

# TEACHING INCLUSIVE HISTORY

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## INTRODUCTION

A proper historical education for young students is essential to building the skills that will be needed from them throughout their lifetime. Learning about the past, both the positive and negative components of it, will make for a more informed and empathetic generation going forward. In recent years, history curriculums have sparked debates amongst politicians and educators around the United States. In Pennsylvania, the issue of anti-racism education has created much debate among politicians and has left many educators in the state uncertain when discussing controversial topics. This paper will discuss the controversies surrounding topics such as Critical Race Theory and what measures have been taken to prevent it from being taught to students in elementary and high schools in Pennsylvania. It will also discuss how the omission of controversial topics works to the student's detriment and prevents them from forming the critical thinking skills needed to engage with the world around them.

The goal of this paper is to address school administrators and recommend that they support a pre-made course on African American history, including anti-racist resources, to be implemented in high schools across Pennsylvania. This will supply teachers with anti-racist materials to use in the classroom. Without taking the required action to keep anti-racism education in schools, the threat of a statewide ban on such topics becomes increasingly prevalent.

## CONTROVERSIAL TOPIC: CRITICAL RACE THEORY

### Benefits of Teaching Inclusive History

The focus of these debates around the country is the topic of Critical Race Theory, the interdisciplinary study in which scholars examine the convergence of race and the law in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Many teachers across the country support the creation of a more diverse history curriculum and have spoken out about the backlash against Critical Race Theory, pointing out that the omission of such topics will likely lead to large amounts of ignorance in the future.<sup>2</sup> Allowing the classroom to be a space in which students can learn about and discuss these important topics will make way for a more engaging learning experience.

**“We have to talk about the fact that race and racism is real and is as much of the fabric of America as apple pie or the Fourth of July or the Second Amendment, just because that’s where we are doesn’t mean that’s where we have to be.”**  
 -Terry Harris, executive director of student services at Rockwood school district, St. Louis, MO

Waxman, “Critical Race Theory Is Simply the Latest Bogeyman.’ Inside the Fight Over What Kids Learn About America’s History,” [time.com](https://time.com)

Teaching students controversial subject matter will allow them to further develop critical thinking skills and give them the ability to look at a topic from diverse perspectives. It will also allow them to use what they have learned in the classroom to hopefully better the world around them. Along with these beneficial skills, teaching younger generations the truth about our country’s history is one way to ensure that it won’t be repeated.

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Kim, “What Critical Race Theory Is and What It Means for Teachers.” *Learning for Justice*, [https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/what-critical-race-theory-is-and-what-it-means-for-teachers?gclid=CjwKCAjwx46TBhBhEiwArA\\_DjJfJy5351AtrPwluBjYwYXIItM9oSxvLCveaUckGimNZoNfAzTLegxhoCskkQAvD\\_BwE](https://www.learningforjustice.org/magazine/what-critical-race-theory-is-and-what-it-means-for-teachers?gclid=CjwKCAjwx46TBhBhEiwArA_DjJfJy5351AtrPwluBjYwYXIItM9oSxvLCveaUckGimNZoNfAzTLegxhoCskkQAvD_BwE).  
<sup>2</sup> Olivia B. Waxman, “Critical Race Theory: The Fight over What History Kids Learn.” *Time*, Time Magazine, 16 July 2021, <https://time.com/6075193/critical-race-theory-debate/>

## According to Parents

Recently, the term “Critical Race Theory” has begun to be falsely equated with the teaching of any topic involving racism in the minds of many Americans. As described by the NAACP, “The term has been unjustifiably used to include all diversity and inclusion efforts, race-conscious policies, and education about racism, whether or not they draw from CRT.”<sup>3</sup> According to a poll conducted by IPSOS, a majority of American parents are in favor of educators teaching their children about the impact of slavery and topics surrounding racism. However, many white parents become more hesitant when asked about Critical Race Theory specifically:

- ◇ 60% of American parents want their kids to learn about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism as part of their education
- ◇ 83% of Black parents are in favor of their children’s schools teaching critical race theory
- ◇ 37% of white parents are in favor of their children’s schools teaching critical race theory

USA TODAY/Ipsos Poll taken Aug. 30-Sept 1 of 2,010 adults. Credibility interval +/- 2.5 percentage points.

The divide seems to become more prevalent when examining it across party lines. Results from the same poll show that:

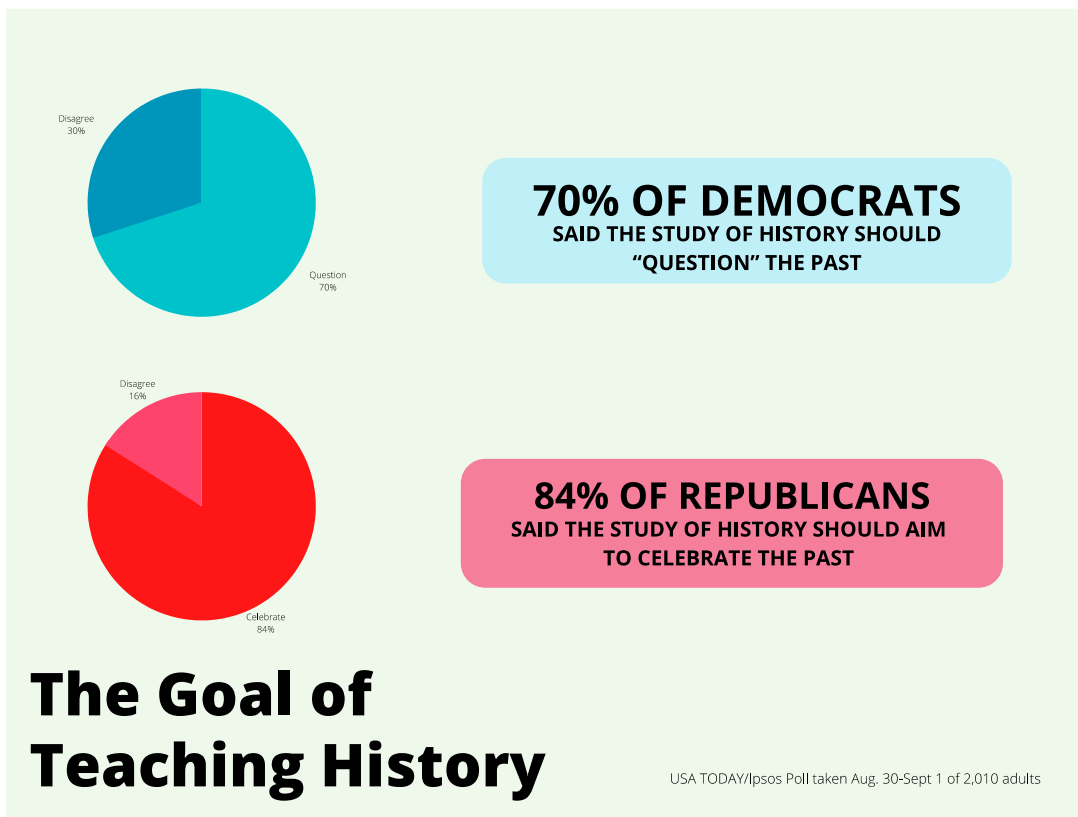
- More than 8 in 10 Democrat parents believed their children should learn about the lingering impact of slavery and racism
- Fewer than 4 in 10 Republican parents believed their children should learn about the lingering impact of slavery and racism

USA TODAY/Ipsos Poll taken Aug. 30-Sept 1 of 2,010 adults

<sup>3</sup> “Critical Race Theory FAQ.” NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, December 22, 2021. [https://www.naacpldf.org/critical-race-theory-faq/?gclid=Cj0KCCQiAu62QBhC7ARIsALXijXRWMUcz2Iv8jzUxBTOUNWpGCIRrcnJRtr6L7mNd8pRDC3OZSl n16f4aAgOoEALw\\_wcB](https://www.naacpldf.org/critical-race-theory-faq/?gclid=Cj0KCCQiAu62QBhC7ARIsALXijXRWMUcz2Iv8jzUxBTOUNWpGCIRrcnJRtr6L7mNd8pRDC3OZSl n16f4aAgOoEALw_wcB).

## According to Politicians

The debate over what students should learn about America’s history has further divided politicians over the last year. This divide is reflective of how each party sees as the value of a history class. A national survey conducted by the American Historical Association and Fairleigh Dickinson University found that:



While the celebration vs. questioning approach is a bit over simplified, it points out the differences in the way politicians themselves view our country’s history. Amongst many conservatives, there is a fear that learning about racism throughout American history will make kids hate America or become too focused on our differences.<sup>4</sup> While PA currently has no

<sup>4</sup> Alex Geli. “Are Lancaster County Schools 'Indoctrinating' Children with Critical Race Theory? Educators, Experts Say No.” LancasterOnline, October 3, 2021. <https://lancasteronline.com/news/local/are-lancaster-county-school>

statewide ban, the misinformation surrounding Critical Race Theory specifically has culminated in many states banning the topic from being taught in schools:



“Map: Where Critical Race Theory is Under Attack,” EdWeek.org

There is, however, a bill that was introduced in Pennsylvania in June of 2021 titled **The Teaching Racial and Universal Equality Act**.<sup>5</sup> While the bill has not moved out of the state House Education Committee, it still poses a threat to teachers who want to speak openly in their classrooms about issues involving racism. The bill aims to punish public schools and individual educators who teach about these topics by subjecting them to an investigation by the state or pulling funding if a parent complains of “racist or sexist concepts” being taught to their child.<sup>6</sup> One of these concepts as stated within the bill is that “The United States of America or the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is fundamentally racist or sexist.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Geli, “Are Lancaster County Schools 'Indoctrinating' Children with Critical Race Theory?”

<sup>6</sup> Ibid

<sup>7</sup> Ibid

## According to Students

One of the largest stakeholders in this situation are high school students across the state. With a proper education at risk, older students have become increasingly aware of the damage that these bans can cause. Some school districts in PA have taken to creating their own school wide bans, prohibiting anti-racist books and teaching materials from being used in their schools. Such is the case at Central York High School in York, PA where students have begun protesting a ban that was put into effect by their school administrators. This ban prevents the use of books and documentaries focusing on black history and promoting anti-racism. The school's Panther Anti-Racist Student Union amongst other concerned students took to the school grounds with the goal of getting this ban lifted.<sup>8</sup> This example displays how students are unlikely to be passive bystanders when it is their education at stake. Students, especially those in high school, care about these social issues and do not want to see important pieces of history omitted from their classrooms.

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<sup>8</sup> Gabriela Martinez. "PA Students Protest Ban on Anti-Racist Teaching Materials." WHYY. WHYY, September 10, 2021. <https://whyy.org/articles/pa-students-protest-school-boards-ban-on-anti-racist-teaching-materials/>.



## Effects on Teachers

These bans are not only a disservice to students but to teachers as well. The tension surrounding the topic of anti-racist education have made it extremely difficult for teachers to navigate course materials. If bans continue to be created, many teachers will be put in the compromising position of having to choose between teaching the truth or potentially losing their jobs. For example, teachers within the School District of Philadelphia have spoken out about the importance of making sure their district supports them even while legislation is being debated:

**“We want the board to say that regardless of what happens in the legislature, we’re going to continue to encourage our teachers to teach about racism and teach about the truth and the past of this country,”**  
-Adam Sanchez, social studies teacher at Central High School in Philadelphia, PA.

Calhoun, Johann. “What’s at Stake in Pennsylvania’s Gubernatorial Race? Educators Say Teaching Race, Racism in Schools.”

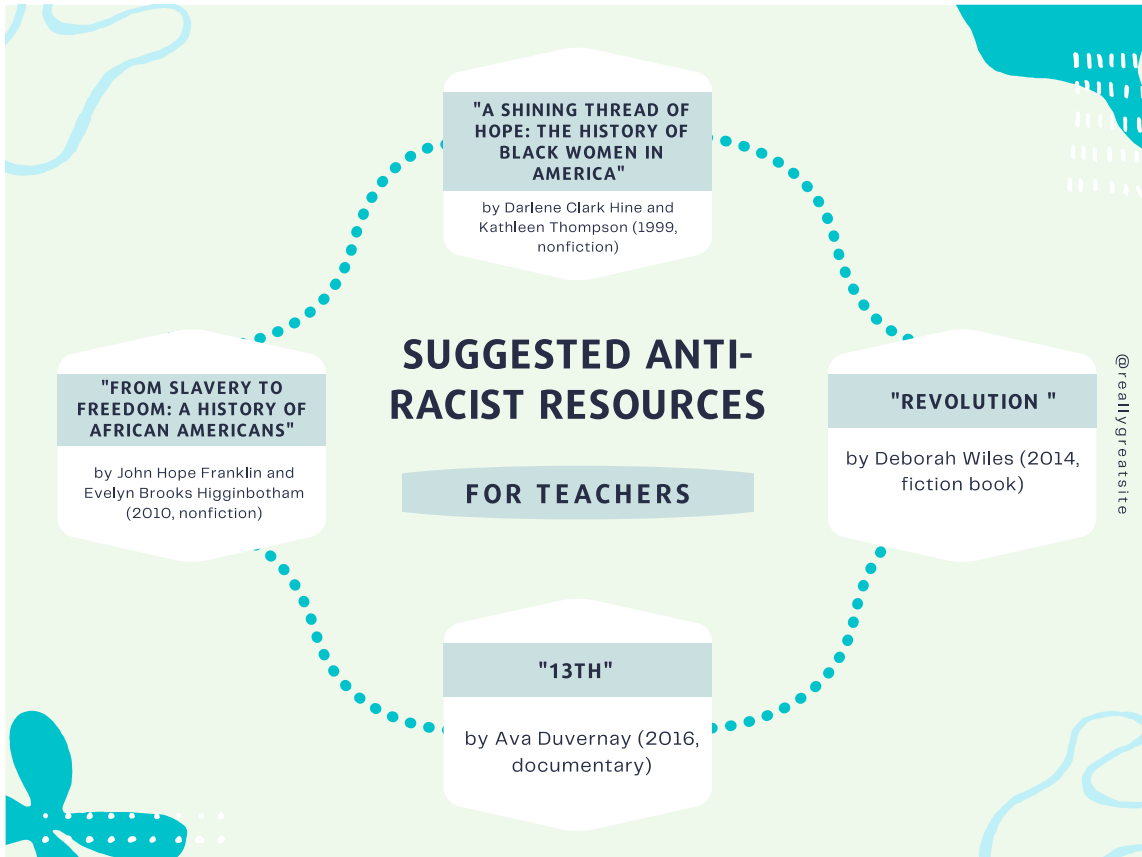
The School District of Philadelphia has begun requiring students to take a course on African American history in order to graduate.<sup>9</sup> Having students take a course on this topic that is mandated by the school district protects the teachers from parental complaints by having the explicit support of the district and its administrators.

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<sup>9</sup> Johann Calhoun. “What’s at Stake in Pennsylvania’s Gubernatorial Race? Educators Say Teaching Race, Racism in Schools.” Chalkbeat Philadelphia. Chalkbeat Philadelphia, July 26, 2021. <https://philadelphia.chalkbeat.org/2021/7/26/22594223/whats-at-stake-in-pennsylvanias-gubernatorial-race-educators-say-teaching-race-racism-in-schools>.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

To teach this controversial subject matter, educators must be adequately prepared. To do this, educators from various parts of PA should collaborate to create a course specifically on African American history. This course should be implemented statewide and address systemic racism in America’s past by including anti-racist teaching materials. If the state were to give teachers the ability to partner with their community and activists within it, they would be able to create a course that addresses this material in a way that works for their school district while still following the course’s standard layout. Similar movements have come about around the United States, such as the “Teach The Truth” campaign in which teachers have begun creating ways to combat anti-CRT bans in their school districts ([zinnedproject.org](http://zinnedproject.org)). To create this proposed course, the Pennsylvania Board of Education will supply educators with helpful teaching materials such as appropriate textbooks, fiction and nonfiction books, and documentaries.



“Pledge to Teach the Truth.” *Zinn Education Project*, 28 Jan. 2022,  
<https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/pledge-to-teach-truth>.

## CONCLUSION

The debate over Critical Race Theory is indicative of how polarized our society has become in recent years. It has become increasingly clear the ways in which teachers are at risk when these bans become implemented in their district. While resolution proposed in this paper is possible, it is likely that any attempt at teaching about systemic racism on a statewide level currently will be undermined by conservative policymakers. However, the mandated course will protect and support teachers as they navigate this subject matter. It is critical that students receive a proper historical education and are not sheltered from the truth about America's past. It is of the utmost importance that administrators in PA take the required steps to ensure that anti-racist topics can be safely taught in their schools.

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