

HB3979 seeks to soft-pedal racism, not address critical race theory

Political motives

Critical race theory is an academic analytical tool that seeks to explain why racism and racial inequality persist even decades after the passage of crucial civil rights laws and anti-discrimination laws. The theory views these disparities through a lens that downplays bigotry and racism on an individual level and focuses instead on the systemic discrimination that's baked into our legal and economic institutions.

Critical race theory is not taught in Texas public schools, and it is not addressed in this new law. But the term is being misused by right-wing Republicans around the country to inflame their political base, sow divisions between parents and educators and intimidate educators into downplaying or ignoring the systemic racism that has plagued our nation's history and perpetuates inequities today.

The result in Texas was the enactment of HB3979.

The new law circumvents the State Board of Education's normal process of adopting curriculum standards with guidance from educators by requiring specific topics to be included or excluded from the social studies curriculum. The SBOE has until December 31, 2022, to review and revise the social studies Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). The revised TEKS would then be effective as of the 2022-23 school year. All parts of the bill not related to curriculum requirements are effective Sept. 1, 2021.

This poorly written law leaves some issues murky and open to interpretation by school districts and parents. This vagueness, unless clarified by the state board in future curriculum changes, may have a far-reaching, chilling effect in terms of teacher intimidation and on what districts allow in classrooms.



Some things you can teach

The curriculum must include the “fundamental moral, political, and intellectual foundations of the American experiment in self-government,” the founding documents and certain historical texts, events, concepts and persons. Many of these concepts are already in the state standards, and some were added to this bill by TSTA allies. The latter

include writings related to the Chicano movement, women's suffrage and the civil rights movement.

Some things you can't teach

- That slavery and racism are anything other than failures to live up to our country's authentic founding principles, including liberty and equality. This is an effort to downplay the widespread impact of slavery and racism from the very beginning of U.S. history.
- The 1619 Project, The New York Times' in-depth report on the history of slavery in the United States and its lasting impact on our society and economic system.
- That our society has a history of systemic racism and we have an opportunity to create an equitable community for everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender or gender identity.
- Any discussion or training about implicit bias.

Teaching current events

Under the new law, teachers can — but cannot be required to — discuss current events or controversial issues in class. If they do, they must present diverse viewpoints without giving preference to any particular viewpoint, something that most teachers usually

do because diverse viewpoints help students develop critical learning skills.

This is clearly an effort to discourage the teaching of current events. Some topics, such as the Jan. 6 Capitol riot, the rise of anti-Jewish and anti-Asian sentiments and the racial violence in Charlottesville, Va., are difficult to discuss in a neutral manner. Some school districts may react by banning or sharply restricting lessons about current events.

Discouraging civic engagement and political participation

HB3979 prohibits students from receiving social studies course credit or extra credit for certain types of activism and for participating in internships and activities involving social and public policy advocacy. It also prohibits school districts from accepting private funds for curriculum, materials or training for such efforts.

Training in race or sex stereotyping

The new law prohibits districts or charters from requiring employees to take training or therapy in race or sex stereotyping. This will dampen efforts by

teachers and staff to learn more about equity, diversion and inclusion so they can better serve their students and school communities.

What will happen to dual-enrollment/AP history courses?

Many academic experts believe that the new law may lead to a loss of dual-enrollment and AP history courses, hurting Texas' progress in student college readiness. HB3979 potentially could eliminate 30 state standards, many of which may be necessary to continue qualifying high school courses for AP status. Universities may reevaluate whether to continue accepting courses that have been narrowed in scope due to the new law.

More trouble may be on the way

Gov. Abbott has indicated he will add this issue to the upcoming special session's agenda. If so, he likely will try to make the law worse, including the possible addition of state sanctions for educators who violate it. TSTA will continue to fight against censorship in the classroom that undermines our students' educations and our democracy.

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