



Equity In A Divided Community

Questions & Answers about CRT

June 2021

What is critical race theory?

- Critical race theory (CRT) refers to a broad collection of legal and academic topics that examine social, cultural and legal issues as they relate to race and racism. CRT holds that race is not biological, but is a socially constructed idea
- CRT teaches that bias is embedded within our institutions, laws, and public policy. The theory posits that this embedded bias affects each of us differently and is primarily responsible for the unequal outcomes we see in systems like education, health care, etc.
- CRT is a framework that is used to help understand why racial inequities exist in our systems and how to eliminate them. In the education system, it can be used to understand issues of disparity in school discipline, tracking and standardized testing.

Why are we hearing about critical race theory now?

Why is our school district/school board getting questions about it?

While the academic and legal term has been around since the 1970s, the term “critical race theory” has begun to be used recently as a political shortcut to lump together a variety of positions and practices. Many times, the term is used without being fully understood by the user. Because of this, many important equity initiatives that are not CRT are getting swept up in the current debate.

Within school districts in Washington state, there are many efforts to increase access to opportunities for all students to be successful and to close opportunity gaps between students. These are broadly referred to as an equity focus, equity initiatives or using an equity lens. These are not the same as critical race theory, although some of them may contain similar elements, such as analyzing a school district's policies to determine if they disproportionately impact some student groups more than others. Equity in education is about making sure our systems are set up so that all students are able to succeed.

I've heard community members say that critical race theory is divisive and is designed to make people feel guilty about their racial identity or identify as an

“oppressor” or as “oppressed.” Another concern raised is that we are “indoctrinating” students and that it is counter-productive to focus on racial issues. How do we respond as district leaders?

You could approach this in a variety of ways. You might choose to talk about what CRT is and isn't. Critical race theory is not centered on blaming individuals or making anyone feel guilty. It focuses on understanding how race plays a role in how institutions like education serve people. Furthermore, there is nothing in critical race theory that promotes the idea that any race is superior to any other; in fact, most racial justice work promotes the exact opposite idea.

Getting into a debate about terms associated with CRT is something of an academic exercise, though. What matters to most people is what is happening in their own schools.

For this reason, it is critically important to ensure your community understands what your district's equity efforts encompass. Educational leaders are constantly seeking how to better support the success of students, while ensuring that students who need extra or different supports to be successful get what they need every day in every classroom. Educators want all students to succeed. Help your community see this. Make your equity work as transparent as possible. Share the data that are driving your decisions. Make it easy for families to view curricular materials so they can see for their own eyes what your schools are teaching. Provide context by reminding your community of the process you go through for all curriculum adoptions, being sure to note the opportunities for review and input.

It is also important to note that the equity training required in Washington state's SB 5044 is only about training for adults in the system, namely school board members, district and school leaders and educators. **Nothing in SB 5044 mentions curriculum or lessons for students.** It also does not include any mention of critical race theory or any specific curriculum for the training programs for adults.

WSSDA is developing the equity training for school directors while other organizations, including the Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB), are developing training for other indicated groups. See [Fact Sheet: SB 5044 & WSSDA's Equity Training](#)

Some say that our district's equity policy / equity initiatives / culturally responsive teaching practices are CRT in disguise. How do we respond to this?

Start by listening respectfully and attentively and asking questions for understanding. Ask what they mean when they refer to the broad concept of critical race theory. Ask what their exact concerns are within your school district and/or within their children's school.

Without being dismissive or combative, calmly correct misinformation and delineate what your local school district is or isn't doing in contrast to what a larger national narrative may be suggesting.

Next, reframe the discussion by sharing the goals and efforts within your district to ensure every student has access to an equitable education and what they need to be successful. If equity is included in your strategic plan and/or within a board-adopted equity policy, refer community members to those guiding principles, which are usually developed with community partners.

Why is there such a big focus on “equity in education?” Shouldn’t we just treat all students equally?

As any parent of more than one child can attest, different children have different needs. Equity is about that simple and instinctive understanding that each student needs different supports, and that the same student may need extra support in one area but not in another.

School districts regularly review student outcome data to understand which students are more successful or less successful academically. District staff also review differences exist in how disciplinary actions are applied to students. Nationally and in Washington state, these gaps exist between a variety of student groups. Examples of those groups include:

- Students from low-income households
- Students with disabilities
- Students experiencing homelessness
- Students in foster care
- Students who are English-language learners
- Students of different races and/or ethnicities

The education system in the U.S. has long supported additional funding and other supports for students who have been less successful academically than others. For example, federal Title I funding is designed to support the success of students from low-income families. Another area where different types of support are provided to some students is through IDEA (the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act), which is the primary funding source for supplementing local and state dollars to support the needs of students with disabilities and special education programs.

Here is a helpful listing to federal funding for various student categories:

[An Overview of Federal Education Funding \(azk12.org\)](http://azk12.org)

Washington state student data shows significant disparities in a variety of student outcomes, including academic assessments, student discipline, readiness for kindergarten, graduation rates, placement in advanced coursework and college attendance after graduation. When disparities are evident in the academic outcomes between groups of students, most school leaders agree that it is the moral and legal obligation of the school district to study why those gaps exist and support policies and practices that close them.

School board-superintendent teams cannot address the disparities– whether they are racial, economic, or some other factor – if they don’t discuss, evaluate and work to mitigate them.

Our district leadership team is not in agreement about how to approach these community concerns. How do we navigate this topic?

Similar to how you approach community concerns, your first step is to take the time to share concerns or confusion honestly with each other to learn more. Get curious. Focus on listening carefully to each person without turning it into a debate.

We strongly encourage you to bring student voice into the conversation. Listen to students sharing their experiences and/or review student survey data. Look at your district's disaggregated data together and discuss what you find. Where there are differences of opinion, let the data be your guide in determining how to approach to equity to close gaps in your district. Sharing your findings and goals to support the success of each and every student with your community so they understand why equity is a benefit to all students.

We have followed all of these recommendations and there are still people in our community who disagree with our approach. What now?

It is unrealistic to hope that everyone in your community will completely agree on any given topic, so it is most productive to focus on where you find agreement and not dwell on areas where you do not. This is not unlike other controversial topics, including work stoppage negotiations or standardized testing, where there are emotional and deeply rooted feelings on either side of an issue. It is important to remain open and transparent, providing resources for the community to review and use to come to their own conclusions about educational equity.

Additional Resources for Information

[Critical race theory invades school boards - NBS News](#)

[A Lesson on Critical Race Theory \(americanbar.org\)](#)

[Former GA Teacher of the Year - Debate over critical race theory is heartbreaking](#)