

Executive Summary

The Conflict Campaign

**Exploring Local Experiences
of the Campaign to Ban
“Critical Race Theory”
in Public K–12 Education
in the U.S., 2020–2021**

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U.S. public schools are ideally places where students from all backgrounds come together to build knowledge and skills to make a better country for all. Students who will be called upon as adults to live and work in diverse communities and make important decisions together about improving public life need to accurately understand U.S. history and society, including barriers to opportunity past and present. They also need to learn about and benefit from the rich diversity of their community and their nation. And they need to be treated with respect and learn to treat all people humanely. In all this, public schools are asked to support evidence-based inquiry, accurate treatment of fact, and deliberation — cornerstones of democratic life.

Our country has been gripped by a politically inflamed effort to block much such learning.

After a summer 2020 surge of protest-fueled anti-racist energy across the nation and increase in K–12 education efforts to explore issues of race and racism in U.S. society (often at students’ request), pushback against a caricatured vision of “Critical Race Theory” (“CRT”) in K–12 public schools rose over the 2020–2021 school year. Propelled by common talking points, media attention, state legislation, and school board protests, school- and district-level conflicts increased and intensified over the year and into summer 2021 as critics sought to restrict or “ban” curriculum, lessons, professional development, and district equity and diversity efforts addressing a broad but often loosely defined set of ideas about race, racism, diversity, and inclusion. In 2020–2021, “CRT” became a caricatured catch-all term opponents used to try to limit and prohibit much such learning.

In a rapid-response multi-method study funded by the Spencer Foundation for Research in Education, we have sought since spring 2021 to understand the current context of extreme pressure on educators attempting to teach on issues of race/racism in our country, and more generally to work on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion in schools and districts so all students are supported as they learn.

Widely reported at the national level, and at the state level where restrictive laws have been proposed, the anti “CRT” campaign has also had an impact at the local level. Our report centers on efforts to restrict teaching and learning that have played out at the *local district level*—a topic that has not been covered in a systematic way—and on national patterns in those localized efforts. We first explore media-fueled, broadly connected, and often powerful partisan efforts to incite and support *local community members* to target teaching and diversity work in schools and districts, often by distorting educators’ work. We then attend

to how (and where) such efforts (and restrictive bills) have been experienced by educators and, indirectly, their students.

For this study, we reviewed documentation from and about the campaign’s loudest proponents, particularly national and local leaders. We analyzed anti “CRT” websites, toolkits, Facebook groups, and media appearances to understand their shared language, tactics, and logic. We analyzed survey and interview data from educators affected through early fall 2021, drawing on survey responses from 275 members of a set of national teacher organizations that support teachers who tend toward teaching on race and diversity, as well as an interview study of 21 “equity officers” (EOs) in district diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) roles across the country. We also drew on a unique data set of more than 10,000 media stories we collected covering “CRT” and public schools between September 2020 and August 2021.

We found that at least 894 school districts, enrolling 17,743,850 students, or 35% of all K–12 students in the United States, have been impacted by local anti “CRT” efforts. Our survey and interviews demonstrate how such restriction efforts have been experienced inside schools as well as districts. We found that both state action and local activity have left many educators afraid to do their work.

We call the anti “CRT” campaign a *conflict campaign* because it has both manufactured conflict to partisan ends, and exploited real divisions over how to teach about race and for inclusion in U.S. society. It is difficult to tease out these two purposes in the conflict campaign. For some campaign participants, the focus clearly lies with partisan politics. For others, the focus is on what is happening in schools. And for still others (perhaps most) these two themes are intertwined. Many educators experience the campaign as a local effort to restrict K–12 learning about race and diversity in our country, even as they sense it is driven by larger political dynamics.

We put “CRT” in quotation marks throughout this report because so often the conflict campaign’s definition of “CRT” (like its description of actual K–12 practice) is a caricatured distortion by loud opponents as self-appointed “experts.” The conflict campaign thrives on *caricature*—on often *distorting* altogether both scholarship and K–12 educators’ efforts at accurate and inclusive education, deeming it (and particularly K–12 efforts to discuss the full scope of racism in our nation) wholly inappropriate for school.

Confronted by the conflict campaign, K–12 educators across the country said they had to look up the term “Critical Race Theory” to learn what it was.

The conflict campaign's loudest, most powerful voices caricature actual teaching and stoke parent anxiety in a quest to control both schools and government. We describe the conflict campaign in our report as many local wildfires, one fire. It is a national campaign made real in part through local critics of schooling enacting state and national trends. We show broader national connections via localized stories.

Our findings:

THE CONFLICT CAMPAIGN ITSELF

- ▶ The anti “CRT” effort is a purposeful, nationally/state interconnected, and locally driven *conflict campaign* to block or restrict proactive teaching and professional development related to race, racism, bias, and many aspects of proactive diversity/equity/inclusion efforts in schools, *while* — for some — gaining political power and control. Strategy, language, terminology and tactics are shared and encouraged across localities through networking fueled by powerful conservative entities (media, organizations, foundations, PACs, and politicians) that exploit and foment local frustration and dissent over what should be taught and learned in schools. Targets include both school district policy and state law, and local educators themselves.
- ▶ Conservative media has played a pivotal role in spreading the conflict campaign. From September 2020 to August 2021, the majority of national news stories about “CRT” and public schools came from conservative news sources, with mainstream news sources and liberal news sources generating far fewer stories. There were more than seven stories from national conservative news sources about “CRT” in public schools for every one story from a national liberal media source.
- ▶ Campaign efforts go far beyond deliberating different ways of understanding and teaching about race and racism. In addition to legislative efforts, participants organizing nationally and riled up locally are intentionally attacking and affecting race-related and diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) work in districts, on school boards, and in teaching often by *intimidating* educators and elected school board members away from DEI efforts and discussions with students of race and diversity issues. This activity is at times strikingly driven by partisan aims.
- ▶ The conflict campaign in total seeks to expose, restrict, ban, “abolish,” censor, and control a wide

set of school conversations on race and inclusion. These restrictions threaten to prevent students and educators from engaging and grappling with difficult historical facts, current events, complex opportunity barriers, real biases, marginalized communities’ voices, and possible collective improvements in our shared schools and country. Restriction efforts also threaten to block opportunities for students of color and White students to discuss how they might join together to ensure that *all are included and valued* in our society and treated with dignity and respect.

INITIAL EFFECTS OF THE CONFLICT CAMPAIGN ON LOCAL EDUCATORS

- ▶ Teachers and district equity officers surveyed and interviewed for our report described an experience of the 2020–2021 conflict campaign as creating a newly *hostile environment* for discussing issues of race, racism, and racial inequality and more broadly diversity, equity, and inclusion. The majority of our survey respondents noted personally experiencing efforts to restrict or prohibit learning on these issues in 2020–2021. Only one equity officer described a year free of anti “CRT” conflict.
- ▶ In describing their local experiences of the campaign, respondents described a heightened level of “attack,” “intimidation,” and “threat” from legislation, “outside orgs,” and local critics, particularly subgroups of highly vocal parents sometimes fueled by politicians.
- ▶ These respondents often described feeling attacked and at risk for discussing issues of race or racism at all, or promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion in any way. Equity officers told us that at times they feared for their personal safety.
- ▶ In states with passed or pending legislation, teachers shared a sense of looming “attack” on “what is taught” and described colleagues as “terrified, confused and/or demoralized.” Confusion over what teachers “could teach” in states where “bans” had been passed or were under consideration pervaded some teachers’ responses. These teachers spoke of awaiting “instructions” on actual restriction while sensing overall prohibition on “controversial issues” or “beginning discussions in class about race, gender, or sexual orientation.” A number described school or district leaders that had themselves “forbidden” or advised “avoiding” specific texts or topics, leaving younger teachers “understandably cowed.”

- ▶ Notably, teachers in places with *no* state prohibitions also felt a censorship drive by local critics inflamed by broader forces. Some described how local pushback “led by parents” (often “associated with parent groups on social media”), a misinformed “vocal minority,” or “individuals from outside our community,” created a “chilling” atmosphere for “teaching and learning” and professional development. Others described increasing “hesitancy” about “teaching about race” or diversity-related topics, anticipating local “attack.”
- ▶ Educators highlighted the involvement of “politicians,” naming governors and state legislators, state superintendents, and “policy organizations.” Respondents also sometimes signaled an intertwining of politicians and local parents, with phrases like “politician and parent groups,” “lawmakers and parent groups,” “parents and lawyers/politicians,” and “parent organizations inflamed by politicians and Facebook.” Some also noted administrators and even some teacher colleagues who seemingly supported restrictions.
- ▶ Many indicated that the response of local education leaders to the conflict campaign shaped how they themselves would proceed. Some shared stories of local leaders and community members successfully backing up the right to teach and learn about race and diversity. Respondents noted how if higher-ups did *not* offer explicit protection for the right to learn and teach, even “vocal minorities” or individual critics could have large effects. Respondents indicated repeatedly that what would be taught by teachers and learned by students regarding race and diversity depended on local district and school-level leadership — including in states with restrictive bills.
- ▶ Educators also noted district leaders “pulling away” from earlier commitments to work on race and DEI, to “culturally responsive” and “social-emotional learning,” or even to accurate history. Many worried about leaders’ lack of explicit “response” to prohibitions.
- ▶ Describing feeling “terrified” to teach “in this polarized environment,” some teachers indicated that they and colleagues intended to remain silent on an array of issues that they otherwise would have taught, on topics as broad as “race” and “race and gender.” Some said that as teachers were “left wondering” what they could do and “unsure what I am allowed to say and teach,” many were “choosing to avoid” “controversial” topics and specific texts.
- ▶ Some pointed out explicitly how efforts intimidating *educators* risked restricting opportunities for

students to learn — and for adults to learn to support students better.

THE CONFLICT CAMPAIGN IN LOCAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

- ▶ Nearly 900 school districts have experienced local actions related to the campaign (for example, public discussions about banning “CRT”) or contention at school board meetings addressing “CRT.” These 894 impacted districts enroll 17,743,850 students, or 35% of all K–12 students in the United States. Such districts are in states both with and without restrictive state efforts.
- ▶ Districts experiencing the most rapid demographic change (in which the percentage of White student enrollment fell by more than 18% since 2000) were more than three times as likely as districts with minimal or no change in the enrollment of White students to be impacted by the localized conflict campaign. This means that in the very districts where students’ families and communities experienced rapid demographic shift, the conflict campaign could particularly restrict students from analyzing that experience — and restrict educators from learning to better support students.
- ▶ The localized conflict campaign seemingly has sparked most in districts with the greatest level of racial and ideological diversity. Districts impacted by local campaigns are most likely to enroll a racially mixed and majority White student body and to be located in communities that are politically contested or leaning liberal or conservative, rather than in communities that voted strongly against or in favor of Trump in the 2020 presidential election. This means that students in racially mixed communities whose parents are arguing over politics may particularly be restricted from learning together about complex issues of race and diversity in our society.

To date, this story is about both formal state action and resultant local restriction, and also about how educators are experiencing local pushback from local people inflamed by larger forces, as well as the broader climate of fear all this pushback creates. The efforts of the conflict campaign have created a heightened *context of hostility* to teaching and work on race and diversity, potentially threatening learning opportunities not only in states with bills but more broadly in districts supporting more than a third of U.S. students. We show that in states with and without restrictive bills, the conflict campaign has laid the groundwork for educator censorship and self-censorship across the country. Educators worry that in intimidating teachers, this

climate of fear ultimately restricts *students'* own freedom to learn and talk about our society, our history, and one another's lives.

Years of student learning about key issues of U.S. society may hang in the balance if educators are made too scared to teach.

This report focuses attention on the pivotal role of local school districts, schools, and communities going forward in shaping contexts for educators' work and students' freedom to learn.

Our report suggests that what will be taught by teachers and learned by students depends on local district and school-level leadership—including in states that have taken restrictive action. Equity officers indicated the importance of clear communication about district and school efforts and intentions, and support from district-level leaders, school board members, and union leadership in protecting learning. Repeatedly, educators spoke of the importance of meeting critics with matter of fact descriptions of necessary student support, teaching, and learning. Some said districts and “school and union leadership” needed to more explicitly back up basic freedoms to “address topics,” both when responding to legislative efforts and in knowing “the presence at board meetings of ‘anti-CRT’ voices may not be representative of the community at large.” Equity officers and teachers highlighted the value of intergenerational community action that brings together organized youth and organized adults to speak publicly on the importance of learning about issues of race,

racism, and diversity in our shared country so all are valued going forward. Both district staff and teachers noted the importance of educators joining together to protect the right to learn. Finally, both equity officers and teachers offered a final piece of advice for districts to respond to the conflict campaign: support educators to keep building their professional capacity *for* guiding such teaching and learning effectively.

Many of the localized debates in this report were sparked amidst local students of color attempting to share their experiences in schools, and students from all groups calling for teaching and learning designed to unite students *through* exploring diversity and inequality. Throughout this year, U.S. school districts will either insist on the freedom to talk and teach about real issues of race, inequality, and inclusion in our society (and the freedom to keep improving this craft), or begin to buckle under efforts to control and censor. Refusing the conflict campaign's efforts to divide them, educators, students, and parents will need to unite the majority of Americans around a clear vision of public schools where everyone is treated like they belong and matter, and where historical facts and real experiences of opportunity barriers in our actual country are discussed accurately and with nuance so we can together create a country that works for everyone.

Students' own rights to learn about these issues will now be dependent on the local systems they are in, and on whether anyone backs up their teachers—and in some places, on who wins school board elections.

