

## NAVIGATING THE POLITICS OF EDUCATION: LEADING SCHOOLS DURING CHALLENGING TIMES

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### ABSTRACT

Teachers, principals, and superintendents have been placed in an unfortunate and unexpected political position. Due to increased misinformation on the nature and origin of varying political issues, educators often have to address and confront parents and community members who have likely seen headlines about these brewing “local battles” (Kingkade et al., 2021). Normally, educators would approach these topics thoughtfully with a purpose to help each of their students to realize their potential as effective citizens and fulfilling responsibilities in the community by cooperating with parents to improve the public schools (Texas Administrative Code, 1998). However, these themes have become polarizing and educators are feeling a mounting pressure to make pedagogical decisions to please school leaders and the school community (Walker, 2018; Dunn, Sondel, & Baggett, 2019).

### Introduction

Most of the time education professionals have been provided very little information on the facts related to these politically charged issues. As the issues grow seemingly more significant during political campaigns and beyond, educators, superintendents, and school boards members should be equipped with the appropriate information to provide parents and community activists (who often live outside the school district attendance boundaries) who seek answers on these politically charged issues. Since 2020, coincidentally at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, several issues related to important topics and themes have made national news.

### Polarizing Examples of Critical Race Theory, Diversity, Racism

In August 2019, *The New York Times Magazine* published a series of essays, called *The 1619 Project*, on the effects of slavery that the authors claim can still be felt today. The *1619 Project* includes essays from various writers including “The Idea of America” by Nikole Hannah-Jones, “Capitalism” by Matthew Desmond, “Undemocratic Democracy” by Jamelle Bouie, “Mass Incarceration” by Bryan Stevenson, and others.

The Pulitzer Center developed lessons for K-12 schools based on the project, and individual teachers across the country have created lessons inspired by the project (Pulitzer Center, 2020). This has renewed concerns about how history is taught and how teachers discuss current events and issues of race in the classroom. Across the country, governors and state legislators have opposed the possibility of basing curricula on critical race theory or *The 1619 Project*. For example, Georgia Governor Brian Kemp stated, “This divisive, anti-American agenda has no place in Georgia classrooms” (Downey, 2021). In June 2021, Republican lawmakers introduced legislation at the federal level to “ban federal funds from being used to teach the 1619 Project in K-12 schools” (Bernstein, 2021).

Official adoption of *The 1619 Project* has not occurred with Common Core or state standards; however, districts can choose to supplement the way standards are addressed. After the release of the *New York Times* special issue regarding *The 1619 Project*, “schools or school districts in Chicago; Newark, N.J.; Buffalo, N.Y., and Washington, D.C. all announced 1619 Project-related events” (Riley, 2021). To prevent official adoption of the project’s ideals, state legislatures, including those in Georgia, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, Ohio, Oklahoma, Texas, Tennessee, and South Dakota, have already passed or promised to enact bills banning such curricula. In many cities, parents have expressed alarm and voters have elected school board members and mayors who promise to oppose curriculum based on *The 1619 Project*.

Recently, a north Texas city and its corresponding school district made national news when the residents elected a mayor, city council members, and school board members who were outspoken against the school district’s proposed Cultural Competence Action Plan (CCAP) (WFAA.com, 2021). In the plan, the school district promised to emphasize cultural competence in curriculum, feature student assembly speakers specializing in cultural sensitivity and diversity, and to provide ongoing diversity training for all staff (Asmelash, 2021). In response to the plan, which was created by the District Diversity Council (DDC) (WFAA.com, 2021), a concerned group of Judeo-Christian families “advocating for our strong community values and traditions of excellence” (Southlake Families, 2021) condemned the DDC and the CCAP stating concerns about Black Lives Matters Week, Campus Diversity Councils, Christian Club Audits, mandatory social justice training, and the cost of the overall program (Southlake Families PAC, 2021).

The Texas legislature followed by enacting new restrictions on some types of diversity-related curricula and teacher training. Legislation has also been proposed at the federal level that would prevent federal funds from

being used to teach from certain curricula (Cotton & Buck, 2021). Further, the Governor of Texas, in a re-election bid, has promised to amend the state constitution to provide parents with certain rights including “giving parents the option to decide if their child should repeat a course or grade level” and require that schools not collect unnecessary personal data about students and not sell students’ data outside of the state (Abbott, 2022).

Later that year in a different school district, a high school principal resigned and was placed on administrative leave after a parent in the school district accused the principal of teaching critical race theory. The principal, who is African American, sent a letter to the school community in the aftermath of the George Floyd killing (New York Times, 2020). In the letter, the principal declared “that racism is ‘alive and well’ and that they needed to work together to achieve ‘conciliation for our nation’ (Texas Tribune, 2021). In a similar incident, a school district superintendent resigned her positions over controversies related to COVID-19 mask mandates and for promoting diversity in the district (Fox 4 Staff, 2021; Texas Tribune, 2022).

These few incidents serve as examples of times when educators made humble attempts to either share an opinion, support fact or science, or serve the needs of all students and were met with political ideology or misinformation. With the growing politicization of educational issues through legislation, school board election turnover, or curricular changes, educators – especially school district leaders and school board members – need to develop strategies to defend and support the teachers and students they are obligated to lead.

### **Strategies for School Leaders to Address Polarization and Politicization in Education**

#### *Educators Have a Responsibility to Encourage and Support Accurate Thinking*

The challenge for educators in this developing polarizing environment is simply addressing the issue directly with students or constituents. Dunn, Sonde, and Baggett (2018) found that everything in education is becoming political and informed by ideology (Walker, 2018). This is especially concerning since educators are charged with encouraging student participation in exploring their own ideas to construct a more reasoned and accurate understanding of the world around them (Holt-Reynolds, 2000).

What guidance can educators offer to their students who may feel caught between their need to teach history from diverse perspectives and parents who may fear that schools will “indoctrinate” (Kingkade et al., 2021) their children? Much of the concern from parents and politicians centers around curricula based on *The 1619 Project* (Bernstein, 2021; Cotton and Buck, 2021). Given the amount of attention that it is receiving, teachers should always reference the state education standards and use *The 1619 Project* or other diversity-based curriculum as a reference tool to support those standards and make real-world connections. If educators work in a district where parents are opposed to curriculum they feel is divisive or controversial, teachers and school districts who are looking for a civics or history curriculum that present a more-diverse group of stories than those found in traditional curricula could investigate new curricula that might be less divisive than one based on *The 1619 Project*. An organization founded by Bob Woodson, 1776 United, has released a free curriculum for high-school students and promises to release K-8 lessons soon. Another organization, the Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism, has released learning standards related to the histories, experiences, and contributions of people of different cultural and ancestral backgrounds in the U.S. Helping future teachers understand both sides of the critical race theory issue will be important.

It is important to remember that educators have a responsibility to present content with accuracy. District-leaders need to be prepared to have difficult conversations with parents about important issues such as diversity, inclusion, social justice, and equity by removing the negative and political stigma associated with these terms and themes. An important message for community members to understand is that educators must adhere to state standards while serving the needs of all students. This message should be communicated consistently and accurately to counteract misinformation and divisive ideology. The goal is not to replace concepts already discussed in history curricula; instead, the goal is to make all perspectives known. This may involve peeling back layers of the ideal image of the United States to uncover perspectives to historical events that may have been pushed aside.

#### *School Leaders and School Boards Need to Defend and Support the Professionalism of Educators*

There is simply not enough conversation coming from school district-level leaders and school board members on the professionalism of educators. Professionalism, as defined by Sociologists Mirko Noordegraaf, states that an individual is deemed a professional when they are highly trained (educated) or have specialized training, supervised by peers, and held accountable. Often the position requires a degree or certification, membership in professional organizations, and held to an attributable set of standards and ethics. (Mosher 1956; Noordegraaf 2018; Bruno, 2018). These standards clearly express the designation of teaching as a profession. Further, principals, counselors, superintendents, and other supporting educators also qualify as professionals under these standards.

However, there has been a developing perception that educators, specifically teachers, are not professionals and their own “experience is being devalued by policymakers and other officials with little experience in the education field” (Bruno, 2018). Policymakers across the country have closed neighborhood schools, implemented charter schools with no locally elected board oversight, placed roadblocks on instruction and curriculum, and eliminated funding from school districts (Bruno, 2018). Meanwhile, expectations on teachers have never been higher, driven by overcrowded classes, high stakes testing, and an increasingly diverse and high needs student population (Timperley & Robinson, 2000).

*School Leaders Need to Build Relationships, Open Doors, Connect with the Community*

Superintendents are beholden to the elected officials that hire and fire them. Often every decision that a superintendent makes is a political decision. Superintendents should realize that from the perspective of the community, you are responsible for their children, their tax dollars, and their schools. It quickly becomes personal for the community. The smaller the school community, the more aware constituents are to school related issues. School board members are often accessible and involved in other aspects of their community. It would be to the advantage of the superintendent to leverage this access to get out in front of misconceptions about the school district and create a strong communication system between the school district, the school board, and the community.

The key to strengthening this communication loop is to build strong relationships with board members and with key community members. This is best done through aligning the values of the district with the values of the community. It is difficult to argue with the concept of making decisions in the best interest of children when leaders use values, data, information, and collaboration to drive those decisions. The community is more likely to support a superintendent if they feel they have input and are working on common goals for their schools.

*Educators Have a Responsibility to Serve and Educate ALL Students*

In Texas, HB 4093 bill claims “teachers can’t be forced to discuss current events or widely debated controversial issues” and “to the best of their ability provide diverse perspectives without deference to anyone,” which is considered the “most controversial aspects of the bill” (McGee, 2021). The history that is neatly packed into textbooks that teachers are *allowed* to cover already shows deference toward white Americans. “Educators, historians and school advocacy groups who fiercely oppose the bill remained unswayed by arguments that the bill is merely meant to ensure students are taught that one race or gender is not superior to another” (McGee, 2021). Educators are left wondering if they choose to cover current events, then will they keep their jobs. “Paula Lewis, chair of the Oklahoma City School Board, said though the state’s new law bans teachers from discussing concepts they weren’t discussing anyway, and though its penalties are not yet clear, the danger is the fear it instills” (Florida, 2021). Many educators in the conservative states where critical race theory is viewed as a problem, like Oklahoma and Texas, worry about the “thought police” monitoring their lessons and classroom discussions. Educators are beginning to “second-guess whether they can lead students in conversations about race and structural racism that many feel are critical at a time the nation is navigating an important reckoning on those issues” (McGee, 2021). Without schools’ guidance in helping students navigate their current lived experiences, they are left to attempt to make sense of events with social media and peers. Students will bring current event topics into the classroom with questions and concerns. Educators are now unsure if they can engage in these current event discussions.

Senators are divided on the Texas bill that is gaining traction as a platform issue in North Texas school board elections. “Sen. Brandon Creighton, R-Conroe, who sponsored the Senate version of the bill, said in a statement to the *Tribune* that Texas schools should emphasize ‘traditional history, focusing on the ideas that make our country great and the story of how our country has risen to meet those ideals’” (McGee, 2021). Across the aisle, some Democrats call the bill whitewashed (Yager, 2021). Senator Royce West of Dallas claims the focus of education should be on preventing the same mistakes of the past (Yager, 2021). The updated Senate-approved version of the bill renews specific “essential curriculum standards” such as the Declaration of Independence and the Federalist Papers (McGee, 2021). The updated house bill eliminated over two dozen requirements from the previous House-approved version including “requirements to study the writings or stories of multiple women and people of color [...] despite attempts by Democratic senators to reinstate some of those materials in the bill” (McGee, 2021).

*If Teachers Can’t Talk about Politics, are They Truly Educating?*

Political discourse in the classroom setting has become a more divisive issue for parents in the last several years. Parents seemingly want to own the discourse on political thought worried about “woke” conversations or controversial social issues confusing or influencing their children. Schools were once a construct designed to explore social democratic goals for children with the goal to expand equality and opportunity (Apple, 1996, pg.6). However, with increased state and federal government interest in curriculum, funding, and certification

requirements, there appears to be a clear loss of curricular and conversational control of the actual teaching, especially topics that may influence the values and knowledge that could be passed on to children (Apple, 1996, pg. 6).

Statements that explicitly favor one political party or the other probably will not make it into published curricula, but parents also fear the messages given by individual teachers regarding politics and current events. One example from *The 1619 Project*, Jamelle Bouie's essay "Undemocratic Democracy", is explicitly anti-Republican. The essay states that "reactionary extremism" took over the Republican Party in 2011. Bouie recounts the 2011 debate over proposed repeal of the Affordable Care Act and the debt-limit increase and states that "Republicans would either win total victory or they would wreck the system itself" (p. 52). This is a one-sided partisan recounting of the events of 2011 implies that Republicans fear the growing population of people of color and that the party only wins by gerrymandering and voter suppression. Given the fact that at least one of the essays in *The 1619 Project* is explicitly anti-Republican, it is reasonable to expect that Republican parents might be concerned if they hear that a school or teacher will base lessons on *The 1619 Project*.

### Conclusion

The purpose of this article is to provide teacher educators and school leaders with background information about critical issues and controversial curriculum that has become a political concern for schools in recent years. K-12 teachers have likely heard of the legislative bills that have been introduced at the state and federal levels and may face questions from concerned parents and guardians. School leaders need to have quality skills and systems in place to reassure their community members that they are continuing to be good stewards of the children they serve while supporting the teaching and expertise of their teachers. Teachers should have some familiarity with the controversy to be able to respond to parents' possible questions parents may have about how controversial issues are addressed in the classroom. School leaders should become more familiar with these controversies so that they can advise school board members and the community to effectively serve all of the children with fidelity.

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