialism, collective guilt, and neo-segregation-which violate the basic principles of equality and justice."

CRITICAL RACE THEORY is fast becoming the U.S.'s new institutional orthodoxy. Yet, a number of Americans never have heard of it-and of those who have, many do not understand it. It is time for this to change. We need to know what it is so we can know how to fight it.

In explaining critical race theory, it helps to begin with a brief history of Marxism. Originally, the Marxist Left built its political program on the theory of class conflict. Karl Marx believed that the primary characteristic of industrial societies was the imbalance of power between capitalists and workers. The solution to that imbalance, according to Marx, was revolution: the workers eventually would gain consciousness of their plight, seize the means of production, overthrow the capitalist class, and usher in a new socialist society.

During the 20th century, several regimes underwent Marxist-style revolutions, and each ended in disaster. Socialist governments in the Soviet Union, China, Cambodia, Cuba, and elsewhere racked up a body count of nearly 100,000,000 of their own people. They are remembered for their gulags, show trials, executions, and mass starvations. In practice, Marx's ideas unleashed man's darkest brutalities.

By the mid 1960s, Marxist intellectuals in the West had begun to acknowledge these failures. They recoiled at revelations of Soviet atrocities and came to realize that workers' revolutions never would occur in Western Europe or the U.S., where there were large middle classes and rapidly improving standards of living. Americans in particular never had developed a sense of class consciousness or class division. Most believed in the American Dream-the idea that they could transcend their origins through education, hard work, and good citizenship.

However, rather than abandon their Leftist political project, Marxist scholars in the West simply adapted their revolutionary theory to the social and racial unrest of the 1960s. Abandoning Marx's economic dialectic of capitalists and workers, they substituted race for class and sought to create a revolutionary coalition of the dispossessed based on racial and ethnic categories.

Fortunately for society, the early proponents of this revolutionary coalition in the U.S. lost out in the 1960s to the civil rights movement, which sought instead the fulfillment of the American promise of freedom and equality under the law. Americans preferred the idea of improving their country to that of overthrowing it. The vision of Martin Luther King, Jr., Pres. Lyndon Johnson's pursuit of the Great Society, and the restoration of law and order promised by Pres. Richard Nixon in his 1968 campaign defined the post 1960s American political consensus-but the radical Left has proved resilient and enduring, which is where critical race theory comes in.

Critical race theory is an academic discipline, formulated in the 1990s, built on the intellectual framework of identity-based Marxism. Relegated for many years to universities and obscure academic journals, over the past decade it increasingly has become the default ideology in our public institutions. It has been injected into government agencies, public school systems, teacher training programs, and

corporate human resources departments in the form of diversity training programs, human resources modules, public policy frameworks, and school curricula.

There are a series of euphemisms deployed by its supporters to describe critical race theory, including "equity," "social justice," "diversity and inclusion," and "culturally responsive teaching." Critical race theorists, masters of language construction, realize that "neo-Marxism" would be a hard sell. Equity, on the other hand, sounds nonthreatening and easily is confused with the American principle of equality, but the distinction is vast and important. In deed, equality—the principle proclaimed in the Declaration of Independence, defended in the Civil War, and codified into law with the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the Voting Rights Act of 1965—explicitly is rejected by critical race theorists. To them, equality represents "mere nondiscrimination" and provides "camouflage" for white supremacy, patriarchy, and oppression.

In contrast to equality, equity as defined and promoted by critical race theorists is little more than reformulated Marxism. In the name of equity, UCLA law professor and critical race theorist Cheryl Harris has proposed suspending private property rights, seizing land and wealth and redistributing them along racial lines. Critical race guru Ibram X. Kendi, who directs the Center for Antiracist Research at Boston University, has proposed the creation of a Federal Department of Antiracism. This department would be independent of (i.e., unaccountable to) the elected branches of government, and would have the power to nullify, veto, or abolish any law at any level of government and curtail the speech of political leaders and others who are deemed insufficiently "antiracist."

One practical result of the creation of such a department would be the overthrow of capitalism, since according to Kendi, "In order to truly be antiracist, you also have to truly be anticapitalist." In other words, identity is the means and Marxism is the end.

An equity-based form of government would mean the end not only of private property, but of individual rights, equality under the law, federalism, and freedom of speech. These would be replaced by race-based redistribution of wealth, group-based rights, active discrimination, and omnipotent bureaucratic authority. Historically, the accusation of "anti-Americanism" has been overused, but in this case, it is not a matter of interpretation—critical race theory prescribes a revolutionary program that would overturn the principles of the Declaration and destroy the remaining structure of the Constitution.

What does critical race theory look like in practice? Last year, I authored a series of reports focused on critical race theory in the Federal government. The FBI was holding workshops on intersectionality theory. The Department of Homeland Security was telling white employees they were committing "microinequities" and had been "socialized into oppressor roles." The Treasury Department held a training session telling staff members that "virtually all white people contribute to racism" and that they must convert "everyone in the Federal government" to the ideology of "antiracism."

Moreover, the Sandia National Laboratories, which designs the U.S.'s nuclear arsenal, sent white male executives to a three-day re-education camp, where they were told that "white male culture" was analogous to the "KKK," "white supremacists," and "mass killings." The executives then were forced to renounce their "white male privilege" and write letters of apology to fictitious women and people of color.

This year, I produced another series of reports focused on critical race theory in education. In Cupertino, Calif., an elementary school forced first-graders to deconstruct their racial and sexual identities, and rank themselves according to their "power and privilege."

In Springfield, Mo., a middle school forced teachers to locate themselves on an "oppression matrix," based on the idea that straight, white, English-speaking, Christian males are members of the oppressor class and must atone for their privilege and "covert white supremacy."

In Philadelphia, Pa., an elementary school forced fifth-graders to celebrate "Black communism" and simulate a Black Power rally to free 1960s radical Angela Davis from prison, where she had once been held on charges of murder.

In Seattle, Wash., the school district told white teachers that they are guilty of "spirit murder" against black children and must "bankrupt [their] privilege in acknowledgement of [their] thieved inheritance."

I am just one investigative journalist, but I have developed a database of more than 1,000 of these stories. When I say that critical race theory is becoming the operating ideology of our public institutions, it is not an exaggeration—from the universities to bureaucracies to K-12 school systems, critical race theory has permeated the collective intelligence and decisionmaking process of U.S. government, with no sign of slowing down.

This is a revolutionary change. When originally established, these government institutions were presented as neutral, technocratic, and oriented towards broadly-held perceptions of the public good. Today, under the increasing sway of critical race theory and related ideologies, they are being turned against the American people. This is not limited to the permanent bureaucracy in Washington, D.C., but is true as well of institutions in the states, even in red states, and it is spreading to county public health departments, small Midwestern school districts, and more. This ideology will not stop until it has devoured all of our institutions.

Thus far, attempts to halt the encroachment of critical race theory have been ineffective. There are a number of reasons for this.

First, too many Americans have developed an acute fear of speaking up about social and political issues, especially those involving race. According to a Gallup poll, 77% of conservatives are afraid to share their political beliefs publicly. Worried about getting mobbed on social media, fired from their jobs, or worse, they remain quiet, largely ceding the public debate to those pushing these anti-American ideologies. Consequently, the institutions themselves become monocultures: dogmatic, suspicious, and hostile to a diversity of opinion. Conservatives in both the Federal government and public school systems have told me that their "equity and inclusion" departments serve as political offices, searching for and stamping out any dissent from the official orthodoxy.

Second, critical race theorists have constructed their argument like a mousetrap. Disagreement with their program becomes irrefutable evidence of a dissenter's "white fragility," "unconscious bias," or "internalized white supremacy." I have seen this projection of false consciousness on their opponents play out dozens of times in my reporting. Diversity trainers will make an outrageous claim—such as "all whites are intrinsically oppressors" or "white teachers are guilty of spirit murdering black children"—and then when confronted with disagreement, they adopt a patronizing tone and explain that participants

who feel "defensiveness" or "anger" are reacting out of guilt and shame. Dissenters are instructed to remain silent, "lean into the discomfort," and accept their "complicity in white supremacy."

Third, Americans across the political spectrum have failed to separate the premise of critical race theory from its conclusion. Its premise - that American history includes slavery and other injustices, and that we should examine and learn from that history - is undeniable. However, its revolutionary conclusion-that the U.S. was founded on and defined by racism and that our founding principles, Constitution, and way of life should be overthrown-does not rightly, much less necessarily, follow.

Fourth and finally, the writers and activists who have had the courage to speak out against critical race theory have tended to address it on the theoretical level, pointing out the theory's logical contradictions and dishonest account of history. These criticisms are worthy and good, but they move the debate into the academic realm, which is friendly terrain for proponents of critical race theory. They fail to force defenders of this revolutionary ideology to defend the practical consequences of their ideas in the realm of politics.

No longer simply an academic matter, critical race theory has become a tool of political power. To borrow a phrase from the Marxist theoretician Antonio Gramsci, it is fast achieving "cultural hegemony" in the US.'s public institutions. More and more, it is driving the vast machinery of the state and society. If we want to succeed in opposing it, we must address it politically at every level.

#### Speak to the facts

Critical race theorists must be confronted with and forced to speak to the facts. Do they support public schools separating first-graders into groups of "oppressors" and "oppressed"? Do they support mandatory curricula teaching that "all white people play a part in perpetuating systemic racism"? Do they support public schools instructing white parents to become "white traitors" and advocate for "white abolition"? Do they want those who work in government to be required to undergo this kind of re-education? How about managers and workers in Corporate America? How about the men and women in our military? How about every one of us?

There are three parts to a successful strategy to defeat the forces of critical race theory: governmental action, grassroots mobilization, and an appeal to principle.

We already see examples of governmental action. Last year, one of my reports led Pres. Donald Trump to issue an Executive Order banning critical race theory-based training programs in the Federal government. Pres. Joe Biden rescinded this order on his first day in office, but it provides a model for governors and municipal leaders to follow.

This year, several state legislatures have introduced bills to achieve the same goal : preventing public institutions from conducting programs that stereotype, scapegoat, or demean people on the basis of race, and I have organized a coalition of attorneys to file lawsuits against schools and government agencies that impose critical race theory-based programs on grounds of the First Amendment (which protects citizens from compelled speech), Fourteenth Amendment (which provides equal protection under the law), and Civil Rights Act of 1964 (which prohibits public institutions from discriminating on the basis of race).

On the grassroots level, a multiracial and bipartisan coalition is emerging to do battle against critical race theory. Parents are mobilizing against racially divisive curricula in public schools and employees

increasingly are speaking out against Orwellian re-education in the workplace. When they see what is happening, Americans naturally are outraged that critical race theory promotes three ideas-race essentialism, collective guilt, and neo-segregation which violate the basic principles of equality and justice. Anecdotally, many Chinese-Americans have told me that having survived the Cultural Revolution in their former country, they refuse to let the same thing happen here.

In terms of principles, we need to employ our own moral language rather than allow ourselves to be confined by the categories of critical race theory. For example, we often find ourselves debating "diversity." Diversity, as most of us understand it, is generally good, all things being equal, but it is of secondary value. We should be talking about and aiming at excellence, a common standard that challenges people of all backgrounds to achieve their potential. On the scale of desirable ends, excellence beats diversity every time.

Similarly, in addition to pointing out the dishonesty of the historical narrative on which critical race theory is predicated, we must promote the true story of the U.S.-a story that is honest about injustices in American history, but that places them in the context of our nation's high ideals and the progress we have made towards realizing them. Genuine American history is rich with stories of achievements and sacrifices that will move the hearts of citizens-in stark contrast to the grim and pessimistic narrative pressed by critical race theorists.

Above all, we must have courage-the fundamental virtue required in our time-courage to stand and speak the truth, withstand epithets, face the mob, and shrug off the scorn of the elites. When enough of us overcome the fear that currently prevents so many from speaking out, the hold of critical race theory will begin to slip-and courage begets courage. It is easy to stop a lone dissenter; it is much harder to stop 10, 20, 100, 1,000, 1,000,000, or more who stand up together for the principles of America.

Truth and justice are on our side. If we can muster the courage, we will win.

# The GOP's 'Critical Race Theory' Obsession

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A theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2021/05/gops-critical-race-theory-fixation-explained/613828/

May 7, 2021

## Politics

How conservative politicians and pundits became fixated on an academic approach

By Adam Harris

May 7, 2021

On January 12, Keith Ammon, a Republican member of the New Hampshire House of Representatives, introduced a bill that would bar schools as well as organizations that have entered into a contract or subcontract with the state from endorsing “divisive concepts.” Specifically, the measure would forbid “race or sex scapegoating,” questioning the value of meritocracy, and suggesting that New Hampshire—or the United States—is “fundamentally racist.”

Ammon’s bill is one of a dozen that Republicans have recently introduced in state legislatures and the United States Congress that contain similar prohibitions. In Arkansas, lawmakers have approved a measure that would ban state contractors from offering training that promotes “division between, resentment of, or social justice for” groups based on race, gender, or political affiliation. The Idaho legislature just passed a bill that would bar institutions of public education from compelling “students to personally affirm, adopt, or adhere” to specific beliefs about race, sex, or religion. The Louisiana legislature is weighing a nearly identical measure.

The language of these bills is anodyne and fuzzy—*compel*, for instance, is never defined in the Idaho legislation—and that ambiguity appears to be deliberate. According to Ammon, “using taxpayer funds to promote ideas such as ‘one race is inherently superior to another race or sex’ ... only exacerbates our differences.” But critics of these efforts warn that the bills would effectively prevent public schools and universities from holding discussions about racism; the New Hampshire measure in particular would ban companies that do business with government entities from conducting diversity, equity, and inclusion programs. “The vagueness of the language is really the point,” Leah Cohen, an organizer with Granite State Progress, a liberal nonprofit based in Concord, told me. “With this really broad brushstroke, we anticipate that that will be used more to censor conversations about race and equity.”

Most legal scholars say that these bills impinge on the right to free speech and will likely be dismissed in court. “Of the legislative language so far, none of the bills are fully constitutional,” Joe Cohn, the legislative and policy director of the Foundation for Individual

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Rights in Education, told me, “and if it isn’t fully constitutional, there’s a word for that: It means it’s unconstitutional.” This does not appear to concern the bills’ sponsors, though. The larger purpose, it seems, is to rally the Republican base—to push back against the recent reexaminations of the role that slavery and segregation have played in American history and the attempts to redress those historical offenses. The shorthand for the Republicans’ bogeyman is an idea that has until now mostly lived in academia: critical race theory.

The late Harvard Law professor Derrick Bell is credited as the father of critical race theory. He began conceptualizing the idea in the 1970s as a way to understand how race and American law interact, and developed a course on the subject. In 1980, Bell resigned his position at Harvard because of what he viewed as the institution’s discriminatory hiring practices, especially its failure to hire an Asian American woman he’d recommended.

Black students—including the future legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw, who enrolled at Harvard Law in 1981—felt the void created by his departure. Bell had been the only Black law professor among the faculty, and in his absence, the school no longer offered a course explicitly addressing race. When students asked administrators what could be done, Crenshaw says they received a terse response. “What is it that is so special about race and law that you have to have a course that examines it?” Crenshaw has recalled administrators asking. The administration’s inability to see the importance of understanding race and the law, she says, “got us thinking about how do we articulate that this is important and that law schools should include” the subject in their curricula.

Crenshaw and her classmates asked 12 scholars of color to come to campus and lead discussions about Bell’s book *Race, Racism, and American Law*. With that, critical race theory began in earnest. The approach “is often disruptive because its commitment to anti-racism goes well beyond civil rights, integration, affirmative action, and other liberal measures,” Bell explained in 1995. The theory’s proponents argue that the nation’s sordid history of slavery, segregation, and discrimination is embedded in our laws, and continues to play a central role in preventing Black Americans and other marginalized groups from living lives untouched by racism.

For some, the theory was a revelatory way to understand inequality. Take housing, for example. Researchers have now accumulated ample evidence that racial covenants in property deeds and redlining by the Federal Housing Authority—banned more than 60 years ago—remain a major contributor to the gulf in homeownership, and thus wealth, between Black and white people. Others, perhaps most prominently Randall Kennedy, who joined the Harvard Law faculty a few years after Bell left, questioned how widely the theory could be applied. In a paper titled “Racial Critiques of Legal Academia,” Kennedy argued that white racism was not the only reason so few “minority scholars” were members of law-school faculties. Conservative scholars argued that critical race theory is reductive—that it treats race as the only factor in social identity.

As with other academic frameworks before it, the nuances of critical race theory—and the debate around it—were obscured when it escaped the ivory tower. It first entered public discourse in the early 1990s, when President Bill Clinton nominated the University of Pennsylvania Law School professor Lani Guinier to run the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. Republicans mounted an aggressive and ultimately successful campaign to prevent her appointment, tagging her the "Quota Queen." Among the many reasons her adversaries said she was wrong for the job was that she had been "championing a radical school of thought called 'critical race theory.'" The theory soon stood in for anything resembling an examination of America's history with race. Conservatives would boil it down further: Critical race theory taught Americans to hate America. Today, across the country, school curricula and workplace trainings include materials that defenders and opponents alike insist are inspired by critical race theory but that academic critical race theorists do not characterize as such.

Fox News gave only passing thought to critical race theory until last year. The first mention on the network occurred after Bell died, in 2012. A video of President Barack Obama praising him 21 years earlier began circulating online. "Open up your minds and your hearts to the words of Mr. Derrick Bell," Obama said. That introduction was followed by a hug between the two men, which Fox cited as further evidence of Obama's tendency to consort with radicals. A guest on *Hannity* offhandedly alluded to the theory during a segment on George Zimmerman's trial for the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2014; network regulars briefly referred to it twice in 2019. Then, in 2020, after Derek Chauvin was captured on video kneeling on George Floyd's neck for more than nine minutes, and the United States became awash in anti-racist reading lists—some of which included books and articles that discussed critical race theory—Fox suddenly took a great interest in the idea. It became the latest in a long line of racialized topics (affirmative action perhaps being the most prominent) that the network has jumped on. Since June 5, 2020, the phrase has been invoked during 150 broadcasts.

If a single person bears the most responsibility for the surge in conservative interest in critical race theory, it is probably Christopher Rufo. Last summer, Rufo, a 36-year-old senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a libertarian think tank, received a tip from a municipal employee in Seattle. (Rufo had lived in the city and, in 2018, ran unsuccessfully for city council.) According to the whistleblower, the city was conducting "internalized racial superiority" training sessions for its employees. Rufo submitted a Freedom of Information Act request and wrote about his findings for the institute's public-policy magazine.

"In conceptual terms," Rufo wrote, "the city frames the discussion around the idea that black Americans are reducible to the essential quality of 'blackness' and white Americans are reducible to the essential quality of 'whiteness'—that is, the new metaphysics of good and evil." The training was rampant, he wrote, infecting every part of the city's municipal system. "It is part of a nationwide movement to make this kind of identity politics the foundation of our public discourse. It may be coming soon to a city or town near you." His article—which did

not include the phrase *critical race theory*—inspired a rush of whistleblowers from school districts and federal agencies, who reached out to him complaining about diversity training they had been invited to attend or had heard about.

A month later, Rufo employed the term for the first time in an article. “Critical race theory—the academic discourse centered on the concepts of ‘whiteness,’ ‘white fragility,’ and ‘white privilege’—is spreading rapidly through the federal government,” he wrote. He related anecdotes about training influenced by critical race theory at the Environmental Protection Agency, the FBI, and the Treasury Department, among others. In early September, Tucker Carlson invited him on his Fox News show during which Rufo warned viewers that critical race theory had pervaded every institution of the federal government and was being “weaponized” against Americans. He called on President Donald Trump to ban such training in all federal departments.

“Luckily, the president was watching the show and instructed his Chief of Staff to contact me the next morning,” Rufo wrote to me. (He would agree to be interviewed only by email.) Within three weeks, Trump had signed an executive order banning the use of critical race theory by federal departments and contractors in diversity training. “And thus,” he wrote to me, “the real fight against critical race theory began.”

Trump’s executive order was immediately challenged in court. Nonprofit organizations that provide these training sessions argued that the order violated their free-speech rights and hampered their ability to conduct their business. In December, a federal judge agreed; President Joe Biden rescinded the order the day he took office. But by then, critical race theory was already a part of the conservative lexicon. Since Trump’s executive order, Rufo told me, he has provided his analysis “to a half-dozen state legislatures, the United States House of Representatives, and the United States Senate.” One such state legislature was New Hampshire’s; on February 18, the lower chamber held a hearing to discuss Keith Ammon’s bill. Rufo was among those who testified in support of it.

Concerned that the measure might fail on its own, Republicans have now included its language in a must-pass budget bill. In March, Republican Governor Chris Sununu signaled that he would object to “divisive concepts” legislation because he believes it is unconstitutional, but he has since tempered his stand. “The ideas of critical race theory and all of this stuff—I personally don’t think there’s any place for that in schools,” he said in early April. But, he added, “when you start turning down the path of the government banning things, I think that’s a very slippery slope.” Almost everyone I spoke with for this article assumed that Sununu would sign the budget bill, and that the divisive-concepts ban would become law.

Although free-speech advocates are confident that bills like Ammon’s will not survive challenges in court, they believe the real point is to scare off companies, schools, and government agencies from discussing systemic racism. “What these bills are designed to do


is prevent conversations about how racism exists at a systemic level in that we all have implicit biases that lead to decisions that, accumulated, lead to significant racial disparities,” Gilles Bissonnette, the legal director of the ACLU of New Hampshire, told me. “The proponents of this bill want none of those discussions to happen. They want to suppress that type of speech.”

Conservatives are not the only critics of diversity training. For years, some progressives, including critical race theorists, have questioned its value: *Is it performative? Is it the most effective way to move toward equity or is it simply an effective way of restating the obvious and stalling meaningful action?* But that is not the fight that has materialized over the past nine months. Instead, it is a confrontation with a cartoonish version of critical race theory.

For Republicans, the end goal of all these bills is clear: initiating another battle in the culture wars and holding on to some threadbare mythology of the nation that has been challenged in recent years. What’s less clear is whether average voters care much about the debate. In a recent *Atlantic/Leger* poll, 52 percent of respondents who identified as Republicans said that states should pass laws banning schools from teaching critical race theory, but just 30 percent of self-identified independents were willing to say the same. Meanwhile, a strong majority of Americans, 78 percent, either had not heard of critical race theory or were unsure whether they had.

Last week, after President Biden’s first joint address to Congress—and as Idaho was preparing to pass its bill—Senator Tim Scott stood in front of United States and South Carolina flags to deliver the Republican response. “From colleges to corporations to our culture, people are making money and gaining power by pretending we haven’t made any progress,” Scott said. “You know this stuff is wrong. Hear me clearly: America is not a racist country.” Rufo immediately knew what he meant. “Senator Tim Scott denounces critical race theory in his response to Biden’s speech tonight,” he tweeted. “We have turned critical race theory into a national issue and conservative political leaders are starting to fight.”

# The Right-Wing Mothers Fuelling the School-Board Wars

 [newyorker.com/magazine/2022/11/07/the-right-wing-mothers-fuelling-the-school-board-wars](https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2022/11/07/the-right-wing-mothers-fuelling-the-school-board-wars)

Paige Williams

October 31, 2022

In August, 2020, Williamson County Schools, which serves more than forty thousand students in suburban Nashville, started using an English and Language Arts curriculum called Wit & Wisdom. The program, which is published by Great Minds, a company based in Washington, D.C., wasn't a renegade choice: hundreds of school districts nationwide had adopted it. Both Massachusetts and Louisiana—states with sharply different political profiles—gave Wit & Wisdom high approval ratings.

The decision had followed a strict process. The Tennessee State Board of Education governs academic standards and updates them every five or six years, providing school districts with an opportunity to switch curricula. Williamson County Schools assembled a selection committee—twenty-six parents, twenty-eight elementary-school teachers of English and Language Arts. The committee presented four options to teachers, who voted on them in February, 2020. Wit & Wisdom was the overwhelming favorite. After the selection committee ratified the teachers' choice, the school board, which has twelve members, unanimously adopted Wit & Wisdom, along with a traditional phonics program, for K-5 students.

Great Minds's promotional materials explain that Wit & Wisdom is designed to let students "read books they love while building knowledge of important topics" in literature, science, history, and art. By immersing students in "content-rich" topics that spark lively discussion, the curriculum prepares them to tackle more complicated texts. The materials are challenging by design: studies have shown that students read better sooner when confronted with complex sentences and advanced vocabulary. Wit & Wisdom's hundred and eighteen "core" texts, which range from picture books to nonfiction, emphasize diversity, but not in a strident way. They provide "mirrors and windows," allowing readers both to see themselves in the stories and to learn about other people's lives. The curriculum assigns or recommends portraits of heralded pioneers: Leonardo da Vinci, Sacagawea, Clara Barton, Duke Ellington, Ada Lovelace. The lessons revolve around readings, augmented with paintings, poetry, speeches, interviews, films, and music: in the module "A Hero's Journey," students explore an illustrated retelling of the Odyssey alongside the Ramayana, a Sanskrit epic, while also discussing "Star Wars." A section on "Wordplay" pairs "The Phantom Tollbooth" with Abbott and Costello's "Who's on First" routine.

Elsewhere in Tennessee, teachers were saying that Wit & Wisdom improved literacy. The superintendent of Lauderdale County, a rural area where nearly a quarter of the population lives below the poverty line, published an essay reporting that his district's teachers had noticed "an enormous difference in students' writing" after implementing the curriculum. Wit & Wisdom encourages students to discuss readings with their families—a father in Sumner County, northeast of Nashville, was pleased that his daughters now talked about civil rights and the American Revolution at dinner.

Then, seemingly out of nowhere, Wit & Wisdom became the target of intense criticism. At first, the campaign in Williamson County was cryptic: stray e-mails, phone calls, public-information requests. Eric Welch, who was first elected to the school board in 2010, told me that the complainers "wouldn't just e-mail *us*—they would copy the county commission, our state legislative delegation, and state representatives in other counties." He said, "It was obviously an attempt to intimidate."

The school board is an American institution whose members, until recently, enjoyed visibility on a par with that of the county tax collector. "There's no glory in being a school-board member—and there *shouldn't* be," Anne McGraw, a former Williamson County Schools board member, said on a local podcast last year. Normally, the district's public meetings were sedate affairs featuring polite exchanges among civic-minded locals. The system's slogan was: "Be nice."

In May, 2021, as the district finished its first academic year with Wit & Wisdom, women wearing “Moms for Liberty” T-shirts began appearing at school-board meetings. They brought large placards that contained images and text from thirty-one books that they didn’t want students to read. In public comments and in written complaints, the women claimed that Wit & Wisdom was teaching children to hate themselves, one another, their families, and America. “Rap a Tap Tap,” an illustrated story about the vaudeville-era tap dancer Bill (Bojangles) Robinson, by the Caldecott medalists Leo and Diane Dillon, harped on “skin color differences.” A picture book about seahorses, which touched on everything from their ability to change color to the independent movement of their eyes, threatened to “normalize that males can get pregnant” by explaining that male seahorses give birth; the Moms suspected a covert endorsement of “gender fluidity.” Greco-Roman myths: nudity, cannibalism. (Venus emerges naked from the sea; Tantalus cooks his son.)

The Moms kept attending school-board meetings and issuing complaints. Curiously, though they positioned themselves as traditionalists, they often borrowed “woke” rhetoric about the dangers of triggering vulnerable students. Readings about Ruby Bridges—who, in 1961, became the first Black child to attend an all-white school in New Orleans—exposed students to “psychological distress” because they described an angry white mob. (Bridges, in a memoir designed for young readers, wrote, “They yelled at me to go away.”) The Moms also declared that, though they admired Martin Luther King, Jr.’s iconic line about judging others “on the content of their character,” the book “Martin Luther King, Jr. and the March on Washington” was unacceptable, because it contained historical photographs—segregated drinking fountains, firefighters blasting Black Americans with hoses—that might make kids feel bad. The Moms considered it divisive for Wit & Wisdom to urge instructors to remind students that racial slurs are “words people use to show disrespect and hatred towards people of different races.”

At one meeting, Welch watched, stunned, as a Moms member said, “You are poisoning our children,” and “Wit & Wisdom must go!” Welch told me, “They went from zero to a hundred. Everything from them was aggressive, and threatening in nature.” He said, “It was not ‘Let’s have a dialogue.’ It was ‘Here are our demands.’”

“You’re unlikely to find anyplace on the market that is truly impregnable.”

When the women in T-shirts first showed up, Welch had never heard of Moms for Liberty, and he didn’t recognize its members. The group’s leader, Robin Steenman, was in her early forties, with shoulder-length blond hair; in coloring and build, she resembled Marjorie Taylor Greene. Board of Education members struggled to understand why she’d inserted herself into a matter that didn’t concern her: Steenman had no children in the public schools.

Moms for Liberty members soon escalated the conflict, publicly asserting that Williamson County Schools had adopted Wit & Wisdom hurriedly, and in violation of state rules. The school board still wasn’t sure what Moms for Liberty was—who founded it, who funded it. Nevertheless, the district assembled a reassessment team to review the curriculum and the adoption process. At a public “work session” in June, 2021, the team announced that, after a preliminary review, it hadn’t found any violations of protocol. Teachers had spent a full workday familiarizing themselves with Wit & Wisdom before implementing it. As Jenny Lopez, the district’s curriculum director, explained, “Teachers actually had more time than they’ve ever had to look at materials.”

The superintendent, Jason Golden, urged his colleagues to take parental feedback seriously, including worries that certain Wit & Wisdom content was too mature for young kids. For example, there were gruesome details in books about shark attacks and about war. Golden told the board, “These are real concerns.” Yet Golden also recalled telling a Moms for Liberty representative how much he trusted the district’s processes for evaluating curricula.

The review committee ultimately concluded that Wit & Wisdom had been an over-all success; still, administrators decided to survey teachers quarterly about how the curriculum was working. They limited access to the gorier images in one Civil War book and imposed similar “guardrails” involving “Hatchet,” a popular young-adult novel in which a character attempts suicide. “Walk Two Moons,” a novel by the Newbery Medal winner Sharon Creech, about a daughter’s quest to find her missing mother, was eventually removed from the Williamson version of the program,

not because its content was deemed objectionable but, rather, to adjust the pacing of one fourth-grade module. Golden, who is tall and genial, told the board members, "The overwhelming feedback that we got was: 'Man, can't we just read something *uplifting* in fourth grade?' And we felt the same way!"

At the work session, Golden shared one end of a conference table with Nancy Garrett, the board's chair. Garrett, who has rectangular glasses and a blond bob, is from a family that has attended or worked in Williamson County Schools for three generations. She had won the chairmanship, by unanimous vote, the previous August. At one point, she asked an assistant superintendent who had overseen the selection and review of Wit & Wisdom whether "the concept of critical race theory" had come up during the process. No, the assistant superintendent said.

Moms for Liberty members were portraying Wit & Wisdom as "critical race theory" in disguise. Garrett found this baffling. C.R.T., a complex academic framework that examines the systemic ways in which racism has shaped American society, is explored at the university level or higher. As far as the board knew, Williamson County Schools had never introduced the concept. Yet there had been such a deluge of references to it that Garrett had delved into her old e-mails, in an unsuccessful attempt to identify the origins of the outrage. She told her colleagues, "I guess I'm wondering what *happened*."

In September, 2020—four months after the murder of George Floyd, two months before the Presidential election, and a month into Williamson County Schools' use of Wit & Wisdom—Christopher Rufo, a conservative activist, appeared on Tucker Carlson's show, on Fox News, and called critical race theory "an existential threat to the United States." Rufo capitalized on the fact that, given C.R.T.'s academic provenance, few Americans had heard of the concept. He argued that liberal educators, under the bland banner of "diversity," were manipulating students into thinking of America not as a vibrant champion of democracy but as a shameful embodiment of white supremacy. (As he framed things, there were no in-between positions.) Rufo later called C.R.T. "the perfect villain"—a term that "connotes hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, anti-American views."

Rufo found a receptive ear in President Donald Trump, who was already ranting about "The 1619 Project" the collection of *Times Magazine* essays in which slavery is placed at the heart of the nation's founding. On Twitter, Trump had warned that the Department of Education would defund any school whose classroom taught material from the project. Trump conferred with Rufo and banned federal agencies from conducting "un-American propaganda training sessions" involving "critical race theory" or "white privilege." Trump said that Black Lives Matter protests were proliferating not because of anger over police abuses but because of "decades of left-wing indoctrination in our schools." Establishing a "1776 Commission," he urged "patriotic moms and dads" to demand that schools stop feeding children "hateful lies about this country." (The American Historical Association condemned the Administration's eventual "1776 Report," highlighting its many inaccuracies and arguing that it attempted to airbrush history and "elevate ignorance about the past to a civic virtue.")

Nearly nine hundred school districts nationwide were soon targeted by anti-C.R.T. campaigns, many of which adopted language that closely echoed Trump's order not to teach material that made others "feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex." In some red states, the vague wording was enshrined as law. Republicans filed what became known as "anti-C.R.T." bills; they were seemingly cut and pasted from templates, with similarly phrased references to such terms as "divisive concepts" and "indoctrination."

Williamson County Schools was uneventfully wrapping up its first term with Wit & Wisdom when, in early December, 2020, the American Legislative Exchange Council, which generates model legislation for right-leaning lawmakers, hosted a Webinar about "reclaiming education and the American dream." A representative of the Heritage Foundation, the conservative think tank, warned that elements of a "Black Lives Matter curriculum" were "now in our schools." Rufo—correctly predicting that Joe Biden, then the President-elect, would abolish Trump's executive order—urged state legislators and governors to take up the fight.

Continuing the agitation wasn't just an act of fealty to Trump; it was cunning politics. The fear that C.R.T. would cause children to become fixated on race has resonated with enough voters to help tip important elections. Last November, [Glenn Youngkin](#), a candidate for the governorship of Virginia, won an upset victory after repeatedly warning that the "curriculum has gone haywire"—and promising to sign an executive order banning C.R.T. from schools. Jasia Wrighten, a political scientist at Virginia Commonwealth University, [told the Washington Post](#) that Youngkin had "activated white women to vote in a very specific way that they feel like is protecting their children."

Days after the *alec* Webinar on "reclaiming education," three women in Florida filed incorporation papers for Moms for Liberty, Inc., later declaring that their "sole purpose" was to "fight for parental rights" to choose what sort of education was best for their kids. One of the organization's founders, Tina Descovich—who had recently lost reelection to the school board of Brevard County, Florida, after opposing pandemic safety protocols—soon appeared on [Rush Limbaugh's](#) show. Declaring plans to "start with school boards and move on from there," she said of like-minded parents, "It sounds a little melodramatic, but there is *evil* working against us on a daily basis." *maga* media—"Tucker Carlson Tonight," Breitbart—showcased Moms for Liberty. Media Matters, the liberal watchdog, [argued](#) that influential right-wing media figures were essentially "recruiting their eager audience" for the Moms' campaign.

Moms for Liberty, which is sometimes referred to as M4L or MFL, is so new that it is hard to parse, from public documents, what its leaders are getting paid. (The founders say that the chairs of local chapters are volunteers.) The group describes itself as a "grassroots" organization, yet its instant absorption by the conservative mediasphere has led some critics to suspect it of being an Astroturf group—an operation secretly funded by moneyed interests. Moms for Liberty registered with the I.R.S. as the kind of social-welfare nonprofit that can accept unlimited dark money.

The leaders had deep G.O.P. connections. One, Marie Rogerson, was a successful Republican political strategist. The other, Bridget Ziegler, a school-board member in Sarasota County, is married to the vice-chair of the Florida G.O.P., Christian Ziegler, who [told the Washington Post](#), "I have been trying for a dozen years to get twenty- and thirty-year-old females involved with the Republican Party, and it was a heavy lift to get that demographic. . . . But now Moms for Liberty has done it for me." Moms for Liberty worked with the office of Florida's governor, [Ron DeSantis](#), to help craft the state's infamous "Don't Say Gay" legislation, which DeSantis signed into law this past March; it forbids instruction on "sexual orientation or gender identity" in "kindergarten through grade 3 or in a manner that is not age-appropriate."

A national phalanx of interconnected organizations—including the Manhattan Institute, where Rufo is a fellow, and a group called Moms for America—supported the suite of talking points about C.R.T. [According to NBC News](#), in a single week last year Breitbart alone published seven hundred and fifty posts or articles in which the theory was mentioned. Glenn Beck, the right-wing pundit, declared that C.R.T. is a "poison," urging his audience, "Stand up in your community and fire the teachers. Fire them!"

On March 15, 2021, Rufo, in [a tweet thread](#), overtly described a key element of the far right's evolving strategy: "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 brand category." He added, "The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think 'critical race theory.'"

"The line in the script was actually 'Woof woof,' but, when we started shooting, 'Bow wow' came out, and the rest is history."

Williamson County has some of Tennessee's top-ranked schools. "That's why people *move* here," Eric Welch, the longtime school-board member, told me. He describes the school system as an economic "asset that pays off." Williamson County has the state's second-lowest unemployment rate and the highest property values: the median home value exceeds eight hundred thousand dollars.



It is not a diverse place. Eighty-eight per cent of residents are white. Ninety-five per cent of the school district's teachers are white. Until September, all twelve school-board members and the superintendent were white. A Confederate monument anchors the town square of the county seat, Franklin. The square was publicly marked as a former slave market only three years ago. The Confederate flag still flies prominently in some areas. When the white father of Black children recently complained about this at a school-board meeting, a man in the audience sneered, "We're in the *South!* "

In 2018, several parents joined forces to point out that schools in Williamson County could work harder to be welcoming to children of color. The group, which became known as the Cultural Competency Council, included Black, Asian American, Jewish, and L.G.B.T.Q.+ residents. A school-district official who served as a liaison to the council created videos for teacher training and development, including one about privilege. That video's language had clearly been calibrated to preempt defensive reactions: a narrator underscored that the concept of privilege was "not meant to suggest that someone has never struggled or that success is unearned." Even so, the conservative media pounced: the *Tennessee Star* said that the video took viewers on a guilt trip about "the perks white males supposedly have that others do not, America's supposed dysfunctional history, and how unfair it all is." Such views have played well in a county that Trump carried twice, both times by more than twenty points. (The Cultural Competency Council has been disbanded )

In 2020, Revida Rahman and another parent co-founded an anti-racism group, One WillCo, after Black parents chaperoning field trips to local plantations were astonished to see slavery depicted as benign. Rahman told me that some presentations suggested that "the slaves didn't really have it that bad—they lived better than we do, they had their food provided, they had housing." She added, "I beg to differ." At a school that one of Rahman's sons attended, some white classmates had mockingly linked arms as if to represent Trump's border wall.

One WillCo especially wanted the school system to address the fact that it had a record of disproportionately punishing students of color—a recent revelation. Moreover, some teachers used racially insensitive materials in their classrooms: in an assignment about the antebellum economy, students were instructed to imagine that their family "owns slaves," and to "create a list of expectations for your family's slaves."

On February 15, 2021, the school board hired a mother-and-son team of diversity consultants to gauge the depth of the district's problems with racism, bullying, and harassment, and to recommend solutions. A conservative board member, Jay Galbreath, forwarded information about the consultants to influential local Republicans, including Gregg Lawrence, a county commissioner, and Bev Burger, a longtime alderman in Franklin. In an e-mail, Lawrence complained to Galbreath that hiring the consultants was the type of thing that would lead to "the politicization of teaching in America where every subject is taught through the lens of race." He wrote, "These young people who have been protesting, looting and burning down our cities in America are doing so because they don't see anything about America worth preserving. And why is that? Because our public schools and universities taught them that America is a systemically racist nation founded by a bunch of bigoted slave owning colonizers."

This exchange was eventually made public through an open-records request, which also revealed that Burger had helped edit what has been called the foundational complaint against Wit & Wisdom: a month after the diversity consultants were hired, the parents of a biracial second grader e-mailed school officials to complain that the curriculum had caused their son to be "ashamed of his white half." Burger wrote of her edits, "See what you think." She cc'd Lawrence, who forwarded the communications to Galbreath and another school-board member, Dan Cash, a fellow-conservative who had won his seat in 2014, during a Tea Party wave. The county commissioner told the school-board members, "Here is more evidence that we are teaching critical race theory," and urged them to "get rid of" Wit & Wisdom.

A few weeks later, on March 22nd, the school board's monthly meeting took place on Zoom, because of the pandemic. Robin Steenman appeared before the board for the first time. Wearing a cream-colored sweater and dangly earrings, she presented herself simply as a concerned resident who wanted school officials to reject any

diversity proposal that involved "The 1619 Project, critical race training, intersectionality." She worried aloud that a recent proposal in California to mandate a semester of ethnic studies would be "paraded as a blueprint for the rest of the country."

Steenman, who appeared to be reading from notes, asserted that parents in Virginia were being blacklisted for "speaking out." In Pennsylvania, an elementary school had "forced fifth graders to celebrate Black communism and host a Black Power rally." In North Carolina, a teacher had described parents as "an impediment to social justice." In Ohio, C.R.T. "had to be removed from the curriculum, because the students were literally turning on each other." Steenman cited no sources. She said, "If you give them an inch"—then changed course. Dropping the "them," she declared, "If you give *one* inch to this kind of teaching, then you're gonna subject yourself to the whole spectrum."

Several weeks later, Steenman started the Williamson County chapter of Moms for Liberty, building on the e-mail sent by the parents of the biracial child and harnessing the furious energy of families who were already accusing the school board of "medical tyranny" for requiring students to wear masks. This vocal minority had been particularly incensed at one school-board member, Brad Fiscus, a former science teacher whose wife, Michelle, a pediatrician, was Tennessee's chief vaccine officer. Williamson County is a Republican pipeline to state and national office: the governor, Bill Lee, is from there; Marsha Blackburn, the *maga* senator, began her political career as a county commissioner there. In July, 2021, the state fired Michelle Fiscus after conservative lawmakers objected to her "messaging" in support of covid-19 vaccinations; afterward, Brad Fiscus resigned from the school board and the family moved to the East Coast. For right-wing extremists, the obvious lesson was that rage tactics worked. That August, one school-board meeting nearly ended in violence when two enraged men followed a proponent of masks to his vehicle, screaming, "We can find you!"

Moms for Liberty emphasizes the importance of being "joyful warriors"—relatable women who can rally their communities. A founder once explained, "This fight has to be fought in their own backyard." The organization may have seen Steenman as particularly well suited to winning over Williamson County residents: she was a former B-1-bomber pilot now raising three small children. Her husband, Matt, was also ex-Air Force—fighter jets. They moved to Williamson County five years ago, from Texas.

Another member of their fraternity was John Ragan, a former Air Force fighter pilot who'd been elected as a Republican to the Tennessee General Assembly in 2010. Ragan, a former business consultant from the city of Oak Ridge, had been listed as an alternate on *alec's* education task force. (He says that he does not recall attending any meetings.) He'd once crafted legislation to ban K-8 teachers from using materials "inconsistent with natural human reproduction" in the classroom. (It failed.)

Early last year, as Moms for Liberty was receiving its first wave of national media attention, Ragan introduced "anti-C.R.T." legislation. He wanted to ban teaching about white privilege or any other concepts that might cause students "discomfort or other psychological distress" because of their race or sex. The wording parroted talking points from Moms for Liberty, which parroted Trump, who parroted Rufo. Around the time that Moms for Liberty members began showing up at Williamson County school-board meetings, Steve Bannon, the former Trump adviser, said on his video podcast that "the path to save the nation is very simple—it's going to go through the school boards." Calling mothers "patriots," he urged a "revolt."

At a committee meeting of Tennessee House members, Ragan promoted his legislation by claiming that he'd heard about a seven-year-old Williamson County girl who had had suicidal thoughts, and was now in therapy, because she was ashamed of being white. (No such family has ever publicly come forward.) Two Black Democrats sharply challenged Ragan. Harold Love, a congressman from Nashville, asked him whether the proposed legislation would make it illegal for teachers to even mention "The 1619 Project." When Ragan replied that instructors could talk about it as long as they taught "both for and against," Love said, "It's kind of hard to be 'for or against' slavery." G. A. Hardaway, a congressman from Memphis, argued on the House floor that a law limiting discussion of race, ethnicity, discrimination, and bias contradicted "the very principles that our country was formed on."

Ragan pushed ahead, arguing that “subversive factions,” “seditious charlatans,” and “misguided souls” were creating “artificial divisions” in a “shameless pursuit of political power.” His bill passed. Senator Raumesh Akbari, who chairs the Tennessee Senate Democratic Caucus, said, “This offensive legislation pretends skin color has never mattered in our country,” adding that “our children deserve to learn the full story.”

Once the Governor signed the bill into law, Moms for Liberty would be able to devise complaints arguing that certain elements of public instruction violated a Tennessee statute. Violators could be fined hundreds of thousands of dollars, potentially draining resources. Steenman, appearing on Blackburn’s video podcast, “Unmuted with Marsha,” let slip a tactical detail: the moment Tennessee’s new law took effect, Moms for Liberty would have a complaint against Wit & Wisdom “ready to go” to the state. Blackburn praised Steenman as “the point of the spear.”

“It’s sheer arrogance to believe that your voice is louder than the din of crackers in my mouth.”

Steenman also appeared on Glenn Beck’s show. As if speaking directly to Governor Lee, she said, “Stop serving the woke-left lobby!” Beck said, “Bill Lee, shame on you!” Lee signed the bill into law on the eve of the anniversary of George Floyd’s murder.

Steenman raised Moms for Liberty’s visibility by putting on events—rented plants, live music, charcuterie. One of them, C.R.T. 101, took place in May, 2021, before a large audience at Liberty Hall, a Franklin auditorium in a renovated stove factory filled with shops and restaurants. A clinical psychologist from Utah, Gary Thompson, came onstage and declared that C.R.T. engenders shame, which can trigger depression, which could “be pushing your kids to suicide.” Thompson, who is Black, showed photographs of his multiracial family: he and his wife, a white pediatric neuropsychologist, have six children. Thompson joked, awkwardly, that the overwhelmingly white audience sure didn’t *look* like members of the K.K.K. He noted that he’d voted for Barack Obama, and said that he approved of Williamson County Schools’ hiring of diversity consultants to assess such problems as racial bullying. He opposed C.R.T., though, because it framed people of color as “victims.” Choking up, Thompson said, “That is *not* the legacy that my parents left me.”

Moms for Liberty often advances its cause by enlisting Black conservatives, or by borrowing snippets from their public comments. The organization has posted a video clip of Condoleezza Rice saying that white kids shouldn’t have to “feel bad” in order for Black children to feel empowered. Steenman has collaborated with Carol Swain, a political scientist at Vanderbilt, who vocally opposes same-sex marriage and once described Islam as “dangerous to our society.” This past January, Moms for Liberty sponsored a conference organized by Swain, American Dream, whose branding heavily featured images of Martin Luther King, Jr. Before the event, King’s daughter Bernice tweeted an admonition about those who took her father’s “words out of context to promote ideas that oppose his teachings,” adding that Steenman’s chapter, having “sought to erase him,” was now “using him to make money.”

At the C.R.T. 101 gathering, the author of the original complaint against Wit & Wisdom revealed herself onstage to be Chara Dixon, a mom in her forties. Nervously holding a copy of her speech, she introduced herself as a naturalized citizen. (She had emigrated, decades earlier, from Thailand.) Dixon, whose husband, Brian, is white, recalled helping their seven-year-old son with a Wit & Wisdom assignment about a “lonely little yellow leaf.” The audience laughed when she declared, “It was boring.” A book about a chameleon: “Another boring story!” Her son had also read about King’s “I Have a Dream” speech, which was “beautiful and uplifting”; but the tale of Ruby Bridges and the “angry white mob” was depressing. Dixon said that in her son’s childhood world “there’s no color.” (She soon became Moms for Liberty’s treasurer.)

Dixon seemed to conflate Wit & Wisdom and C.R.T. Steenman, in an official complaint to the Tennessee Department of Education, wrote, “There does not have to be a textbook labeled ‘Critical Race Theory’ for its harmful tenets to be present in a curriculum.” At the C.R.T. 101 event, she took the stage and told the audience that the threat of “Marxist” indoctrination at school could be vanquished by opposing “activist” teachers, curricula, and diversity-driven policy. An m.c. cheerily ended the evening by reminding everyone that “today’s kids are tomorrow’s voters.”

The Williamson County chapter of M4L held its next big event, Let's Talk Wit & Wisdom, at a Harley-Davidson franchise in Franklin. Steenman had been having trouble finding a venue when the dealership's owner offered his showroom. Calling the man a "true patriot," Steenman presented him with a folded and framed American flag that, she said, had accompanied her on a bombing mission in Afghanistan.

Moms for Liberty had invited the entire school board to the event, but the only members who showed up were the group's three clear allies. One, a former kindergarten teacher who opposed masking, liked to hug people during breaks at school-board meetings. The other two were Cash and Galbreath, both of whom were up for reelection on August 4, 2022.

Steenman, gesturing toward a large screen behind her, showed the "findings" of a Moms for Liberty "deep dive" into Wit & Wisdom. She elicited gasps from the audience by saying that the curriculum contained books that depicted "graphic murder," "rape," "promiscuity," "torture," "adultery," "stillbirth," and "scalping and skinning," along with content that her organization considered to be "anti-police," "anti-church," and "anti-nuclear family." Rhetoric about "empowering the students" was suddenly "*everywhere*," she complained. Without presenting any evidence, she claimed that elementary-school students now needed counsellors to help them "overcome the emotional trauma" caused by Wit & Wisdom.

Steenman's events often strayed far from the particulars of Williamson County Schools. At one of them, the proceedings were interrupted when someone walked onstage and breathlessly announced news from Virginia: Glenn Youngkin, the candidate for governor who'd crusaded against C.R.T., had won. The audience cheered as if Youngkin were one of their own.

Steenman's claims about Wit & Wisdom were so tendentious that several ardent supporters of the public schools looked her up on social media. Among other things, they discovered a Twitter account, @robin\_steenman. On August 9, 2020, Matt Walsh—a columnist for the Daily Wire, the conservative media site co-founded by the pundit Ben Shapiro—had shared a thread by a Philadelphia teacher who expressed concern that meddlesome parents might overhear classroom conversations during online learning and undermine "honest conversations about gender/sexuality." (The Daily Wire is headquartered in Nashville, and Shapiro has propagated Moms for Liberty's messaging.) In a retweet of Walsh, @robin\_steenman had posted, "You little brainwashing assholes will never get hold of my kids!" After Eric Welch and others publicly challenged Steenman about the tweet—and another one declaring that her children would never attend public schools—the account vanished. (Steenman agreed to an interview, but did not keep the appointment. A Moms for Liberty spokesperson, calling my questions "personal in nature," largely declined to provide answers.)

Privately, certain defenders of Wit & Wisdom referred to Moms for Liberty members as the Antis. In a sly move, some adopted the seahorse as a symbol of what one parent described to me as "the resistance." This summer in Williamson County, I saw seahorse stickers on cars and laptops. When I met Rahman for lunch, she was wearing seahorse earrings. At a school-board campaign event for a candidate who opposed Moms for Liberty, a volunteer wore a seahorse pendant on a necklace, alongside a gold cross. At least one person connected to Moms for Liberty had become concerned about the group's motives and tactics, and was secretly monitoring them from the inside. This person told me, "I'm the one in the trench, and I don't want to get caught."

Many Moms and like-minded parents wanted both Wit & Wisdom and Superintendent Golden gone. Golden's contract was up for annual review before the 2021-22 school year began. (One Moms for Liberty opponent recently tweeted, "The m.o. nationwide is to fire Supt's and hire ideologues.") At a meeting where the board planned to vote on Golden's future, one of the superintendent's many supporters implored the elected officials to "hold the line" against the "steady attack on our public schools." The Antis were louder. A man wearing an American-flag-themed shirt shouted, "We, the parents, are awake, we're organized, and we're *extremely* pissed off." He declared, "We're gonna replace every board member in here with people *just like me*. Nothing would make us happier than to surround you with a roomful of American patriots who believe in the Constitution of the United States and Jesus Christ above!"

The Antis jeered at speakers who expressed support for Golden or the district's diversity efforts. They mocked a woman whose daughters had experienced anti-Asian slurs at school. The mom told the board, "I've heard people say that teaching these parts of our history is 'racist' or 'traumatic.' What's traumatic is Black, Latino, Asian, and L.G.B.T.Q. kids going to schools where they face discrimination and don't feel safe." A local psychologist, Alanna Truss, said, "I'm yet to see a child in my practice who's been traumatized by our county's curriculum choices. I have, however, seen *many* students experiencing trauma due to being discriminated against and bullied within our schools, related to race, religion, gender, and sexuality."

Six of the school-board members, who serve four-year terms, were coming up for reelection in August of 2022. (The other six will finish their terms in 2024.) As the Wit & Wisdom furor grew, another component of the right-wing assault on schools locked into place: last fall, state lawmakers passed a bill legalizing partisan school-board elections. Moms for Liberty called the change "a *HUGE* step forward."

Educators and policymakers have long believed that public education should operate independently of political ideology. As the magazine *Governing* put it last year, "The goal of having nonpartisan elections is not to remove all politics" but "to remove a conflict point that keeps the school board from doing its job." For people who target school boards, conflict has become a tool. In Texas, a PAC linked to a cell-phone company which recently funded the *maga* takeover of several school boards paid for an inflammatory mail campaign blaming a classroom shooting on administrators who had "stopped disciplining students according to Critical Race Theory principles." In August, during a panel at *cpac*, the gathering of conservatives, the former Trump official Mercedes Schlapp warned that, though Republicans were focussed on federal and state elections, "school board elections are *critical*." The panel's title, "We Are All Domestic Terrorists," derisively referred to recent instructions from Attorney General Merrick Garland to the F.B.I. for devising a plan to protect school employees and board members from threats of violence.

Joining Schlapp onstage was Ryan Girdusky, the founder of the 1776 Project *pac*, which funnels money to G.O.P. candidates in partisan school-board races. Girdusky boasted that, in 2021, his *pac* "did fifty-eight elections in seven states and we won forty-two." Girdusky said that his goal this year is to boost at least five hundred school-board candidates nationwide. He urged the audience to "vote from the bottom up—go from school board and then go all the way up to governor and senator, and we'll have conservative majorities across the entire electorate."

"My phone is definitely spying on me—I just got an ad for 'bad sex.'"

Last November, mere weeks after Tennessee lawmakers voted to allow partisan school-board races, Steenman launched a *pac*, Williamson Families. Its approach was markedly similar to that of Southlake Families, a Texas *pac* whose orchestrated takeover of a school board in that state has led to attempted book bans. Both *pacs* have worked with Axiom Strategies, a political-consulting firm that has helped seat high-profile Republicans, including *maga* figures. Allen West, the chair of the Texas G.O.P., has urged Southlake Families to export its takeover blueprint to suburbs nationwide. Wealthy suburbs are some of America's purplest districts, and winning them may be key to controlling the House, the Senate, and the Presidency. Anne McGraw, the former Williamson County Schools board member, told me that the advent of Moms for Liberty "shows how hyperlocal the national machine is going with their tactics." She observed, "Moms for Liberty is not in Podunk, America. They're going into hyper-educated, wealthy counties like this, and trying to get *those* people to doubt the school system that *brought* us here."

Steenman's *pac* quickly took in about a hundred and seventy-five thousand dollars—an unusually large amount for local politics in Tennessee. The *pac* held an inaugural event featuring John Rich, a country singer who had appeared with Trump on "The Celebrity Apprentice." Rich, who has no apparent connection to Williamson County, has contributed at least five thousand dollars to Steenman's *pac*.

Progressives and policy experts have long suspected that right-wing attacks on school boards are less about changing curricula than about undermining the entire public-school system, in the hope of privatizing education. During the *alec* Webinar about "reclaiming education," the Heritage Foundation representative declared that "school choice" would become "very important in the next couple of years"; controversies about curricula, he said, were "opening up opportunity for policymakers at the state level" to consider options like charter schools.

This isn't the first time that the culture wars have taken aim at public education. But Rebecca Jacobsen, a professor of education policy at Michigan State University, believes that this era is different, because social media has made it easy for national operatives to stage "a coordinated, concrete" scare campaign designed to drive parents toward alternatives to public schools: "The message, at its core, is: 'Beware of your public-education system. Make sure your kid's teachers aren't up to something.'"

The timing of "anti-C.R.T." legislation is no coincidence. Instead of putting forth a platform, the Republican Party has tried to maintain power by demonizing its opponents and critics as sinister and un-American. In the lead-up to the midterms, the G.O.P.'s alarmism about critical race theory has accompanied fear-mongering about L.G.B.T.Q. + teachers being "groomers." Conservative media aggressively promote both campaigns. From Fox News to the Twitter account Libs of TikTok, the messaging has been consistent: many public-school teachers are dangerous.

Lee, the Tennessee governor, has leveraged this discord while trying to reformulate school funding: in January, he announced plans to create fifty new charter schools in partnership with Hillsdale College, a private Christian school in Michigan, whose president, Larry Arnn, headed Trump's 1776 Commission. The plan partially collapsed after a Tennessee television station aired footage of Arnn, during a private appearance in Williamson County, comparing public education to "the plague" and arguing that teachers are educated in "the dumbest parts of the dumbest colleges in the country." J. C. Bowman, the executive director and C.E.O. of Professional Educators of Tennessee, called Arnn's comments "reprehensible and irresponsible." Even Republican politicians backed away. The speaker of the Tennessee House, Cameron Sexton, acknowledged that Arnn had "insulted generations of teachers who have made a difference for countless students."

Moms for Liberty's role in the broader war on public schools became ever clearer in July, at the group's inaugural national summit, in Tampa. DeSantis, who delivered a key address, was presented with a "liberty sword." Another headliner was Trump's former Education Secretary, Betsy DeVos, whose family has connections to Hillsdale. To an enthusiastic crowd that included Steenman, DeVos declared that the U.S. Department of Education—the agency that she once oversaw—should not exist.

Early this year, Eric Welch, the school-board member, was leaning against seeking reelection. Both of his sons had graduated—he was the one who handed them their high-school diplomas when they crossed the stage. His wife, Andrea, wanted him to take it easy for a while.

School-board service, which is time-consuming and can be tedious, requires diplomacy, a breadth of knowledge, and the ability to make complex, well-informed decisions. At meetings, Welch, who considered ideologues and bullies a threat to public education, often rebutted misinformation about covid-19 and Wit & Wisdom. At one meeting, he'd pointedly read aloud from a title that he found on a Moms for Liberty site: the book, written by a follower of the John Birch Society, referred to Black people as "pickaninnies." Rahman, the co-founder of One WillCo, the anti-racism organization, told me, "He came with *all* the receipts." Welch's detractors had declared him arrogant and rude; Rahman called him "a strong advocate for what's *right*."

For Welch's seat, Steenman's *pac* backed William (Doc) Holladay, an optometrist who, like Steenman, had no children in Williamson County Schools. Holladay had shown up at school-board meetings to denounce C.R.T. as "racist." On Facebook, where he'd railed against pandemic protocols, his posts were routinely flagged or removed because they contained misinformation. His top "news" sources included the *Epoch Times*, which regularly promotes right-wing falsehoods.

Last year, Charlie Wilson, the president of the National School Boards Association, characterized local school-board members as fundamental guardians "of democracy, of liberty, of equality, of civility and community, and of the Constitution and the rule of law." Holladay, a felon who believes the conspiracy theory that Trump is still the "legitimate President," seemed more like an opportunist. In 2008, he'd pleaded guilty to multiple counts of prescription fraud and forgery; the Tennessee Department of Health had put him on probation for "immoral,

unprofessional or dishonorable conduct," noting that he had also worked "while impaired." The state licensure board later added five more years of probation upon discovering that he'd made "untruthful" claims about "professional excellence or abilities." (Holladay told me that he has turned his life around.)

When Welch heard that Holladay and other figures he considered to be unsuitable were seeking authority over the schools, he tweeted, "I'm running." He told his wife, "I don't know that I can walk away and let these people be in charge." The "Tennessee School Board Candidate Guide" notes that, for the office of school board, "the best, most capable and most farsighted citizens of each community should be drafted."

During the campaign, Holladay tried to frame Welch, a lifelong Republican, as a "liberal" for having supported masking and Wit & Wisdom. Welch publicly noted that he had interned for Senator John Warner, of Virginia, and attended the Inauguration of George W. Bush. Holladay, who had no military service, bragged about being a patriot; Welch is an Army veteran.

In a Q. & A. published by One WillCo, candidates were asked to describe their involvement with Williamson County Schools. Welch explained that, in addition to serving on the executive board of the district's parent-teacher association, he had "run wrestling tournaments as a booster fundraiser, spray painted end zones, worked concessions, volunteered for holiday shows setup/breakdown, built theatre sets, cleaned bleachers, mopped floors." Holladay's answers: "Speaking out at school board meetings"; "Helping to lead activist groups in order to effect needed changes." When asked why he was running, he said that "the school board has largely been operating in a manner that runs counter to the conservative principles that most people who live here hold dear." This and other answers betrayed profound ignorance of what a school board does.

Moms for Liberty had been broadening its campaign against Wit & Wisdom and was now targeting reading materials available in school libraries, which provided access to the Epic app, a repository of nearly fifty thousand children's books. In a local news segment, Steenman read aloud, "I-is-for-intersex," from a book called "The GayBCs," which was available on Epic, and said, "What parent wants to explain 'intersex' to their child that, at this point, doesn't even understand sex?"

Holladay tried a similar maneuver. During a live-streamed candidate forum, he handed his interviewer a passage from "Push," the acclaimed novel by Sapphire, and asked him to read it aloud. (If this was the same passage that Holladay later showed me on his cell phone, it began, "Daddy sick me, disgust me, but he sex me up.") The interviewer was Tom Lawrence, a gentlemanly fixture on AM radio who has been called "the voice of Williamson County." Lawrence scanned the text and declined to share it with viewers, saying, "It has words like 'orgasm' in it." Holladay, noting that the book could be found in one of the local high schools, declared, "Whoever is responsible for putting that book in the library should be *arrested*." (In a tweet, Welch expressed astonishment that a school-board candidate would "call for the arrest of a WCS librarian.")

As Holladay campaigned, he repeatedly invoked the nationwide partisan divide. In an interview that appeared on YouTube, he declared that conservatives were fleeing blue states for places like Williamson County because the left was trying to "destroy the last remaining refuges of conservatism and patriotism." If Williamson County "goes blue," he said, the rest of the state would follow, and if Tennessee "doesn't stay red" it will be "a huge blow to the country."

On Election Day, Welch, a wiry ex-wrestler, erected a pole tent outside Hunters Bend Elementary School, a voting precinct. Holladay's supporters set up nearby. I arrived to find Welch, wearing khaki shorts and a "*re-elect eric welch*" T-shirt, squaring off in the parking lot with a Holladay supporter who was saying, angrily, "I've laid people *out* for less than that!"

The man, Brian Russell, described Welch as the aggressor—"He shoulder-checked me"—but multiple witnesses characterized the altercation differently. Meghan Guffee, a Republican running for reelection to the county commission, told me that Russell had demanded to know why Welch had blocked him on social media. Welch, trying to walk away, had responded, "I'm ending this conversation. You're an ass."

In a public Facebook post, Russell had declared Welch to be “as bad as a pedophile.” Guffee said that she’d heard Russell, in the parking lot, accuse Welch of having “voted to teach third graders how to masturbate.” (Russell denies this.) Guffee was particularly appalled that her six-year-old daughter, who was with her at the voting site, had witnessed Russell’s hostility. She told me, “That is not how this community does things.”

Before leaving the school grounds, Russell, a painting contractor in his early fifties, told me that he was angry about Wit & Wisdom: “When my daughter comes home and her best friend is Black, and she’s wondering why I’m bad because I’m white. . . .” This and other comments suggested that his children attended local schools. In fact, Russell’s three children lived in his native state of Ohio.

Throughout America, *maga* types were targeting education officials. In Maine, a man plastered a school-board member’s photograph on a sign and surrounded it with rat traps, telling NBC News, “This is a war with the left,” and “In war, tactics and strategy can become blurry.” A member of the Proud Boys ran for a school-board seat in California. On September 27th, the American Libraries Association sent an open letter to the F.B.I. director, Chris Wray, asking for help: in the previous two weeks alone, “bombing or shooting threats” had forced the temporary closing of libraries in five states. Tennessee was one of them.

In Williamson County, Moms for Liberty members couldn’t claim ignorance of the beliefs of some of the candidates they and Steenman’s *pac* supported. Williamson Families donated a thousand dollars to the campaign of an ex-marine who was running for county commissioner, and who had publicly warned the school board, “In the past, you dealt with sheep. Now prepare yourselves to deal with lions! I swore an oath to protect this country from all enemies—foreign and domestic. You harm my children, you become a domestic enemy.”

That guy lost. So did Holladay. Welch beat him by five hundred and fifty-nine votes. Welch was surprised that *anybody* had voted for Holladay, later telling me, “If you had to *design* a candidate who is unqualified and should not be on a board of education, that’s what he’d look like.”

Candidates backed by Moms for Liberty members won, however, in two other districts. A Republican who appeared to have no connection to the public schools beat Ken Chilton, who ran as an independent and who, the day after the election, tweeted that Tennessee lawmakers’ decision to allow partisan school-board elections had “created a monster.”

Jay Galbreath, the board member who had forwarded the e-mails about diversity consultants to other conservative politicians, had found himself challenged from the right flank—by a M4L-affiliated candidate whose campaign signs said “*reject crt.*” As if to prove his opposition to Wit & Wisdom, Galbreath had posted publicly, on Facebook, that progressives were “constantly looking at ways to inject and normalize things like gender identity, the black lives matter movement, and LGBTQ by weaving it into curriculum.” Williamson Strong, a *pac* composed of local progressives who have long defended the public schools, called for Galbreath’s resignation, noting, “This is pure hate speech, and it has *NO* place in a position of influence or power over 40,000+ children and their education. It has no place in Williamson County, period.” The group, whose leaders include Anne McGraw, the former school-board member, observed, “All filters have apparently been obliterated now that he’s competing for votes against an MFL-endorsed candidate.” Despite the controversy, Galbreath won reelection.

A month before the vote, a civil action was filed against Wit & Wisdom: the parents of an elementary-school student sued the school board and various administrators in the district on behalf of a conservative nonprofit that they had just launched, Parents’ Choice Tennessee. The lawsuit’s complaint echoed Moms for Liberty’s assertions that the curriculum’s “harmful, unlawful and age-inappropriate content” represented a “clear violation of Tennessee code.” If the lawsuit succeeds, Williamson County Schools may have to find a new curriculum and pay fines. (Citing the litigation, Williamson County Schools officials declined to comment for this article.)

The lawsuit may have been designed, in part, to give the impression that there was more local opposition to Wit & Wisdom than actually existed. There are eighteen thousand students in the district’s elementary schools, but according to a district report only thirty-seven people had complained about the new curriculum. Fourteen of the



complainants had no children in the system.

Rebecca Jacobsen, the Michigan scholar, looks for clues in such data. She said, of the vitriol toward school boards, "Is this a blip, and we'll rebound? Or are we chipping away at our largest public institution and the system that has been at the center of our democracy since the founding of this country?" She noted that some Americans "don't trust their *schools and teachers* anymore," adding, "That's *radical*."

Moms for Liberty's campaign, meanwhile, continues to widen. The organization now claims two hundred and forty chapters in forty-two states, and more than a hundred thousand members. It has thrown a fund-raising gala featuring Megyn Kelly, in which the top ticket cost twenty thousand dollars. In late October, a spokesperson for the Moms told me that the organization—ostensibly a charity—is a "media company."

The slick rollout of Moms for Liberty has made it seem less like a good-faith collective of informed parents and more like a well-funded operation vying to sway American voters in a pivotal election year. Steenman's chapter recently announced a slate of upcoming talks: "Gender Ideology," "Restorative Justice," "Comprehensive Sex Ed," "History of Marxism in Education." I asked Jacobsen whether she thinks that Moms for Liberty members actually believe that a curriculum like *Wit & Wisdom* damages children. "I don't know what anybody *believes* anymore," she replied. "We seem to have lost a sense of honesty. It may just be about power and money." ♦

RESOLUTION REGARDING THE EDUCATIONAL IMPERATIVE  
OF A COMPREHENSIVE UNDERSTANDING OF SYSTEMIC RACISM

The Cleveland Heights - University Heights Board of Education hereby ADOPTS the following Preambles and Resolutions:

As our nation grapples with the hard truths of racism and inequality, we are listening with broken hearts and engaging with determined spirits. We acknowledge these problems, and while we earnestly strive to correct them, we have a great deal of work left to do: and

Whereas a culturally responsive curriculum reflects the history and background of all students, and empowers students to value all cultures, not just their own; and

Whereas research has shown that a culturally responsive curriculum can motivate students of color to a higher level of academic achievement and in many cases can increase the graduation rate of previously disengaged students; and

Whereas the Cleveland Heights - University Heights Board of Education believes that public schools are fundamental to our democratic society; and

Whereas the Cleveland Heights - University Heights City School District was the first district in the state of Ohio to adopt an equity policy and to commit to equity as a driving principle underpinning our decision making: and

Whereas any path to equity must, necessarily, include an understanding that inequalities, inhumanity and institutional racism have existed throughout our American experience, and that they still do today; therefore be it

Resolved that the Cleveland Heights - University Heights Board of Education condemns, in the strongest possible terms, white supremacy culture, hate speech, hate crimes and violence in the service of hatred. These immoral ideologies and depraved actions deserve no place in our country, state or schools. And be it

Further resolved that our work in racial equity must continue to support open and courageous conversations on racism and inequity; and be it

Further resolved that the Cleveland Heights - University Heights Board of Education will continue to support training for our employees and ourselves in order to identify the implicit biases influencing us; and be it

Further resolved that the Cleveland Heights - University Heights Board of Education encourages the Ohio Department of Education to ensure that all state administered tests are free of racial bias; and be it

Further resolved that the Cleveland Heights - University Heights Board of Education explicitly denounces efforts currently underway to restrict the exposure of our students to a comprehensive understanding of how systemic racism has limited, and continues to limit, the potential of all Americans; and be it

Lastly resolved that the Cleveland Heights - University Heights Board of Education re-commits itself to continued advocacy on behalf of educational equity in our community, our state and nation.

**Parents want kids to learn about ongoing effects of slavery – but not critical race theory. They're the same thing.**

**Erin Richards Alia Wong**

**USA TODAY**

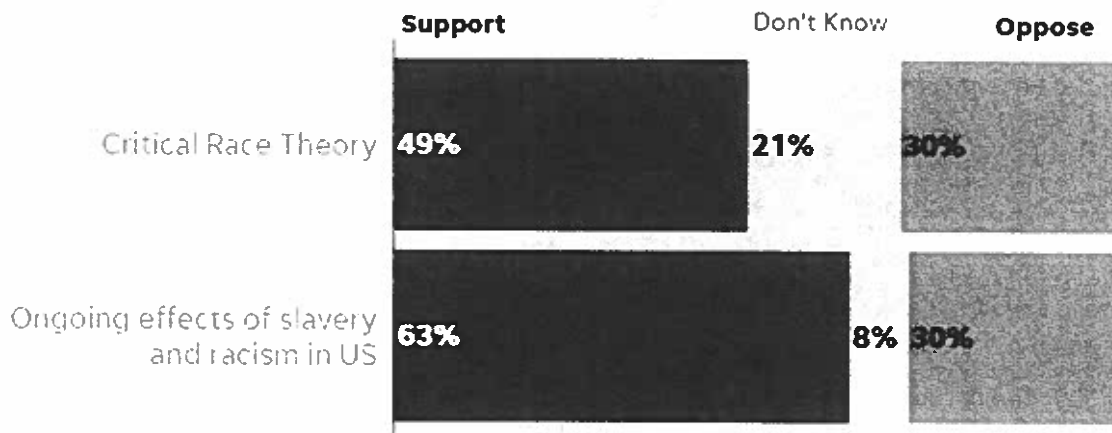
More than 60% of American parents want their kids to learn about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism as part of their education, according to a new USA TODAY/Ipsos poll.

But just half of parents support teaching critical race theory in schools – even though the theory's main premise is that racism continues to permeate society. About 4 in 10 parents support restrictions on schools' ability to teach critical race theory.

That disconnect underscores the heated feelings parents have about race-related conversations and how teachers should be handling that and other delicate topics. And, not surprisingly, the issue is firmly politicized: More than 8 in 10 Democrat parents believed their children should learn about the lingering impact of slavery and racism in schools, compared with fewer than 4 in 10 Republican parents, according to the poll's findings.

Intense feelings about race and gender issues in school played major roles in Tuesday's election results. Anti-critical race theory activism and attention on schools propelled Republican Glenn Youngkin to a victory in the Virginia governor's race and solidified the approach as a key GOP strategy ahead of the 2022 midterm elections.

### **Do you support or oppose teaching about the following in your kid's school?**



Source: USA TODAY/Ipsos Poll taken Aug. 30-Sept. 1 of 2,010 adults. Credibility interval +/- 2.5 percentage points.  
Correction: A previous version of this chart attributed the survey to Suffolk poll, when the correct source is Ipsos.

Across the U.S., a solid majority of parents, about three out of four, believe schools should teach slavery and racism as part of American history, the poll showed. That left some wondering about the respondents in the minority.

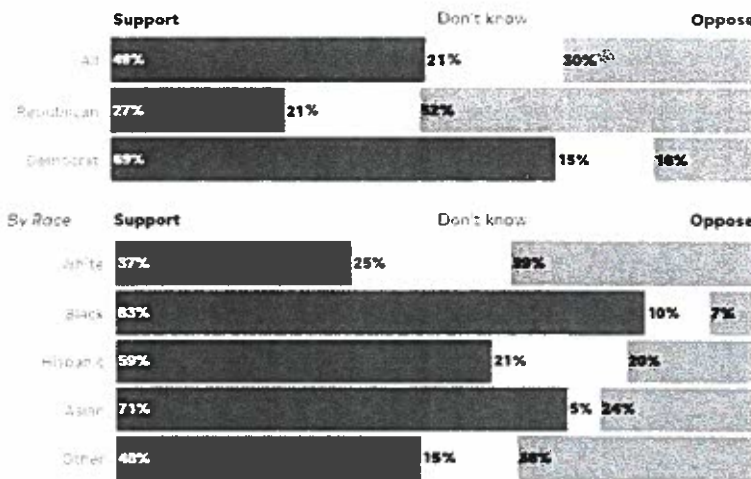
"Who are those one out of four parents who don't want their kid learning history?" said David Hinojosa, a lawyer with the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights, a nonprofit based in Washington, D.C. that's investigating the effects of laws banning critical race theory in some states. "Or do they think American history should be taught, but without slavery?"

A representative sample of about 2,000 Americans participated in the USA TODAY/Ipsos back-to-school survey, conducted between Aug. 30 and Sept. 1. About a fifth of participants are parents of schoolchildren. The poll had a credibility interval, akin to a margin of error, of plus or minus 2.5 percentage points. In addition to asking about critical race theory and history education, the poll surveyed parents about online learning, school mask and vaccine mandates, sexual education and media literacy education.

Most parents, concerned about learning losses brought on by remote learning, support in-person learning with universal masking and teacher vaccination requirements. Roughly three in four parents also said they're in favor of schools teaching students about sex, as well as how to spot misinformation online. Specifically, 63% of parents want their children to learn about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism in schools, while just 49% say critical race theory should be taught in schools – even though the two topics are intertwined. Three in 10 parents oppose the teaching of CRT.

How parents feel varies significantly by race.

**Do you support or oppose teaching critical race theory in your kid's school?**



Source: USA TODAY/Ipsos Poll taken Aug. 30-Sept. 1 of 2,010 adults. Credibility interval +/- 2.5 percentage points. Correction: A previous version of this chart attributed the survey to Suffolk poll, when the correct source is Ipsos.

Just 37% of white parents are in favor of their children's schools teaching critical race theory, compared with 83% of Black parents, according to the poll. Parents of color also support teaching about systemic racism at greater rates than white parents. Deborah Valentine, a 58-year-old Black grandmother of four schoolchildren in Martinsburg, West Virginia, said she believes such education is important "so history won't repeat itself."

"At this point, the grownups seem to be having a hard time getting along and accepting others who are different from them," said Valentine. "If that is allowed to continue, the next generation won't do any better."

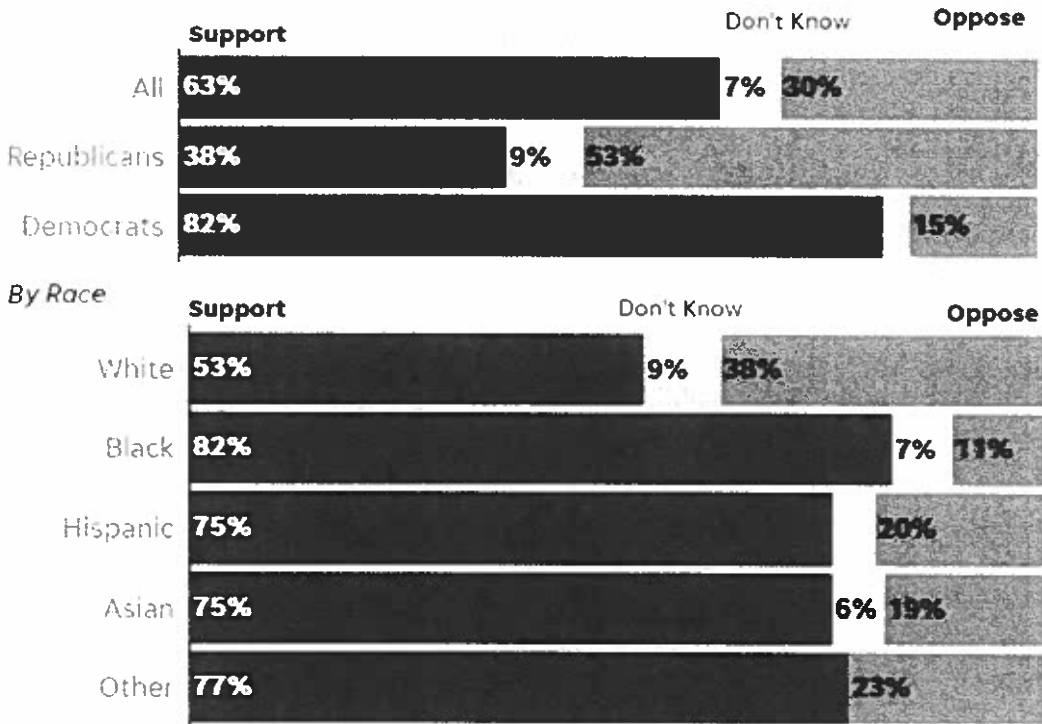
Schools can teach about systemic racism in a way that's age-appropriate and avoids making white children "feel like they're being singled out," she added, by emphasizing mistakes made in the past, and that young people of all races have the power to make it right in the future.

"Putting your hands over your eyes and acting like (racism) didn't happen when it did – it's just not going to be good if we want to keep our country moving forward," said Valentine, a Democrat.

Critical race theory encourages disadvantaged students to see themselves as victims when their education should teach them "tenacity and grit," argued Wayne Pittman, a Republican father of three in Monument, Colorado.

All racism is wrong ... that's not a debate," said Pittman, who's white. But "once you get into this blame game, it's automatically someone else's fault for the situation you're in – you're never going to be able to break out of that cycle or that mindset." Almost 1 in 4 parents – 22% – said children should begin learning about racism in kindergarten. Overall, a majority feel it should at least start sometime before middle school. Still, nearly 1 in 5 respondents – 17% – said it's never appropriate to teach schoolchildren about racism.

**Do you support or oppose teaching about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism in the United States in your kid's school?**



Source: USA TODAY/Suffolk Poll taken Aug. 30-Sept. 1 of 2,010 adults. Credibility interval +/- 2.5 percentage points.

**The continuing fight over critical race theory education**

Battles over what critical race theory is and isn't, whether it's being taught in schools and why it even matters have made headlines for months.

CRT is a framework developed decades ago by legal scholars who wondered why more progress hadn't been made on civil rights in America. The theory is commonly discussed in law schools, but rarely mentioned by name in K-12 schools, teachers and scholars say.

Parents' views on the issue are divided sharply by political affiliation, according to the poll. About 82% of Democrat parents support schools teaching about the ongoing effects of slavery, compared with 38% of Republican parents.

Justine Larison, a 51-year-old mother of two children in the Wilmington, Delaware, area opposes public schools teaching critical race theory. Such critiques have reinforced her decision to send her teenage son to a private Catholic school, said Larison, who's white. Larison and her family discuss critical race theory – which she defines as the ways race and law intersect – at home, though not in depth because she didn't learn about it in school herself, she said.

Teaching kids about the history of slavery and racism is important, Larison said, but she's wary of public schools overemphasizing conflict between Black people and white people.

"People are people," said Larison, a Republican, noting that she believed white people face just as many struggles as their Black peers.

### **How did CRT gain traction?**

A national reckoning over racial injustices and police brutality began last year in the wake of George Floyd's murder in Minneapolis. The national discussion intensified after the publication of the New York Times' 1619 Project, which reframed the founding of America around slavery.

Then last September, former president Donald Trump issued an executive order banning workplace training within the federal government and its contractors that aimed to address racial disparities. President Joe Biden's administration has since rescinded the order. But conservative critics have continued to focus on what they see as "critical race theory" embedded in schools.

Republican lawmakers in GOP-controlled states have since pursued legislation that restricts how race and racism can be taught in public schools. At least 28 states have sought to restrict teaching about racism or bias in schools, according to Chalkbeat, a nonprofit education news site. Some have gone as far as restricting teaching "divisive concepts."

Parents riled up by the issue have flooded school board meetings. Conservative organizations have offered tools to help them. The Manhattan Institute, for example, released a guide for parents concerned about "woke schooling."

"If you are a parent worried about your child's miseducation but afraid to speak up for fear of being called a "bigot" and a "racist," recognize this: you are not alone, and thousands of parents like you are preparing to fight back," the guide says. Many parents and teachers are concerned the outcry over critical race theory in schools has spiraled out of control. They're worried the new laws not only limit freedom of speech, but also the teaching of accurate history. A newly formed group called the Learn from History Coalition, aims to rally teachers and parents behind teaching the full history of America, including the uncomfortable parts. "Our kids need the truth, so they can learn from the past," said Suzanne Schreiber, a school board member in Tulsa Public Schools, in Oklahoma, and a member of the new coalition. "It's our responsibility to teach kids that racism is wrong."