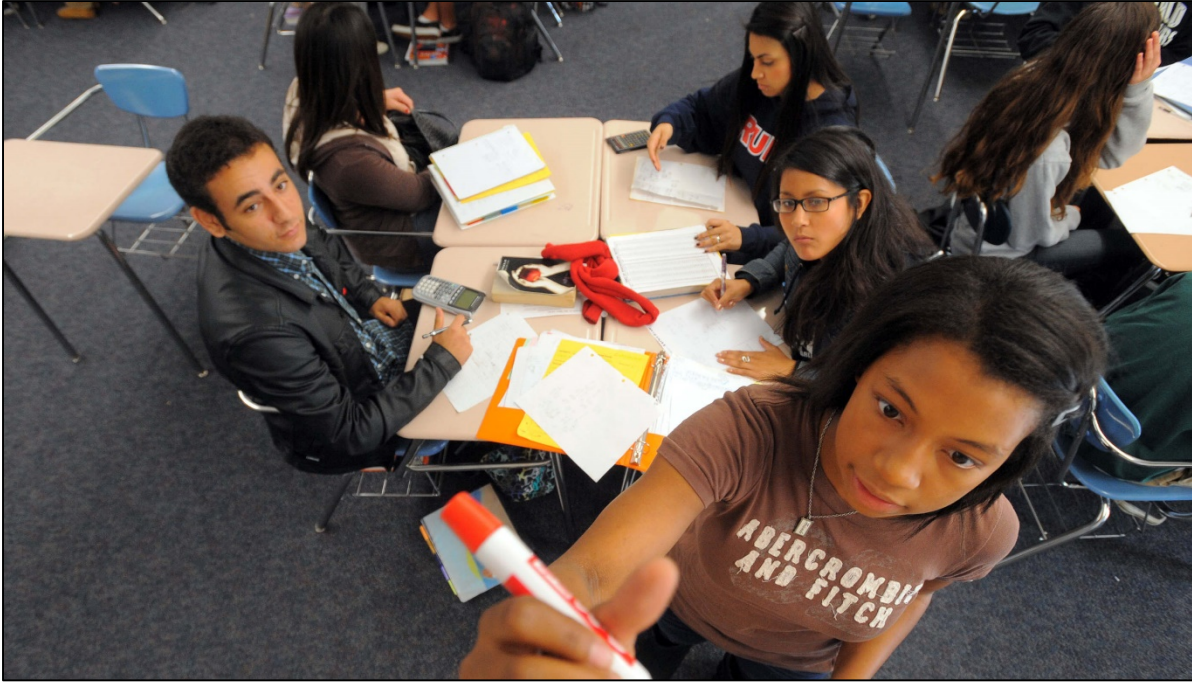


The battle over race upending America's classrooms



California is the first state to make ethnic studies compulsory in its high schools, but how that is taught has divided educators, parents and politicians.

By **Matthew Knott**
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Costa Mesa: Parents in Orange County, a wealthy coastal community in southern California, had plenty of ways to spend their time on a recent Tuesday evening.

They could have cheered on American swim star Katie Ledecky as she raced for Olympics gold or watched the sun set over Huntington Beach, one of the country's most renowned surfing beaches.

Instead, hundreds of parents gathered at the Orange County Board of Education's headquarters for a forum on ethnic studies and critical race theory. All the seats inside were snapped up quickly so an overflow tent was set up in the carpark outside for people to watch on big screens. Around 1000 more were watching live on YouTube.

Similar events have taken place across the US in recent weeks as a new front opened up in the country's culture wars. Some have descended into heated shouting matches. Two people were arrested at a school board meeting in Virginia in June, one for trespassing and the other for disorderly conduct.



Protests against critical race theory in Virginia in June led to arrests.

Officers from the local sheriff's department were at the Orange County forum in case things got out of hand. That didn't happen. Emotions were high, but virtually everyone in the room was in agreement: their children are being targeted by left-wing radicals on a mission to divide students on the basis of race. And it needs to be stopped.

Concerned parent Penny, who emigrated from Iran as a teenager and is married to a white man, told the crowd she feared how her son would be treated at school. "Is he privileged because he's half white?" she asked. "Or a victim because he's half Persian and a minority?"

A father, Don, was on the verge of tears as he recounted how his daughter recently came home from school and told him he possesses white privilege, a concept he doesn't understand.

Several black parents said they were worried their children would be taught to regard themselves as victims and that critical race theory was being used as a Trojan horse to promote progressive ideas on sexuality and gender.

Genuine threat or moral panic?

Until recently, few Americans outside of academia had heard of the term critical race theory.

The framework, first proposed in the 1970s, argues that racism permeates America's laws and institutions and that simply removing discriminatory policies will not erase the inequities between different racial groups. University students could study it if they chose, but there was no suggestion it was being taught to schoolchildren.

That changed in the middle of last year, when America started convulsing over race relations following the killing of black man George Floyd in Minneapolis. Conservative activist Christopher Rufo became a right-wing media star by using Twitter and YouTube to argue that critical race theory, often reduced to its initials CRT, had become the “new orthodoxy in America’s public institutions”.

The threat of CRT soon became a cause celebre for Fox News hosts and Republican politicians. After being mentioned just 132 times on the network last year, CRT racked up 1860 mentions on Fox between January and June this year according to media monitor service Critical Mention.

In June, Florida’s state Board of Education banned the theory from public school classrooms; school boards in Georgia, Utah and Oklahoma have introduced similar guidelines.



Demonstrators argue during a protest against critical race theory before a school board meeting for the Jefferson County Public Schools district in Louisville, Kentucky, on July 27.

There’s little to no evidence that critical race theory is taught to American school children in an explicit way. This has led critics to dismiss concerns about the theory as a manufactured moral panic, similar to the Cold War-era “reds under the beds” scare.

Rufo himself has declared a political motive for inflating its influence. “The goal is to have the public read something crazy in the newspaper and immediately think ‘critical race theory,’” he wrote on Twitter in March.

Under siege in paradise

In America’s most populous state, however, the debate about the teaching of race and ethnicity in schools is very real.

After a rancorous three-year debate, California is set to become the first state in the US to mandate the teaching of “ethnic studies” as a graduation requirement. The state’s model ethnic studies curriculum states that the course is designed to explore “institutionalised systems of advantage and address the causes of racism and other forms of bigotry”.

The course focuses on the experiences of four groups: African Americans, Latin Americans, Native Americans, as well as Asian and Pacific Islander Americans.

Orange County Board of Education trustee Mari Barke, who organised the recent forum, says the issue has sparked unprecedented alarm among local parents.



Orange County Board of Education president Mari Barke and husband Jeff Barke are concerned about the teaching of ethnic studies in California.

“My inbox is out of control,” she says. “Parents don’t want their children to be made to feel responsible for what happened decades ago. They don’t like the idea of children being pitted against each other. This is dividing and confusing our children.”

As recently as the late 1980s, Orange County was one of the most reliably Republican areas in the country.

But the area has been changing rapidly thanks to an influx of Hispanic and Asian-American residents and a left-ward turn among college-educated white voters. In 2016, Orange County voted Democratic for the first time in a presidential election since World War II.

The shift has left Republicans like Barke and husband Jeff feeling under siege in a place they once considered paradise.

“Orange County is a beautiful place,” says Mari. “But if I had school-age children now, they would not be in government schools. Between critical race theory and masking children and now vaccinating them, oh my goodness.”

‘Jargon-filled and all-too PC’

Like most people in the San Francisco Bay area, mother of two Elina Kaplan is a Democrat. When she first heard about the ethnic studies proposal she was excited. “It sounded so good: building bridges of understanding and fostering appreciation of multiple cultures,” she says.

Then the first draft of the curriculum was released in 2019. The document spoke about “dismantling the neo-colonial schooling apparatus” and described capitalism as a “form of oppression”. Kaplan, who emigrated to the US from Belarus at age 11, says such terminology reminded her of her schooling in the former Soviet Union.

The course also proposed a list of role models for children to study. Civil rights icons such as Martin Luther King jnr and John Lewis were absent. But more radical figures such as Oscar Lopez Rivera - the leader of a Puerto Rican separatist group that carried out over 100 bomb attacks in the US - were included.

“We believe in confronting racism but we don’t believe in dictating a specific politicised ideology that elevates Marxism and violent movements,” says Kaplan, co-founder of the Alliance for Constructive Ethnic Studies. The group says its mission is to remove “political agendas” from ethnic studies curricula.



Elina Kaplan says elements of California’s ethnic studies curriculum remind her of her education in the former Soviet Union.

Kaplan was far from alone in her outrage. Jewish community leaders said the draft curriculum promoted anti-Semitic tropes and were incensed that it appeared to endorse the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions movement against Israel.

The left-leaning *Los Angeles Times* editorial board railed against the model curriculum as “jargon-filled and all-too-PC”. The newspaper said the curriculum “feels like an exercise in groupthink, designed to proselytise and inculcate more than to inform”.

Gavin Newsom, California’s Democratic governor, said the curriculum was “offensive in so many ways” and vowed that it would “never see the light of day”.

After attracting over 100,000 public comments, a third and seemingly final version was approved by the California Board of Education in March.

The latest document was stripped of its most provocative content, but Kaplan says local school districts will be free to adopt their own, more radical versions.

And her concerns extend beyond ethnic studies.

A draft new mathematics framework, released by the California Department of Education earlier this year, argues that traditional mathematics teaching is inherently biased against non-white students. It endorses an approach by California educators that calls for an explicitly “anti-racist” form of maths education known as ethno-mathematics.

According to this approach, traditional mathematics instruction promotes “white supremacy culture” by focussing on the search for a “single right answer”. Instead, students should be recognised for their concepts and reasoning.

Kaplan says the upheaval in California over race and ethnicity in schools offers a preview for states across the US. “Whatever is being propagated here is absolutely going to spread to the rest of the country,” she says.

Theresa Montaña, a professor of Chicano (Mexican-American) studies at California State University, Northridge was supposed to be one of the experts speaking at the Orange County forum. Many parents in the crowd were keen to hear her views as one of the state’s leading advocates for ethnic studies education.

But Montaña withdrew at the last minute, saying she believed the panel was stacked with critics who were not experts in the field. Instead she appeared at a nearby event organised by Truth in Education, a local group that supports mandatory ethnic studies in Californian schools.

While acknowledging the “tremendous pushback” against California’s ethnic studies curriculum, Montaña says: “The movement for it is stronger than the push against it. As our state increasingly becomes people of colour, students are no longer satisfied with the status quo. They want to see people like themselves prominently featured in their education.”

She says that critical race theory will only rarely, if ever, be explicitly taught in schools. “But given the anti-racist edge of ethnic studies, of course critical race theory is a part of it.”

Rather than pitting students against each other, Montañó says the subject will encourage both white and non-white students to empathise with different cultures and to think deeply about how race has shaped American society.

To the charge of bringing politics into the classroom, she pleads unapologetically guilty.

“The bottom line,” she says, “is that education is political.” The question is which political perspectives are included, and which are shut out.

Matthew Knott

Matthew Knott is North America correspondent for The Sydney Morning Herald and The Age.