

Arizona Alliance of Black School Educators (AzABSE)
Statement for Critical Race Theory:
Advancing Education Excellence in Unprivileged Systems

Introduction

Critical Race Theory (CRT) has become a “hot topic” in Arizona and nationwide because critics claim K-12 teachers are integrating this into curricula. Yet, CRT is a high-level theoretical framework taught mostly in graduate-level and law courses within postsecondary institutions, not in K-12 classrooms. Moreover, many CRT opponents make the inaccurate claim that CRT is synonymous with culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy. Current panic about CRT is harmful not only because it misrepresents CRT and misleads the public, but it also shifts attention from real concerns about racial inequities that contribute to educational disparities in Arizona and beyond. These inequities include, but are not limited to, racially disparate rates of suspensions/expulsions, enrollment in gifted and talented programs and advanced placement courses, access to high quality teachers, other school resources, and school closures.

Although CRT is not taught in Arizona’s K-12 public schools, it does create a framework to understand and help disrupt inequitable policies and practices. The adoption of high quality culturally relevant curriculum and pedagogy is one way to disrupt inequities. In fact, research shows that students (including White students) who participated in ethnic studies courses and had access to culturally relevant pedagogy showed, on average, significantly higher levels of academic achievement compared to their peers who did not¹. In California, this evidence recently helped to prompt a statewide ethnic studies requirement for K-12 public schools aimed at fixing educational disparities².

What Is CRT?

CRT is a theoretical framework that scholars use to analyze, challenge, and seek to restore inequitable systems based on race. Rooted in critical legal studies, CRT offers a critique of race and racism as a construct that is embedded into the cultural, political, and economic fabric of the United States, within the historical context of slavery, genocide, and colonization. CRT centers on seven tenets: (1) Race is a social construction; (2) Racism exists and is part of everyday life; (3) Interest convergence; (4) Intersectionality; (5) Counternarratives; (6) Whiteness as property; and (7) Critique of liberalism.³

Legal scholars developed Critical Race Theory during the Post-Civil Rights Era (1970s-1980s) to address the issue of race and racism in the legal system ⁴. Scholars and legal practitioners used CRT tenets to analyze structures and policies, challenge dominant systems and narratives, and explain historical inequities. In the 1990s, scholars expanded CRT by applying the tenets to education.

Critical Race Theory is taught in some graduate programs in postsecondary institutions and is used in scholarly research to examine disparities. CRT is a theoretical framework that includes the concept of praxis. This is a call for action toward the improvement of systemic and institutional conditions and opportunities for racially minoritized communities. In 2020 and beyond, many argue that anti-CRT efforts began in backlash to the publication of *Project 1619* and the most recent wave of Black Lives Matter protests sparked by the murder of George Floyd.⁵ It is important to understand that:

- CRT is not a crusade against American History nor is it toxic propaganda.
- CRT is not synonymous with culturally responsive education, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion or Social Emotional Learning initiatives.
- CRT does not promote political ideologies such as Marxism, Communism, or Socialism
- CRT is not a theoretical framework that serves to shame or guilt white individuals.
- CRT cannot be directly translated into a widely administered curriculum.

Relevance to Arizona and AzABSE

In Arizona, HB 2458 and SB 1305 are anti-CRT bills aimed at banning teachers from teaching “controversial topics” in public schools. Topics that are controversial often include American history, such as slavery, genocide, and colonization. These bills are likely to prompt fear in teachers and may have an adverse impact on Arizona’s teacher workforce. Anti-CRT legislation aims to limit which history is taught, and narrow opportunities for critical thinking and culturally relevant curriculum.

This is not new in Arizona. In 2010, Arizona’s then (and current) State Superintendent Tom Horne led the initiative to pass an anti-ethnic studies bill aimed at dismantling the Mexican American Studies (MAS) Program in Tucson Unified School District. Sadly, this happened despite the research showed that students enrolled in MAS experienced positive academic outcomes across all subjects. In 2017, after years of litigation, money, and effort, a federal judge deemed this Arizona law as racist, and thus unlawful. ⁶

Like in most U.S. states, many Black and other racially minoritized children in Arizona experience disheartening inequities that, as the State of Black Arizona report shows, “carry over into disparities in high school graduation, college attendance and completion, and can have significant societal impacts as well as economic consequences.” For instance, in 2019, 65% of Black children failed to demonstrate proficiency in third-grade reading.⁷ A lack of proficiency in reading at primary grade level is an indicator for not graduating high school. Consequently, such academic inequities mean that many Black children start their educational journey at a disadvantage⁸.

CRT offers a way to understand the root causes of such disparities and can prompt educators and public officials to rightfully change systemic and institutional policies and practices. Yet, playbook legislative bills to oppose CRT in K-12 schools act as a widespread distraction from addressing these very real racial educational inequities. Meanwhile, Arizona’s Black children and other minoritized children continue to go without equitable opportunities they need to achieve educational success.

AzABSE Position

The Arizona Alliance of Black School Educators (AzABSE) takes the position that CRT’s framework can, and should, be used to guide Arizona’s classrooms, schools, districts, and school boards towards equitable approaches to curriculum, policies, and practices. To create safe and inclusive school environments for all children, we urge educators to understand the historical and contemporary barriers that result in racial disparities in education. The National Association of School Psychologists “actively promotes the inclusion of professional development on topics like critical race theory, diversity, White privilege, mitigating bias, social justice, culturally responsive and antiracist practices within the school context, and other concepts necessary to promote an equitable education system.”⁹ All education stakeholders “can, and should, actively engage in efforts to ensure that school, district, state, and federal policies hold people accountable for ensuring equity in education”¹⁰ Thus, we believe that CRT should be part of the curriculum in teacher preparation programs. CRT tenets can be used as a self-reflection tool and/or generate questions that further analyze and advance the racial equity that school leadership and institutions should seek to enact.¹¹ Moreover, we urge Arizona schools to adopt and support culturally relevant/sustaining curriculum and pedagogy.

AzABSE Recommendations

Our recommendations to **policy makers**:

1. Base policy debates in fact rather than falsely claim that CRT is taught in K-12 schools.
2. Observe the ways that racism is embedded in our history and culture and use the CRT tenets to implement culturally sustaining legislation and policies in K-12 schools.
3. Offer financial support and incentives for curriculum and pedagogy that is culturally relevant and sustaining.
4. Adopt an ethnic studies requirement for public high schools in Arizona, similar to California's requirement.
5. Consult with bipartisan organizations that promote education equity in Arizona and the rest of the United States (e.g., Arizona Alliance of Black School Educators, National Alliance of Black School Educators, Save Our Schools).

Our recommendations to **educators**:

1. Embrace culturally sustaining curriculum and pedagogy in K-12 schools.
2. Use CRT tenets to inform educational leadership practices and to eliminate racism.¹²
3. Observe the ways that racism is embedded in our history and culture and build students capacity for critical thinking and analyzing systems around them.
4. Creates learning opportunities when faced with multiple perspectives.
5. Be intentional in recruiting, supporting, and retaining effective teachers, leaders, and staff from various diverse backgrounds.
6. Employ CRT to create analytic tools for determining the accuracy of perspective and experience of Black and Brown individuals.¹³
7. Participate in organizations that promote education equity in Arizona and the rest of the United States (e.g., Arizona Alliance of Black School Educators, National Alliance of Black School Educators, Save Our Schools).

Our recommendations to **families**:

1. Understand that much of the debate about CRT is not rooted in reality; CRT is not taught in any Arizona's K-12 schools.
2. Encourage your child(ren)'s school(s) to implement and advance curriculum and pedagogy that is culturally relevant and sustaining.

3. Request evidence for conjectures about what is/is not being taught in the classroom. When in doubt consult your child's teacher.
4. Attend district governing board meetings and participate on school site councils.
5. Participate in organizations that help parents navigate the education system (e.g., Arizona Alliance of Black School Educators, Save Our Schools).

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- ¹ News Article: [Research Finds Ethnic Studies in San Francisco Had Enduring Impact](#)
National Education Association Publication: [What Research Says About Ethnic Studies](#)
- ² News Article: [Ethnic Studies in California](#)
Website to Model Curriculum Description: [Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum- The model curriculum was adopted by the California State Board of Education \(SBE\) on March 18, 2021.](#)
- ³ Peer-Reviewed Article: [The 20th-year Anniversary of Critical Race theory in Education: Implications for Leading to Eliminate Racism.](#)
- ⁴ The First Amendment Encyclopedia Article: [Critical Race Theory https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1254/critical-race-theory](https://www.mtsu.edu/first-amendment/article/1254/critical-race-theory)
- ⁵ News Article: [How a Conservative Activist Invented the Conflict Over Critical Race Theory](#)
National Education Policy Center Publication: [Understanding the Attacks on Critical Race Theory](#)
- ⁶ Peer-Reviewed Article: [Missing the \(Student Achievement\) Forest for All the \(Political\) Trees: Empiricism and the Mexican American Studies Controversy in Tucson Federal Judge Finds Racism Behind Arizona Law Banning Ethnic Studies](#)
- ⁷ [State of Black Arizona Vol. V report](#)
- ⁸ [State of Black Arizona Vol. V report](#)
- ⁹ National Association of School Psychologists Article: [The Importance of Addressing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Schools: Dispelling Myths About Critical Race Theory](#)
- ¹⁰ National Association of School Psychologists website: [The Importance of Addressing Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion in Schools: Dispelling Myths About Critical Race Theory](#)
- ¹¹ Peer-Reviewed Article: [The 20th-year Anniversary of Critical Race theory in Education: Implications for Leading to Eliminate Racism.](#)
- ¹² Peer-Reviewed Article: [Where Are We? Critical Race Theory in Education 20 Years Later.](#)
- ¹³ Peer-Reviewed Article: [The \(Mis\)representation of Enslavement in Historical Literature for Elementary Students.](#)