



QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS ABOUT CRITICAL RACE THEORY

What is Critical Race Theory (CRT)?

Critical race theory (CRT) is a discipline and analytical tool primarily used in university-level courses. Originating in the 1970s, CRT was first used as a tool to help law students think critically about the impact of historical and present-day racism on the legal system. In the 1990s, some colleges of education also started incorporating CRT into their coursework to help aspiring school administrators and teachers better understand inequities in the context of schooling.

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. The term “critical race theory” is being inaccurately used by some to encompass a wide range of distinctly different topics, including educational equity, social-emotional learning (SEL), cultural responsiveness, and restorative practices. It is also being used to describe the discussion of racism in classroom instruction.

Within school districts in Colorado, 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 educational equity focus, educational equity initiatives, or using an educational 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. Educational equity 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?

Unless you are an expert in CRT, provide the definition above and focus on what is actually taking place in your school district's classrooms. Getting into a debate about terms associated with CRT is a distraction; what matters to most people is what is happening in their own schools. CRT is most often taught in university-level courses and is not part of the K-12 Colorado Academic Standards.

It is important to ensure your community understands what your district's educational 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 support 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 educational 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. Know your district policies, such as:
 - › Curriculum Development or Adoption (CASB Sample Policy IG)
 - › Teaching About Controversial Issues and Use of Controversial Materials (CASB Sample Policy IMB)
 - › Exemptions from Required Instruction (CASB Sample Policy IMBB)

Some say that our district's educational 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 educational equity is included in your strategic plan and/or within a board-adopted educational 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. Educational 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 that exist in how disciplinary actions are applied to students. Nationally and in Colorado, 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.

Colorado 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 closing the equity 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 educational 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

- [Leading Difficult Conversations in your Community](#) (CASE, CASB)
- [What You Need to Know about the Misuse of CRT](#) (CASB)
- [School boards become political battle zones](#)
- [Critical race theory invades school boards](#) (NBC News)
- [A Lesson on Critical Race Theory](#) (americanbar.org)
- [Former GA Teacher of the Year – Debate over critical race theory is heartbreaking](#) (*Atlanta Journal Constitution*)
- [Tears, politics and money: School board races become battle zones](#) (July 2021)
- [School board president takes heat at conservative 'critical race theory' forum](#) (*The News Tribune*)
- [Interruptors and responses to racism](#) (University of Portland School of Education)

CASB and CASE wish to recognize the Washington State School Directors Association and the Washington Association of School Administrators as the source for most of the materials contained in this communication.
