

Receiving Questions about CRT? Consider the Source

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The topic of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and its relation to school curricula and instructional practice have been elevated to a national level by various media outlets. As a teacher, administrator, or Board member you might receive questions about this topic, if you haven't already. It is useful to recognize that people posing CRT-related questions may have different intentions—ranging from innocent to malicious—and these differences should be considered when responding.

My aim in this article is not to explain Critical Race Theory, debate what aspects of it, if any, should be included in school curricula, or propose how sensitive topics should be addressed in the classroom. Instead, I offer a cautionary note to educators, Board of Education members and communities at large about a politically driven movement that is erupting across the country and poses a disruptive threat to schools. I will describe various tactics that may be employed by people using Critical Race Theory as a culture-war proxy to achieve political ends and I'll propose strategies for countering their attacks and minimizing disruptions to the educational process.

Three Groups

People posing CRT-related questions are typically part of one of three groups that differ in tone and intent. The first group consists of parents in your school or district who have heard about CRT on cable television programs, radio talk shows, Facebook posts, or from relatives or neighbors and they simply want to know if the school will be teaching “it.” Their questions are innocent and well-meaning and should be welcomed and answered honestly with accurate information about what is, and is not, being taught.

A second group of parents or community members also have questions about CRT, but with a tone that is more accusatory than merely inquisitive. They are likely to be upset, or even angry, because of how Critical Race Theory is portrayed by certain media and by what they have been led to believe is happening in schools. They may know little about the actual theory but have heard that CRT is an inherently racist dogma, created to indoctrinate their children.

While people in this group may have been misinformed, most are fundamentally reasonable people who will be open to listening to your replies to their concerns. Listen actively and with empathy to the questions and concerns from this group. Seek to understand exactly what they believe Critical Race Theory is and how they think it is being “taught” in your school(s). Ask them if there are specific examples in your school(s) that are of particular concern. While they may be able to only offer generalities about what they have “heard,” your role is to provide

9/22/21

accurate information about what is, and is not, being taught. Don't take their aggressive questioning personally, become defensive, or bring up politics. Instead, try to answer their questions honestly and provide facts to refute any false allegations.

In my experience, most reasonable people in these two groups will appreciate your willingness to hear their concerns, present the facts, engage in reasoned and respectful dialog, and seek common ground with their children's best interest in mind.

However, not all questions about CRT are benign. They may be posed by a third group, representing a politically orchestrated movement that has chosen Critical Race Theory as the point of the spear (or should I say, smear) to sow cultural division, fuel racial animosity, and stoke resentment in the service of broader political aims. Although they may present the face of genuinely concerned parents of school-aged kids, their "behind-the-scenes" organizers are politically driven, highly organized and funded, and politically shrewd. In many cases, they will not live within your district boundaries or have children in the schools they are attacking. They see schools and school boards as easy targets as they manufacture controversy to advance their political cause.

We have seen this "movie" before. In the 1990's, a strikingly similar movement was launched in opposition to Outcomes-based Education—the conspiratorial pretext of the times—used by ideologues to advance their objective of taking over school boards, city/county councils and legislative seats. While the issues are different, the various tactics that were employed in the 1990's are being repurposed today around the topic of Critical Race Theory. Let us take a closer look at ten tactics that this group may use. By anticipating their tactics, educators and Board members can better prepare to buffer the attacks and minimize disruptions to the educational process.

Attacktics of Group Three

My made-up word is appropriate to characterize the tactics used by members of this politically driven movement to fabricate threats of CRT for the purpose of alarming parents and sowing distrust. Should the anti-CRT caravan show up in your community, be on the lookout for the following:

1. Outlandish Claims

The way CRT is portrayed by some extremists strays widely and wildly from the original academic theory proposed in the 1970s—and this is a deliberate tactic. CRT opponents claim it is inherently racist, designed to make white students feel guilty about their skin color and make students of color believe that the system is so stacked against them that they can never realize their ambitions or achieve their dreams. They further assert that CRT teaches that the United States is an inherently evil nation with no redemptive qualities. Such charges are fabricated or

reflect gross exaggerations of CRT, yet they can be effective at alarming parents. Repeating the same charges, as misinformed as they may be, can leave an incorrect, but powerful impression with uninformed listeners that can be difficult for educators to counteract.

2. Emotional Appeals

Truth is not in the arsenal of the people behind these CRT attacks. They rely on scare tactics and emotional appeals for the purpose of instilling alarm that an outrageous and widespread conspiracy is being stealthily foisted on innocent children and their unsuspecting parents by an unspecified “them.” To ratchet up parental concerns, they will use words like *brainwashing* and *indoctrination* to imply sinister motives by educators. They rarely provide any evidence to support these claims but recognize that these individuals are not appealing to logic and reason.

3. Unwarranted Inferences

A favorite tactic involves the use of an inappropriate lesson example (e.g., a role-play lesson where the Black children are “enslaved”, and the white children make them do chores) or a controversial reading passage to “prove” how terrible CRT teaching is and to engender parental outrage. While critical thinkers understand that one egregious example does not a generalization make, this tactic is used to imply that such lessons are the norm, that such CRT teaching is pervasive, and that parents have a duty to protect their children and demand its removal from schools.

4. Personal Attacks

Coordinated attacks against prominent education authors and consultants is another common tactic, featuring charges that their books promote CRT and their trainings are meant to indoctrinate teachers to indoctrinate students. Folks in Group 3 may also launch personal attacks against specific teachers, administrators, and/or Board members. Personalizing their attacks by putting names and faces in their crosshairs provides specific targets for the animosity they are trying to instill.

5. Media Blitzes with Political Messages

Modern technology and social media provide those in Group 3 with an expanded array of communications’ channels to spread their anti-CRT message. Their movement is propelled from the top of the political food chain, with national political leaders railing against the “conspiracy” and state legislatures passing laws prohibiting any CRT-related teaching. The drumbeats echo non-stop on well-known cable channels and conservative talk radio stations, with regional channels and community newspapers picking up the stories and localizing them. Today’s conspiracy theorists can also leverage the hugely influential power of social media—Twitter and Instagram posts and Facebook groups—to influence parents and local policy makers.

6. Regional Rallies

A clear sign that the anti-CRT movement has spread to your area is when invitations to a Critical Race Theory “information” session appear. Such sessions, typically held at a community center, church, or fairground, are rallies featuring prominent political figures, local celebrities, religious leaders, and charismatic speakers who will drum up support, and raise money for, their “righteous” cause against liberal educators seeking to racialize and radicalize the schools. Brace yourself for an onslaught of questions from your parents and community members following these events.

7. “Outsiders” Show Up

Another classic tactic is underway when individuals who do not reside in the school district appear at Board of Education meetings. These individuals may try to get on the speaking agenda to proclaim the evils of CRT. More likely, they are there to cheer one, or more, local parents who have been recruited as spokespersons. Their presence is also meant to convey the impression that their concerns are widespread throughout the community. The fact that people who have no children in your school district are attending your Board meeting should raise your suspicions that something afoot is afoot.

8. Keeping Educators on the Defensive

A common tactic seeks to keep educators and Board members off-balance, using “*Are you still beating your wife?*” type challenges. Their often-outrageous charges about CRT, delivered with seriousness and faux “evidence,” are meant to put you on the defensive or leave you stumbling to respond to off-the-wall claims. Their primary method is unrelenting attack. They employ the “big lie” tactic that a false claim, repeated long enough and loud enough, starts to become accepted as true.

They dodge reasonable questions and when challenged to provide evidence for their untrue accusations, they will either revert to their talking points, continue to sling wild allegations and accusatory questions, or pivot to an unrelated issue (e.g., transgender bathrooms) and continue the attack. Facts don’t matter to them since lies, hyperbole and innuendo are their weapons of choice.

9. Freedom of Information Act Requests

Another insidious tactic involves the use of the Freedom of Information Act (FoIA) to make requests of the district or school. They will invoke the FoIA to demand to review, for example, all stories/novels and textbooks used in the district. They may ask to review copies of teachers’ lesson plans, administrative emails, or materials used in professional development sessions. These FoIA requests have a dual purpose:

- a) They will comb through the provided materials in search of any CRT-related “code words” such as *equity* and *social justice* to “prove” that the CRT concepts are being taught and that their children are being indoctrinated. They will also search for

controversial stories/novels or an “objectionable” lesson from a textbook or curriculum document to use in making their case.

- b) Their second intention is more subtle, yet can be especially debilitating, especially for small-size districts. Complying with these requests can consume a tremendous amount of time and energy and distracts school administrators and Board members from their fundamental duty of running the schools efficiently and effectively. In a related move, they will demand countless meetings with administrators and Board members with the express purpose of constipating the system and interfering with the more legitimate and important district initiatives and operational requisites. They will then try to make the case in upcoming School Board elections that the administrators and the Board are ineffective and should be replaced.

While they may claim to be concerned parents who simply wish to protect their children, do “normal” parents deliberately barrage their schools with such burdensome requests? Might there be an ulterior motive? Don’t forget that their end game is political power, so do not be surprised by their predictable ploys.

10. The 15 ½ Percent Strategy

A more general political tactic may be behind the scenes in the community. Known as the 15 ½ percent strategy, here is how it works: In most local elections, only about 30% of eligible voters will come out to the polls. Thus, if any group can motivate 15 ½ % of voters to their candidate or their cause, they have a good chance of capturing a seat on the Board of Education or on their city/council. This is the end game for those associated with Group 3; i.e., using Critical Race Theory as a “motivating” force to inspire concerned or angry parents and community members to vote for candidates who will oppose the “teaching” of CRT, and support their more general political agenda.

Countering Actions

Forewarned is to be forearmed. Awareness of these various tactics will enable educators and Board members to prepare effective responses. Here are six recommended actions to help blunt any CRT attacks and reinforce public confidence in your school(s).

1. Ask for specificity and evidence.

If you or your school district is being accused of teaching CRT, begin by asking your accusers to explain *exactly* what they think Critical Race Theory is. (Often their definitions have little to do with the actual theory.) Then, ask for evidence to support their accusations. For example, administrators who have been accused of promoting CRT in their schools (in the ways it is being defined by Group 3) should ask their critics to put forth specific examples or cases in their schools, not some “over-the-top” lesson they heard about in the media. Similarly, teachers who have been accused of “teaching” CRT are within their rights to ask exactly what lesson or

9/22/21

learning activity is being referenced. Education writers who have been accused of promoting some deleterious aspect of CRT should demand that their accusers specify page numbers in their books and articles where the so-called offensive ideas can be found.

Anyone who *deliberately* levels untrue CRT-related accusations should be called to account for their lies. For example, CRT attackers in the media seek to convince the public that the teaching of CRT is widespread and that millions of students are being indoctrinated by this dreadful theory. These false allegations are then repeated by members of Group 3 as if they are true and happening in your school or district. Such untruths need to be publicly exposed.

Here is one “fact” that can be used to counter the lie that CRT is being widely taught: During the 2020-21 academic year, most schools were required to shift to virtual and/or hybrid instruction in response to the Coronavirus pandemic. Accordingly, instruction was literally broadcast into students’ homes every day or several times a week. Wouldn’t you think that parents and caregivers who were monitoring the home learning of their children would have detected any widespread CRT indoctrinations? (Of course, they didn’t because there were rarely any!)

2. Expose their tactics and out them on the defensive.

For example, challenge them to explain the reason behind their FoIA requests. Explain to the community how much staff time (and associated costs) will be required to meet their spurious demands. To put *them* on the defensive, link the costs (in staff time and associated salaries) to the costs of popular extra-curricular activities, implying that the school or district may need to recoup the associated costs by suspending a varsity sport or the Fall drama production.

If a person who does not have a child in your school shows up to harass or demonstrate, ask them *why* they are there. If non-residents appear at your Board meeting, do not allow them to testify or speak on the record. Ask them where they are getting their information, their talking points, and their funding. Characterize them as “outside agitators” and press them to reveal their ulterior motives.

3. Coordinate your messaging.

Honest, clear, and consistent messaging is essential to fighting conspiracy-related inuendo and outright lies. Create a Frequently Asked Questions document to anticipate, and respond to, predictable questions and challenges with accurate answers. Publicize policy statements about how “history” will be examined in your district/school, citing National and State Standards and other relevant documents. Share guidelines that teachers are expected to follow when teaching sensitive topics, such as race. Use the local press and social media to mount a “fact-based” campaign to communicate publicly what you stand for and to counter the misinformation about CRT.

Encourage respected teachers to speak out. Teachers are usually regarded highly in their communities and their voices can have a significant influence in the court of public opinion. Encourage them to testify as to what they are *really* teaching to counteract any lies about CRT “indoctrinations.” When admired teachers, counselors, athletic coaches, band and theater directors speak honestly and forthrightly, people will listen.

4. Seek common ground.

For those people in Groups 2 and 3 who continue to express concerns about CRT, invite them to a planned community presentation at which you display source documents and curriculum materials, e.g., state, or national History/Social Studies standards; curriculum guides; adopted textbooks; policy statements or guidelines regarding the teaching of sensitive topics, such as race.

If the CRT issue remains contentious in your community, you might convene a committee or task force consisting of representative parents, respected community members, School Board reps and admired staff for the purpose of seeking areas of mutual understanding and common ground on the issue. A first step for such a committee would be to define terms. It will be next to impossible to achieve common ground if people cannot agree on the meanings of terms such as Critical Race Theory. Indeed, much of the controversy over CRT stems from the fact that the phrase is being used with widely varied definitions, connotations, and implications.

A next step would be to strive to identify areas of agreement. Here are a few examples of the type of questions that could be used to spark candid conversations leading to common understandings:

Can we agree that:

- *American history should be examined honestly based on accepted facts, including cases when the nation failed to live up to its ideals?*
- *teachers should never attempt to indoctrinate students on any political philosophy or religious belief?*

Such a committee or task force can also help craft policy statements about how “history” will be taught in the district/school, citing National and State Standards, the Bill of Rights and other relevant source documents. They can also help prepare guidelines for teachers to follow when teaching sensitive topics, such as race, or examining controversial ideas or texts (if such policies and guidelines do not already exist).

When any common agreements are reached, these can be publicized and shared with the wider community. Working on a controversial issue in a public, transparent, and respectful manner can serve to counter misinformation, chip away at mistrust, bridge community divisiveness, and marginalize those ideologues who seek disharmony for political advantage.

5. Seek legal and legislative assistance.

If this controversy becomes more contentious, you may need to seek legal advice, for example, if teachers are publicly vilified for teaching CRT (when they are not) or if unreasonable FoIA requests are filed. Have the district attorney challenge any personal attacks on educators that border on slanderous. Assuming you have reasonable state and national representatives, reach out to them to expose the tactics you are experiencing and seek assistance (e.g., against costly FoIA requests.)

6. Support each other.

If the CRT noise becomes louder in your area, school administrators may worry that they will be wrongly accused of some CRT-related infraction. If this occurs, Board of Education members have a responsibility to stand up for the truth and support their district and school leaders. Similarly, teachers may be fearful of being questioned and challenged, not by reasonable parents, but by the ideologues. Administrators should present a unified front by standing up for their teachers.

Conclusion

Critical Race Theory has become a public and divisive issue in many communities. When ordinary parents and community members raise honest questions, straight-forward answers and respectful dialog may be sufficient to allay concerns. However, when ideologues seek to use CRT as an inflammatory issue to propel their ulterior political motives, educators and Board members are likely to witness the tactics I have described. In those cases, the counter actions I have offered can help thwart the impact of their attacks.

Ultimately, the recommended long-term strategy is to encourage reasonable and responsible citizens to run for School Boards and local Councils. Come election time, remind relatives and neighbors of the importance of studying the issues and voting in local elections. Civic engagement is the best defense against takeovers by fringe groups intent on imposing extremist views on a community.

Related Articles and Blogs

<https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2021/09/20/the-man-behind-critical-race-theory>

<https://www.edweek.org/leadership/why-school-boards-are-now-hot-spots-for-nasty-politics/2021/07>

<https://www.echo-pilot.com/story/news/2021/07/30/greencastle-antrim-parents-speak-out-against-critical-race-theory/5432048001/>

9/22/21

<https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-9881493/Parents-hold-SPLINTER-school-board-meeting-banned-commenting-CRT.html>

[“Schools Are Facing a High-Conflict ‘Superstorm’”](#)

<https://www.texastribune.org/2021/06/22/texas-critical-race-theory-explained/>

<https://time.com/6075193/critical-race-theory-debate/>

<http://www.principalkafelewrites.com/2021/07/critical-race-theory-slight-of-hand.html>

<https://www.polaritypartnerships.com/news-events/article/proud-and-critical>

<https://education.wm.edu/news/news-archive/2021/what-is-critical-race-theory-resources-for-educators.php>

T.V. News and Documentaries

<https://abcnews.go.com/US/critical-race-theory-classroom-understanding-debate/story?id=77627465>

https://twitter.com/SHEG_Stanford/status/1442590656447201288

Related Podcasts

[Does Teaching America It’s Racist Make It Less Racist?](#) podcast episode by “The Argument”

[What Should We Be Teaching about Racism and America’s Past?](#) podcast episode by “The Argument”

<https://www.nbcnews.com/southlake-podcast> a 6-part podcast series by NBC News

Author’s Note: This article focuses on CRT challenges from groups representing the right wing of the political spectrum. My analysis of the tactics used by such groups is based on my experiences in the 1990s as well as in current times. I recognize that some on the political left also have strong opinions about what Critical Race Theory implies for society and how it should be addressed in schools, and they may well challenge educators and BOE members to support their positions. However, I have not witnessed any “attacks” by these groups and I do not know if they might use the same tactics I have described. Regardless of the source, my

9/22/21

recommendations remain the same when educators and Board members are challenged over CRT or other controversial topics: Listen with empathy, engage in fact-based discussions, and seek common ground.