

# 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**

Mica Pollock and John Rogers  
with Alexander Kwako,  
Andrew Matschiner, Reed Kendall,  
Cicely Bingener, Erika Reece,  
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## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank multiple readers who provided feedback on early drafts of the report; we own all errors that remain. Thanks also are due to Robin Weisz, Lesley Zanich, and Beth Happel for graphic and web design, as well as to John McDonald for his contributions to communicating the report’s findings. We thank each author team member (and our families) for their patience and dedication throughout this ongoing, rapid, intense, and remotely executed collaboration. Finally, we gratefully acknowledge support from the Spencer Foundation that enabled this rapid response study.

The appropriate citation for this report is: Pollock, M., Rogers, J., Kwako, A., Matschiner, A., Kendall, R., Bingener, C., Reece, E., Kennedy, B., & Howard, J. (2022). *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*. Los Angeles, CA: UCLA’s Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access.

The report can be accessed online at  
<https://idea.gseis.ucla.edu/publications/the-conflict-campaign/>

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# Executive Summary

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.

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**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.

# Introduction

After a summer 2020 surge of protest-fueled antiracist 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 crescendoed over the year and into summer 2021 as critics sought to restrict or outright “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.

By fall 2021, PEN America, an organization that advocates for freedom of expression, counted “54 bills, introduced or pre-filed in 24 states between January and September 2021,” that it characterized as “educational gag orders” driven by “a sweeping crusade for content- and viewpoint-based state censorship.” “Eleven of these bills have already become law in nine states, while similar legislation is pending across the country,” PEN noted in November 2021, emphasizing “the actual and intended effect of these bills: to stop educators from introducing specific subjects, ideas, or arguments in classroom or training sessions” and “to silence teaching and discussion regarding race and racism in U.S. history.”<sup>1</sup>

While there is a long history of American public schools limiting students’ exposure to curriculum and learning experiences exploring the voices and experiences of people of color and others marginalized in U.S. society, PEN noted that such newly heightened and explicit efforts actively restricting the ability to learn on these issues in school are deeply “problematic for education in a democracy” and now widely threatening the freedom to learn facts about the United States.

**What has been the *local* experience of this national “crusade” against K–12 educators’ efforts to explore issues of race, inequality, and diversity in our society?** 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. **Our report centers on 2020–2021 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.

Our objective with this report is to offer educators, education leaders, parents, and all interested in public education an analysis of what we now call a *conflict campaign*— and local educators’ experiences of it.

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<sup>1</sup> PEN notes how “[the] ‘Critical Race Theory’ framing device has been applied with a broad brush, with targets as varied as *The New York Times*’ 1619 Project, efforts to address bullying and cultural awareness in schools, and even the mere use of words like ‘equity, diversity, and inclusion,’ ‘identity,’ ‘multiculturalism,’ and ‘prejudice.’” The report describes the bills’ broad targets: “Eleven bills explicitly prohibit schools from using materials from *The New York Times*’ 1619 Project,” six seem to target “specific educational materials that deal with racial justice and sexism,” “Nine of the bills explicitly target critical race theory (CRT).... as a catchall for any teaching on race or diversity of which they disapprove,” one “seeks to ban curricular materials that ‘promote, normalize, support, or address lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) issues or lifestyles;” and eight “mandate the ‘balanced’ teaching of ‘controversial’ political or social topics or the equal presentation of ‘diverse and contending views’— requirements that appear to promote evenhandedness while actually inviting partisan politics into public educational institutions.” Bills also include public universities; we focus on K–12 only in this report.

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 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, even as they sense it is driven by larger political dynamics.

2020–2021 was a year of massive cultural division in the U.S., exacerbated along many dimensions, targeting schools. [Others have analyzed](#) how bitter divides over 2020–2021 school COVID policies — amidst viciously partisan national politics — splintered many local communities over the same year. While we focus here specifically on the campaign against teaching and learning about race and racism as well as diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts that gained steam in 2020–2021, the broad impact of COVID-19 and an election year cannot be ignored. The conflict campaign frequently has tapped into anxieties and divisions prompted by a deeply partisanized pandemic. Indeed, public comments at school board meetings frequently were a mix of attacks on “CRT” and school COVID policies or mask mandates.

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.” In 2020–2021, “CRT” became a caricatured catch-all term used to target the activity of educators, schools, districts, and professional development related to race and diversity. **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.***

In efforts to caricature and then restrict learning, campaigners limit students’ ability to deliberate ways to improve our country for all.

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.

## SITUATING CRT VS ACTUAL K–12 EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Recent [polls](#) suggest that the [majority of Americans](#) agree that students *should* learn in schools about race and racism in U.S. society. In 2020–2021, “CRT” became a caricatured catch-all term some opponents used to try to limit and prohibit such learning.

We must therefore define actual Critical Race Theory (CRT) scholarship — stemming from legal studies and also as tapped in education research. CRT analyzes race-based discrimination in U.S. history, law, and society. Throughout U.S. history, those in power frequently have utilized law and policy to offer disproportionate opportunity to people deemed “White” — with vast cumulative economic and social consequences for the nation. CRT scholars analyze *how* opportunity has been distributed unjustly along racial lines, often through institutions with the support of federal, state, and local laws. [Legal scholar Kimberlé Crenshaw](#) calls CRT an effort to analyze “the sources and the reproduction of racial inequality” in law and society historically and today, and a deeply “patriotic” effort to “become that country

that we say we are.” “We believe in the promises of equality,” she says, “and we know we can’t get there if we can’t confront and talk honestly about inequality.”

When used in education research, as education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings summed up similarly, “Critical race theory is a theoretical legal concept” some scholars use to analyze racial inequality and racially unequal opportunity in the U.S. (see <https://youtu.be/ufKusK6dQI8> for an overview) as scholars consider how to improve education opportunity for all today. Education scholar Daniel Solorzano adds that CRT scholars identify and challenge “racism in its historical and contemporary forms as part of a larger goal of identifying and challenging all forms of subordination.” CRT scholarship contests all notions that any “race” is inferior or superior. It does not teach “hate” of any social group, nor seek to “divide” Americans, nor oversimplify complex identities as accused by the conflict campaign. Indeed, scholars tapping this tradition insist on the equal worth of human communities and call for listening to marginalized voices from all backgrounds.

Some K–12 educators may have read some education scholarship in graduate school that cites critical race theory in analyzing historical realities or inequality today while explaining a general antiracist, pro-human vision for improving schools to support and value all students. However, most educators engage a general antiracist or multicultural vision far more generically in preparing to teach — if at all. Indeed, researchers point out that many teacher preparation and professional development programs don’t discuss issues of race, racism, or racial inequality in much detail.

### **K–12 educators around the country are not “teaching CRT.”**

**More broadly in K–12 education**, *antiracism* efforts teach people that no “race” is superior to another; counter common biases with facts; and work to ensure that necessary opportunities are not denied students of color or any student. *Equity* efforts actively remedy opportunity barriers so students from all communities can develop their talents, as an investment in our shared society. Along all lines of diversity, work to shape schools and districts so everyone feels valued and supported to thrive is often referred to at the district level as “*DEI*,” or diversity/equity/inclusion. At the classroom level, efforts at *culturally responsive* instruction seek to respect students’ communities, teach for rigor, and offer inclusive and accurate curriculum introducing students to the full range of community experiences in our society. And of course, *accurate K–12 explorations of U.S. history* factually explore how racial inequality of opportunity has shaped and still shapes American society — not to force personal “guilt” or “shame,” as the conflict campaign imagines, but to inspire students to think deeply together about improving their shared country.

At its best, and when conducted skillfully, all such work is about supporting student success — and preparing students to collaborate in a diverse nation, through accurately understanding U.S. history and society, benefiting from the rich diversity of all communities, countering stereotype, addressing opportunity barriers for *all* who experience them, and treating all people humanely. **Far from a zero-sum game** supporting some at the expense of others, as caricatured by the conflict campaign, such work also is an effort to improve schools and society for everyone. It aims to examine racism in our shared history and in our current institutions and policies alongside other forms of harm we can repair together. Such work also places a high value on evidence-based inquiry, accurate treatment of fact, and deliberation — cornerstones of democratic life.

No educator or scholar in education would argue that all such K–12 efforts to engage in antiracism or inclusion effort are being done impeccably. We ourselves have worked with countless educators seeking to improve their craft. *Continually improving* such efforts is the goal of all such work, so that all students in U.S. schools feel supported and are prepared to deliberate ways to improve our country together.

All such work has been targeted by the conflict campaign, under the guise of eliminating “CRT” from K–12 education. By summer 2021, an [NBC overview](#) of the growing campaign reported that “Virtually all school districts insist they are not teaching critical race theory, but many activists and parents have begun using it as a catch-all term to refer to what schools often call equity programs, teaching about racism or LGBTQ-inclusive policies.”

As PEN America noted by fall 2021,

Many teachers and administrators across the country are seeking to take fuller account of the role that race and racism has played and continues to play in our country’s history, politics, and culture. It is imperative that such examinations make room for differing perspectives and arguments. Yet, by caricaturing such efforts as the indoctrination of children into critical race theory, proponents of educational gag orders threaten to shut down the very space for honest inquiry and discussion that they claim to prize.

**The conflict campaign does not invite students, educators, or families into substantive or deliberative disagreement over how to talk about or understand race or diversity in U.S. society.** The conflict campaign’s loudest, most powerful voices caricature actual teaching and stoke parent anxiety in a quest to control K–12 conversations, schools themselves, and government. We describe the conflict campaign below 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.

## **We offer 3 initial analyses at this moment:**

PART 1: The Conflict Campaign Itself

PART 2: Some Initial Effects of the Conflict Campaign on Local Educators

PART 3: The Conflict Campaign in Local School Districts

We offer an introduction now of key points from each part. We also **bold** points throughout that we hope readers will take away.

**Part 1 of our report, The Conflict Campaign Itself**, starts with our analysis of the conflict campaign based on review of documentation from and about its loudest proponents, particularly national and local leaders seeking to inflame and rally local critics. We analyze loud conflict campaigners’ websites, toolkits, Facebook groups, and media appearances to understand shared language, tactics, and logic. In addition to a timeline including federal and state-level actions, we show local and national dynamics of the conflict campaign through analyzing news coverage of a number of district-level campaigns. We rely on descriptions of districts as seen through a mix of media sources, including mainstream and conservative media. At times, this treatment may magnify the presence of the campaign’s national

figures and a *vocal minority* in each local community, as we share campaign leaders' voices and show how nationally shared language and tactics are activated by the loudest participants in local communities quoted in local and national media. Others have [investigated](#) and [demonstrated](#) the large web of conservative organizations and players crafting policy and law designed to restrict teaching and learning about issues of systemic racial inequality in our country in 2020–2021. Here, we focus on the language and tactics of this campaign that seek to rile up community members in localities across the country. Even single riled-up campaigners have been very loud locally and *made loud* through national conservative media; the campaign's inflammatory efforts have played a role in dividing communities, intimidating educators, and threatening students' freedom to learn.

Part 1 thus starts to tell the *story of the campaign itself*, often from campaigners' perspective and with the campaign's efforts and stated intentions regarding local participation as our unit of analysis. Through reading media coverage of localized campaigns, we also have begun to document the vast network of partisan players, media efforts, and institutional and financial backers **exploiting and exacerbating local dissent over race and diversity-related education in a national, deeply partisanized conflict campaign playing out in local battles over K–12 teaching and broader political power**. This work also has resulted in deeper understanding of the role of “conservative” and right-wing media in catalyzing and inflaming conflicts nationwide.

We find that the anti “CRT” effort is a **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 diversity/equity/inclusion efforts in schools, while — for some — gaining political power/control**. Strategy, language, terminology, and tactics are shared across localities via networking fueled by powerful conservative entities (media, organizations, foundations, PACs, and politicians) who 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.

**The conflict campaign goes beyond simple disagreement over how to teach about race or diversity effectively. Based on campaigners' statements and materials and the media coverage of campaign efforts, we analyze campaign tactics pervasive across local, state and national efforts, which we explore in Part 1:**

- ▶ Shared tactic: **caricature** “CRT,” “antiracism,” and “DEI” work more broadly
- ▶ Shared tactic: **conflate** triggering issues so that “CRT,” “antiracism,” “equity,” “cultural competence,” LGBTQ rights, “masks,” etc., are presented as all of one piece
- ▶ Shared tactic: use **combative** language and intimidate educators and board members
- ▶ Shared tactic: seek to restrict and **cancel** (“ban”) offending topics related to race or diversity
- ▶ Shared tactic: seek **control** over both schools and government.

As we show in Part 1, the campaign's language often is focused on stoking both “conservative” anxiety and White anxiety particularly about K–12 diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts, amplifying fears of being controlled and disserved by “the Left” or discriminated against or misrepresented in efforts to remedy racial inequality — leading to efforts to “take back” public schools that are shared spaces for raising children. Notably, while conflict campaigners target a wide range of K–12 DEI efforts, the timeline often shows an arc of distracting from a new energy for learning about and remedying harm to Black people that emerged in the wake of George Floyd's murder and mass protests in summer 2020, toward remedying

perceived harm particularly to White people and “conservatives.” By fomenting anxiety about the future of our nation and division about engaging experiences of racism, the conflict campaign derails forward motion on civil and human rights for *all* in our society.

As reported to media, some local campaign participants really feel that anti-racist analysis of U.S. society is too “negative” or places too much emphasis on race, might distress young children, or is too sympathetic to social movements like Black Lives Matter. Yet as we show below, **campaign efforts go far beyond simply deliberating different ways of understanding and teaching about race and racism.** Localized campaign efforts (in addition to state legislation) are intentionally attacking and seeking to restrict race-related and 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 — thus destabilizing our shared institutions of education and government (e.g., school boards) beyond thoughtful deliberation, a strategy we find inherently undemocratic. This activity is at times strikingly driven by partisan aims.

Ironically, while arguing that “CRT” teaches kids to “hate” themselves and their country, the conflict campaign itself has sought to “teach” already-divided communities to hate public schools, schools’ diversity efforts, and fellow community members. While arguing that teachers are putting “politics” into school, the conflict campaign has leveraged partisan power to politically divide already-divided places.

Many of the loudest voices in this campaign do not actually try to bring parents in to *share* power or to deliberate how best to ensure that all students are supported in schools. They try to scare people, predominantly White people, into seizing more complete power over school boards and systems and “banning” discussions of race and diversity that they fear. They also try to scare educators away from teaching children facts about our actual multiracial democracy, “warts and all,” as one teacher put it. They also attempt to win elections using public schooling as leverage.

Less heard to date are the majority of American parents who “[want their kids to learn about the ongoing effects of slavery and racism as part of their education,](#)” and might be interested in discussing *how* to teach effectively about race, racism, and diversity. The loudest voices in the campaign attempt to disrupt or outright block educators’ *and so students’* efforts to address issues of race and diversity in school, more than discuss and join a collective effort to deepen and improve the quality of such lessons. They often seek to inflame people through misinformation and cherrypicked examples, more than inform; to refuse more than discuss complex ideas; to control more than share public schools in a shared multiracial democracy; to surveil and censor, more than support the freedom to think and discuss; to stoke fear of addressing complex issues in education, more than foster conditions necessary for dialogue and disagreement; and to divide more than include or unify.

Ironically, the movement thrives on calling antiracist efforts “divisive.”

**Part 2 of our report, Some Initial Effects of the Conflict Campaign on Local Educators,** analyzes survey and interview data from educators affected through early fall 2021, with educators’ localized experiences of the conflict campaign as our unit of analysis. We present educators’ experiences in their voices. Our analysis draws on 275 survey responses from members of a set of national teacher organizations that support teachers who tend toward teaching on race and diversity, plus an interview study of 21 “equity officers” (EOs) in district DEI roles across the country. Part 2 shares highlights from this data.

In spring, summer, and early fall 2021, many teachers and EOs 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, often naming specific topics, texts, or instructional materials targeted. In describing their local experiences of the campaign, many teachers and EOs, including in places where no state level restrictions were passed or pending, described a trajectory over 2020–2021 in which efforts to engage issues of race and any broader “DEI” became newly restricted and “attacked.”

**The district or classroom work that these respondents described being and feeling targeted for doing — and newly afraid of doing — was often the basic work of discussing issues of race or racism at all, or of promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion in any way.** Respondents described a heightened level of what many called “attack,” “intimidation,” and “threat” from legislation, outside “groups,” and local critics, particularly subgroups of highly vocal parents sometimes fueled by politicians. Some also noted administrators and even some teacher colleagues who seemingly supported restrictions. Many indicated that local education leaders’ action or inaction in response to the localized conflict campaign shaped how they themselves would proceed.

Respondents detailed ways that the campaign threatened support for equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts where they worked, through both state action and local activity in states both with and without legislation. **Equity officers, particularly educators of color, described experiencing the combative tactics of the campaign personally in the form of explicit threat and intimidation.** EOs spoke of “witch hunts” and “increased stress levels” due to “the demands” of anti “CRT” campaigners. Equity officers described campaign tactics such as FOIAing emails, surveilling teaching and professional development through “screenshots,” and school board pressure as efforts to censor and control learning experiences to align with the “values” only of critics. Some EOs and other district-level educators responding to our survey shared how a context of threat and “intimidation” led to fear to persist in efforts with both students and teachers. As one EO put it, “Generally, it has led to an overall fear of educators to ‘do the work’ of DEI because of the vocal minority in our community.”

Numerous teachers described a spike in challenging what was taught and discussed in classrooms, leading to anxiety about even basic efforts to discuss race and pursue inclusion. This was the case in states with legislation and states without.

**In states with passed or pending legislation, teachers shared a sense of looming “attack” on “what is taught” and described colleagues “terrified, confused and/or demoralized.”** One Tennessee teacher described the very “ability to teach” critical thinking and “actual history” seemingly “taken away.” Teachers also indicated colleagues were afraid of both “the state legislature” and “local parents”: some described local “Media shunning, social media attacks, threatening emails, [and] threats of job loss or fines.” Some described restrictions by their own school or district leaders, and administrator cautions “against teaching” specific topics and texts or “controversial issues.” One teacher described the 2020–2021 arc from districts’ energized diversity and inclusion work to currently “going silent,” noting that “Many people just don’t want to touch it now so the extremists are in a sense winning.”

**Notably, teachers in places with no state prohibitions also described a censorship drive by local critics inflamed by broader forces, often also noting tactics common in the conflict campaign.** Some described how local pushback “led by parents” often “associated with parent groups on social media” or “individuals from outside our community” created a “chilling” atmosphere for “teaching

and learning” and professional development. Even in places with no restrictions at the state level, the broad campaign made some educators “hesitant” about “teaching about equity and social justice topics,” racism or racial inequality, or even just “race and gender” or “race,” in case “parents or the community complain” and “administration” acquiesced to their demands for “restrictions.” One teacher described a colleague afraid to teach the Bill of Rights.

Teachers in various locations indicated being “terrified to teach” in “deeply divided communities,” with some detailing how an environment of looming or actual local “attack” and confusion about “what I am allowed to say and teach” was causing fear and stress amongst educators, increasing a divisive community climate, and potentially sparking troubling turnover in the profession. One teacher described **the detrimental impact of “the campaign” on teachers’ mental and emotional health and their use of “curriculum,” calling it “a serious emotional toll.”**

While respondents did not always note the number of people participating locally in the pushback they described, they often used the phrase “vocal minority” or mentioned particular “groups” leading the campaign locally (“parent groups,” “conservative white<sup>2</sup> groups,” “a group of right-wing organizers,” or “outside agitators”), sometimes describing actions by particularly “vocal” local individuals or “individuals from outside our community.” Educators also 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,” “community members and legislators,” “parents and lawyers/politicians,” and “parent organizations inflamed by politicians and Facebook.” A few also noted some educator colleagues supporting restrictions.

Only one EO described a year free from anti “CRT” conflict. Some teachers described localities that pursued work undeterred by local anti “CRT” organizing, **specifically if “the school district leadership continues to support the equity and antiracist education efforts.”** Some educators described districts that actively “supported” learning “about race and racism” and inclusion effort throughout the entirety of 2020–2021. Indeed, respondents who clicked “no restrictions” on our survey often explained that their school or district leaders to date protected such learning and teaching.

**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.** Various respondents indicated that district leaders were not yet offering clear guidance or messaging responding to either state activity or local threats to basic teaching and learning about race, racism and diversity, leaving educators feeling intimidated. Teachers pointed out that anti “CRT” critics actually seemed to attack an entire wing of work in education, which respondents often described simply as “DEI” (diversity, equity, and inclusion), “history” itself, teaching about “race or racism,” or anything “challenging.” How leaders then responded made the difference. School level educators noted that some administrators “cautioned” “avoidance” of topics; some district leaders were “pulling away” currently from earlier commitments to work on race and DEI, “culturally responsive” and “social-emotional learning,” or even accurate history. Many also worried about leaders’ lack of explicit “response” in this context of prohibition. Respondents indicated repeatedly that what would be taught by teachers and learned by students

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<sup>2</sup> In this report, we generally capitalize the word “White,” as we capitalize “Black,” “African American,” “Latinx,” and “Asian American.” However, when we are quoting a news story or website or a written response to one of our survey questions, we follow the capitalization used in the original source.

depended on local district and school-level leadership—including in states with bills.

More specifically, some teachers in states with legislation passed or pending restricting content and/or practice expressed deep anxiety and confusion over “bans” apparently threatening a broad swath of classroom learning topics, reporting pending guidance from district leaders or administrators about what they were still allowed to teach and indicating in a number of cases that higher-ups were not giving any clear instruction. Many teachers were left uncertain about what they were being prohibited from doing. Confusion over what teachers “could teach” pervaded some teachers’ responses, showing the destabilizing effects of the campaign via confusion as well as fear. Some teachers in states with bills spoke of awaiting “instructions” on actual restriction while sensing overall prohibition on “beginning discussions in class about race, gender, or sexual orientation.” Some described higher-ups that had themselves “forbidden” or advised “avoiding” specific texts or topics, leaving younger teachers “understandably cowed.” As one teacher from Tennessee put it,

As a social studies department we were told that we cannot say things are racist. We were also told we cannot say it was sexist to keep women from voting... These efforts have made my colleagues and I feel like we cannot teach truth and that we have to deny students’ [identities] and realities.

Educators’ stories also indicated how local pushback led by subsets of parents or even individuals “inflamed” by broader forces could intimidate “teaching and learning” in a state *without* legislation pending, if local leaders did not clarify their ability to keep doing this work. As one New Jersey teacher put it, “without a clear and direct statement from district leadership or union leadership, many educators are concerned about the ‘chilling’ atmosphere this will have on teaching and learning.”

**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.”** Given the anti “CRT” conflict campaign’s effort to lump in various topics of diversity, equity and inclusion as problematic and inappropriate, many educators have been made to feel that any learning effort exploring race or racism or pursuing inclusion is subject to likely “attack.” Some said that as teachers particularly were “left wondering” what they could do and “unsure what I am allowed to say and teach,” many were “choosing to avoid” “controversial” topics; some described colleagues discontinuing efforts like “culturally responsive teaching.” Efforts intimidating *educators* risked restricting opportunities for *students* to learn — and for adults to learn to support students better.

Finally, while our survey and interview samples were not designed to test demographic patterns, a very tentative pattern emerges informally. Compared to nation-wide demographics, our sample was heavy on educators working in liberal communities and in school districts serving a majority of students of color. Yet, we noted in our analysis that the extended stories of conflict campaign activity, and the more extreme stories particularly, skewed often toward politically contested or conservative areas in districts that are majority White. If conflict campaign stories came from liberal communities, educators there were often describing pushback from a “vocal minority” of “conservative white groups” or “politician and parent groups” within communities that had rapidly become less White over the past two decades. This final set of stories mostly came from the EOs we interviewed, who had been hired predominantly in such districts to better support newly diverse

communities. This very role made them more likely to be attacked — what EOs called “intimidation” and sometimes, “white intimidation.”

Conversely, we note that in the few districts where educators spoke at length of little restriction or of administrators supportive of their efforts to talk about race or DEI, most were “liberal” districts with lower proportions of Trump voters, often (though not always) serving students of color predominantly.

These demographic claims are very tentative and fodder for future research, as many on our survey did not fully name their location. We explore the racial and partisan demographics of the conflict campaign’s national spread formally in Part 3.

In Part 3, **The Conflict Campaign in Local School Districts**, we explore how many school districts have been impacted by local instantiations of the conflict campaign and whether particular sorts of districts are more likely to have been affected. We also examine which districts have passed resolutions related to “CRT.”

Our analysis draws on a unique data set of more than 10,000 media stories we have collected covering “CRT” and public schools between September 2020 and August 2021. Most of this media coverage featured stories in local news outlets that paid particular attention to school board meetings and formal actions such as board resolutions.

We identified 894 school districts that have experienced media-documented local actions related to the campaign (for example, public discussions about banning “CRT”) or contention at school board meetings addressing “CRT.” These **impacted districts enroll 17,743,850 students, or 35% of all K–12 students in the United States.**

While the impacted school districts are found in every region of the country and in all but two states, they are particularly prevalent in communities that have experienced dramatic demographic change. More than 7 in 10 of all impacted districts experienced at least a 10% drop in White enrollment from 2000 to 2020. **Districts experiencing the most rapid change (with more than an 18% decline in White student enrollment) were more than three times as likely as districts with minimal or no change in White enrollment to be impacted by the localized conflict campaign activities.**

This means that **in the very districts where students’ families and communities have experienced rapid demographic shift, the conflict campaign could particularly restrict students from analyzing that experience — and restrict educators from learning to better support students.**

Further, **impacted districts are more likely to be racially mixed majority White districts** than majority students of color districts or predominantly White districts. **Districts impacted by localized campaigns also are more likely 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.

**Thus, the conflict campaign seemingly has sparked most in *districts with the greatest level of racial and ideological diversity.*** While all threats to learning opportunity are distressing in restricting knowledge about others and selves, **that the conflict campaign could keep *these* students particularly from learning together about complex issues of race and diversity in our society is fundamentally problematic for our democracy’s future.**

Our media analysis (Part 3) shows that not as many districts as we might think are themselves creating actual concrete policy to restrict learning. Yet, we estimate that **a full 35% of American children are enrolled in districts riled up locally by the conflict campaign.** While conservative activists, funders, and organizations

and federal and state GOP actors' activity drove much of the campaign's start (Part 1), in the form of proclamations, bills, toolkits and PACs, the conflict campaign also attempted to rile up and has riled up local people, particularly parents, against efforts to teach and train about race and diversity in local schools serving millions of U.S students.

## The Role for Local Districts, Schools, and Communities Going Forward

While only some school boards have proactively “banned” “CRT” themselves (in Cherokee County, Georgia in May 2021, as one example, a divided “School Board voted to ban the teaching of CRT in a packed meeting in which some attendees chanted ‘no CRT’”), such local restrictions are having immediate consequences: [A local elementary counselor in Cobb County, Georgia, resigned altogether](#) after a district “ban” on “CRT” and *The New York Times*' 1619 Project, saying “she believes now she cannot serve students of color under the constraints imposed by the Cobb district,” as a journalist summed up in the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*.

Many educators in Part 2 of this report make clear that whether they work in states where statewide restrictive action has been initiated or not, a mix of external pressure and *local* activity has made them newly afraid of working on issues of race and diversity with students and colleagues — and local leadership will greatly shape collective response. **As we describe throughout, the conflict campaign's tactics have shaped an overall context of threat and fear that is undermining K–12 access to learning opportunity.** Numerous educators describe experiences of local censorship effort and notably, trends toward anxious *self-censorship*, with teachers and administrators preventatively deleting topics from classrooms or trainings to avoid conflict with the parents and politicians targeting their systems.

**Put together, we propose that the efforts of the conflict campaign have created a heightened context of hostility to teaching and work on race, racism, inequality and diversity, laying the groundwork for educator censorship and self-censorship in many locations across the country and potentially threatening learning opportunities in districts supporting more than a third of U.S. students, in addition to state bills.** Educators worry particularly that this climate of fear ultimately restricts *students' own freedom to learn and talk about our society and one another's lives, through intimidating teachers.*

**Our report thus 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 — in states both with and without formal restrictive efforts.**

Despite bills' wording and passage, much determination of what is allowable K–12 behavior will actually occur at the local level, as elected school boards make district policy, school and district administrators decide how to respond to local complaints and how to interpret and implement state policy, professional development actually happens, and teachers actually teach. This is why while others were covering state-level bills, we proposed to explore how this campaign to limit teaching about race and inclusion has played out across local districts.

To be clear, states will continue to try to restrict the autonomy of local districts, and such legislation should be a crucial focus of forthcoming response. **Yet, 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 broader forces, as well as the broader climate of fear that all this pushback creates. It is also about how local education leaders will respond.** In some cases, even educators who tend toward teaching on issues of race and

inclusion are curtailing their own work on such issues — with consequences for the learning opportunities students will access going forward. Local actors have a lot of power over whether restrictions will happen and how restriction from above will be dealt with.

While many of the educator stories shared with us (Part 2) were stories of fear and anxiety about engaging race/racism or broader issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, **responses also suggested that what would be taught by adults and learned by students depended on local district and school-level leadership — including in states that have taken restrictive action.** EOs indicated the importance and local success of clear communication about district and school efforts and intentions, and support from district-level leaders, school board members, and union leadership to that end. **Repeatedly, educators returned to the importance of meeting critics with matter-of-fact descriptions of necessary student support, teaching, and learning.** Teachers in our survey reported and called for district colleagues and local supporters backing up their right to teach and learn about race and DEI (and to continue to improve in doing so). Some said districts and “school and union leadership” needed to more explicitly back up basic freedoms to “address topics,” both in responding to legislation and in knowing “the presence at board meetings of ‘anti-CRT’ voices may not be representative of the community at large.” Teachers in districts with varying politics discussed the importance of leaders’ communication and leadership, both at the district level and at the school level as well as from unions. Some noted how system leadership had explicitly and “vocally” countered external legislative efforts by stating local “values,” and how “vocally committed” *school* leadership also had played a role in supporting antiracist/DEI efforts and professional development, so teachers too could continue to “grow.”

In such efforts to handle the conflict campaign and engage local people inflamed by it, some district educators said *they* needed support from the local community. Across a variety of partisan contexts, both EOs 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 race and diversity in our shared country. Both district staff and teachers in all sorts of locations noted the importance of educators joining together to protect students’ right to learn, and their own rights to continue to improve their craft. Others emphasized how *students* wanting to discuss these important topics could be “listened to” and tapped more often as supporters. **Finally, both EOs and teachers offered a crucial piece of advice for districts to handle the conflict campaign:** support educators to keep building their professional capacity *for* guiding such teaching and learning effectively.

Our report does not assume unthinkingly that each teaching effort or professional development session being critiqued in the conflict campaign is done well. (Indeed, some of the “tips” fueling local conflict [Part 1] seem to come from disgruntled local educators.) K–12 educators across our field themselves debate how to teach about race and diversity *effectively*, just as university scholars debate how best to share the facts of race and racism in U.S. history. How should complex histories of slavery, or White people’s disproportionate opportunity access due to racism, be taught most effectively? How should professional development on issues of race be structured to help educators improve schools? How can complicated inequalities be discussed with nuance and accuracy, and stereotypes avoided? How can activities exploring racism navigate understandable White defensiveness, balance critique of injustice with celebration of resilience, and realize their purpose of uniting all learners around deliberating ways of improving opportunity today? All of these questions demand ongoing attention across our field.

Relatively missing from this report and the national conversation are the voices of students affected by the conflict campaign, and parents of color, parents of LGBTQ students, and White parents who support ongoing educator efforts to try to teach and learn about race, racism, inequality, diversity, and inclusion. This reflects the absence of their voices in much media coverage focused on loud and inflammatory campaigners. It also reflects the next crucial step in both research and K–12 education: listening to more of those affected by the instruction targeted. 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. Students today particularly need space to say more about the inclusive education they want and need. And adults need to take heed.

**Most of all, years of student learning about key issues of U.S. society may hang in the balance if teachers are made too scared to teach.** As PEN writes, “the appropriate time to contest these ideological gag orders is right now”:

If the widespread campaign against “Critical Race Theory” does indeed prove a winning political issue in the 2022 election, we can expect similar campaigns in the next election cycles, an emboldening of censorship to constrict even broader areas of public debate. For these reasons, it is imperative that all Americans concerned about our constitutional rights and civil liberties immediately and resolutely oppose these educational gag orders, and push to repeal the wrongheaded laws that have already been passed.

Many organizations are beginning to act collectively to protect the right to learn in school, and to continue (and continue improving) basic efforts to discuss race, inequality, and diversity in our country so all can thrive. The [Learn From History Coalition](#) stands firm on teaching accurate history and “saying racism is wrong.” The National Education Association (NEA) now provides a [model resolution](#) to present to school boards for consideration, which contains “a commitment to affirming inclusion of all students,” insistence on “the right of our students to learn,” and a firm stance inviting professional development to support students better. Other student-led efforts reject a campaign of division and fear, with students insisting on their right and desire to learn together about crucial issues in our shared society so they can prepare for improving all Americans’ lives.

We emphasize once again that all such effort by youth and educators seeks to *improve* work on race and diversity in K–12 education, not accept its current state unthinkingly. The concerning version of the conflict campaign is its search to expose, ban, “abolish,” censor, and fully control a wide set of race and inclusion conversations in schools, its demand to “reclaim” schools for just some community members, and the ultimate demand to refuse to discuss many difficult experiences in a shared country. These restrictions threaten to block both students of color and White students (and indeed, their teachers) from analyzing, in school, new ways to ensure that *all* in our society get the opportunities they need.

As opposed to inviting people in a democracy to share power with other Americans who hold other views, the campaign’s loudest voices often inflame conflict with a very partisan purpose — to have *only some* “control” our shared public schools, and seemingly through them our shared government.

Moving forward, educators and community members will need to support the right and freedom to learn about our country and each other in school. Refusing the conflict campaign’s efforts to divide, 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 real experiences

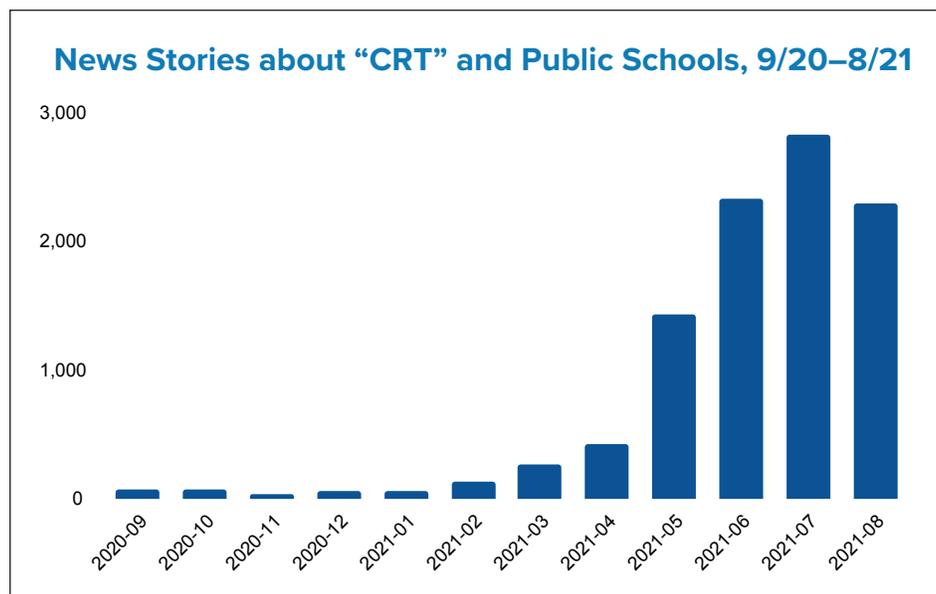
of opportunity barriers in our actual country are discussed accurately and with nuance so we can together create a country that works for everyone.

We share this report amidst persistent contestation over what educators should teach about race and racism and whether and how they should act to promote equity and inclusion. **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, or begin to buckle under efforts to control and censor.** In November 2021, as we completed this report, EOs wrote us of flipped school board seats making them fear even more restrictions on DEI work. Teachers continued to tell us of threat from both politicians and local parents, with books increasingly under review and educators self-censoring proactively to avoid critique. Lawyers are [beginning to challenge](#) specific state legislation's restriction of free speech and denial of learning opportunity to students, and to [advise educators on their own rights](#). But what occurs now will also be largely up to local district administrators and school boards, principals, teachers and librarians, students and parents, and broader supporters of teachers (e.g., unions and teacher organizations). Will boards and district leaders manage to invite purposefully divided parents into a unifying dialogue about education efforts? Will educators stand up for or anxiously self-censor their own and students' ability to discuss such issues in school? Will students insist on their own freedom to learn accurate and inclusive material? [Many aspects of democracy seem to hang in the balance.](#)

We hope that readers of this report will come to understand the extent of the conflict campaign and the fear that many K–12 educators currently feel because of it. Yet we are wary of a report that simply sounds the alarm. Our research to date just begins to share stories of educators', students', and families' efforts to *protect* the right to teach and learn locally on issues of race and racism or diversity/equity/inclusion, because much media focused on loud conflict campaigners and because educators surveyed through September were just starting to respond to the conflict campaign as the 2021–2022 school year began. Still, we end this report emphasizing local actors' key role in backing up students' and educators' freedom and desire to learn about such issues in U.S. schools. While our effort here is nonpartisan — and while we believe in constant effort to *improve* efforts to teach about race at any level — we do believe in the fundamental importance of teaching and learning on these issues in a diverse democracy, and we believe that dissenting participants in a democracy should debate locally *how* best to teach and learn on the realities of race, racism, inequality, and diversity in U.S. society, not *whether* to do so. 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.

PART 1:  
The Conflict Campaign Itself

## Introducing the Conflict Campaign



In spring 2021, media coverage of attacks on “Critical Race Theory” in public schools began to increase, with stories about emergent battles in districts and proposed state legislation seeking to limit teaching about race and racism in K–12 classrooms. **These bills often shared language with one another, with text literally repeated across legislative documents.**

**As we show below, much such language caricatured both academic scholarship and typical K–12 efforts to discuss racial inequality and diversity in our society.** As just one example, a central concept of CRT scholarship in the academy and antiracism more broadly in K–12 education is that no “race group” is inferior or superior to any other. Yet many states’ anti “CRT” bills strangely ban teaching that “one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex” — something no antiracist teacher or CRT scholar would ever propose. **Bills’ language also seeks to restrict educators discussing the history or persistence of racism in our country,** targeting imagined conversations forcing guilt, shame, or stereotypes. Yet *actual antiracism* seeks to inspire all learners, including White students, to value all people as complex peers — and to explore societal opportunity barriers past and present in order to move forward together to deliberate ways of improving a shared country for all.

A quick Google search shows many state bills echo text from federal documents and “model legislation” text like the “Partisanship Out of Civics Act” posted on the conservative “National Association of Scholars” website, which also links to various individuals and organizations coming up often in our review. (*Education Week analyzed conservative organizations involved* in July 2021.) PEN America noted this shared language in November 2021:

With only one exception, the bills appear to have been influenced by U.S. Senator Tom Cotton’s [Saving American History Act](#) [July 2020], former President Trump’s 2020 [Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping](#), or conservative lawyer Stanley Kurtz’s [Partisanship Out of Civics Act](#) [February 2021, linked above]. Forty-two bills have a clear antecedent in Trump’s executive order (EO), with most of them including a list of prohibited “divisive concepts” related to “race and

sex stereotyping” that mirror the EO’s language, though there is some variation among the bills’ listed concepts.

The language of these orders and bills is also mirrored in samples of “[model school board language](#)” offered in guides like this June 2021 “[Toolkit: Combatting Critical Race Theory in Your Community: An A to Z Guide on how to stop Critical Race Theory and reclaim your local school board.](#)”

**Such “toolkits” indicate the campaign’s recruitment of local activists.**

The “Combatting” Toolkit announces to readers its “emphasis on **making the banning of Critical Race Theory (CRT) the central theme by which you reclaim your schools.**” The “Toolkit” is from “Citizens Renewing America,” an organization led by Russell Vought, who, as the Acting Director of Trump’s Office of Management and Budget (OMB), [released a memo](#) in September 2020 demanding that “Federal agencies cease and desist” any “training or propaganda effort that teaches or suggests either (1) that the United States is an inherently racist or evil country or (2) that any race or ethnicity is inherently racist or evil” — concepts also echoed in the state bills. (Actual antiracism frames biases as problematic ways of thinking that we learn despite our best intentions, and invites deliberation about patterned harms past and present to consider how we now can work together, in Martin Luther King Jr.’s words, “to make America what it ought to be.”)

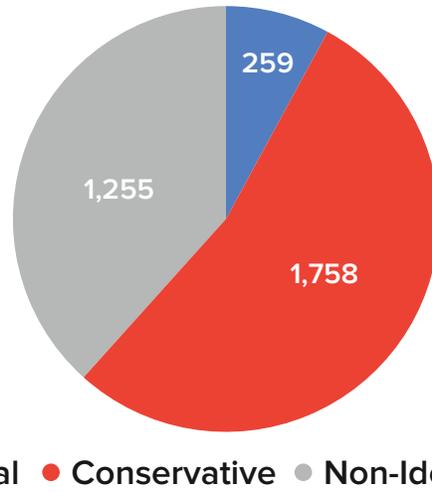
Using Google, **we quickly saw such language and other phrases replicating verbatim nationally, far beyond bills.**

As shown below, **national organizations with “toolkits” and anti “CRT” primer videos have targeted parents and community members at the local level, encouraging them to “ban” or “abolish” a caricatured “CRT.” Local people in Facebook groups, letters to the editor, and public comment testimony at school boards have often repeated the exact same terminology and caricatures.** Anti “CRT” “guides” have urged parents to “fight” a “war” locally against what opponents call “CRT”; [a school board “boot camp” described](#) anti “CRT” training under a picture of lacing up combat boots. New [national parent organizations ask](#) local community members to send in “tips” to nationally “expose” local educators’ efforts to teach even generally about race, bias, injustice, and inclusion. As shown throughout Part 1, conservative media has helped to amplify all of these efforts.

## Conservative National Media and the Conflict Campaign

We tracked media coverage of stories about “critical race theory” and K–12 schools from September 1, 2020 to August 31, 2021. During that period, we collected stories from 2,025 media outlets. In all, we gathered 10,024 news stories, 3,272 of which appeared in national media. We used tools from three independent and non-partisan organizations to determine whether national news sources were Liberal, Conservative, or Non-Ideological. (See our Methodological Appendix for an explanation of how we tracked media coverage and coded news sources.) We found that the most national stories on this topic came from conservative media sources. National news articles on “critical race theory” and K–12 schools were almost seven times more likely to appear in conservative media as in liberal media.

### National Articles on “CRT” and Schools, by Media Ideology



A small number of conservative outlets are responsible for a large proportion of the media coverage. Six of the seven national media sources that produced the most news stories about this topic are conservative.

**Table 1: Leading Sources on “CRT” and Public Schools, 9/20–8/21, by Ideology**

Source	# of Articles	Ideology
Fox News	378	Conservative
Washington Post	165	
CE Think Tank Newswire	124	Conservative
WorldNetDaily	117	Conservative
The Heritage Foundation	101	Conservative
The Federalist	99	Conservative
National Review	94	Conservative
Associated Press	86	
Yahoo	85	
The New York Times	76	

We searched the national news stories about “critical race theory” and K–12 schools for various terms that have been widely circulated in the conflict campaign. The table below offers evidence that such terms have received attention disproportionately through conservative national media. As one notable example, the term “Marx” (and related terms like “Marxist” and “Marxism”) appeared 411 times in conservative media (23.4% of conservative stories), 37 times in liberal media (14.3% of liberal stories), and 162 times in mainstream stories (12.9% of mainstream stories).

**Table 2: Sample Terms Used in Articles on “CRT” and Public Schools, 9/20–8/21, by Ideology**

Term	# LIBERAL Media Articles	# CONSERVATIVE Media Articles
Oppression Matrix	0	15
State Sanctioned Racism	2	21
Oppressor and Oppressed	1	23
Collective Guilt	1	27

Much campaign text directly targets parents. Reading news coverage, websites, and anti “CRT” “toolkits” and “guides” has helped us to begin to see such media, organizations and partisan political actors whipping up a particular form of local “parent engagement.” In this research, we often asked ourselves one analytic question to steady our thinking. As researchers committed to inclusive debate and parent empowerment in a diverse democracy, *why* does this parent engagement worry us?

First, we reminded ourselves often that some of the campaign’s methods— school board speeches, freedom of information act requests, calls to review curriculum or change teaching in schools — are approaches that many constituencies have used to make schools more inclusive and equitable. The “engage” page of new organization Parents Defending Education offers some tactics that could seem a model for parent engagement if improving schools for all were the goal:

- How to Create a Press Release
- How to Write an Op-Ed
- How to Write a Letter to the Editor
- How to Speak to Your School Board
- Questions to Ask School Officials
- How to Engage with the Media ...
- How to File a Complaint With the Office for Civil Rights at the US Department of Education

Yet [the site](#) urges “you and other like-minded parents” to “begin reclaiming your school” from “radical ‘woke’ curricula” that dares to explore “social justice,” hinting at “reclaiming schools” for some families only — and allowing only some topics in school, a core control-and-censor orientation of the conflict campaign.

In particular, even as the campaign sometimes taps “conservative” spokespeople of color who deem antiracist teaching about structural barriers demoralizing or non “academic,” **the campaign’s stoking of parents’ anxiety about K–12 efforts to engage issues of race and diversity in schools often particularly musters White parents against fellow parents and teachers**, a deeply divisive tactic. **Often, the campaign simultaneously stokes “conservative” parents’ anxiety about “the Left” as controlling schools, or about including LGBTQ students in schools, also dividing parents against other parents, teachers, and children.**

Second, we noted that while local battles over “CRT” were fueled by some real differences of opinion over *how* public schools should engage issues of race, racism, and racial inequality in U.S. life (including differences of opinion among educators), they problematically pit those supporting forthright classroom discussions of racism’s history and enduring presence against those wishing to leave such discussion of fact out of schools altogether.

Learning a broad history or curriculum that explores the realities of U.S. race, inequality, and diversity is not easy for many people, even as such learning attempts to include voices long excluded, to inspire deliberation on national issues we can address together, and to invite participants to envision a society that values and supports all. Some White parents, particularly, have said they fear that talking about these issues would “hurt” today’s White children, while other critics have argued that efforts to discuss opportunity barriers are too “negative” or that efforts to engage children (or educators) in diversity and inclusion activities would eclipse “academics” or [can be “divisive.”](#) In suburban [Rockwood, Missouri](#), a racially mixed majority White school district located in a politically contested Congressional District, one local parent forum organizer argued in April 2021 that “race conversations” would “fan the flames ... between children of different races”; “That’s not the type of things you should be pushing on children that have impressionable minds.”

**Yet caricature of teaching turns toxic a variety of real disagreements over teaching about race in schools.** In spring 2021, [one mom speaking at a Rockwood meeting](#) called antiracist teaching “child abuse”; members of the private Facebook group “The Concerned Parents of The Rockwood School District” [called Black staff members working on diversity](#) “the cancer of the Rockwood School District” and their efforts “‘blatant racism’ against white people.” A [local parent told the Board](#) in May 2021 that “I send my kids to school for education ... I don’t send them to get a moral lecture. A political lecture ... an evil political ideology.”

**Crucially, such caricatures of “evil” local teaching and learning were actively brought to Rockwood.** As [Time reported in June 2021](#), Rockwood parents had attended meetings featuring the “Heartland Institute, a major national conservative think tank that opposed Common Core,” which “told more than 100 attendees that diversity trainings in educational settings are ‘iterations from Maoist struggle sessions’ and that Black Lives Matter was a form of ‘Marxist indoctrination.’” Local parents also had “reached out” to new national groups specifically to be “trained,” including the Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism (FAIR) (whose leader argued bluntly that “I don’t think it’s the school’s place to teach our children to be race-conscious”) and Parents Defending Education, founded by “a former staffer at the Cato Institute, a libertarian think tank co-founded by prominent Republican donor Charles Koch.” Both groups had “formed in January and launched publicly in March.” The convening had directed the audience to work by Christopher Rufo, a senior fellow at the conservative Manhattan Institute. In the meeting,

...Amy Svolopoulos, 44, of Ballwin, Mo., sat in the front row, too overwhelmed to take notes. A white parent of three, she went into the meeting believing there should be nothing controversial about the idea that Black Lives Matter. She began crying at the end as she shared her worries that people with ulterior motives are using BLM to “deceive” kids. Now she is worried, she says, that critical race theory will “divide our youth instead of unite them.”

**Instead of engaging communities in thoughtful discussion on how actual educators are trying to support learning about the facts of race, racism, racial inequality, and diversity in U.S. society, the loudest conflict campaigners have often spread caricatures about educators’ efforts and then excoriated educators trying to teach or talk about race, racism, diversity, and inclusion at all.** As shown below, stoking fear of teaching and professional development attempting to engage complex issues of race, bias, inequality, and diversity as instances of “racist” quests to hurt and “divide” or “indoctrinate” or “shame” people in a “Marxist” effort to teach people to “hate America, each other, and themselves,” is a common distortion tactic of the conflict campaign. Some campaign discourse that

appears at first to invite debate over effective teaching (e.g., Black spokespeople raising questions as Heritage Foundation speakers about how emphasizing structural barriers might diminish students' sense of agency) still offers caricature and distortion in urging parents and community members to approach school boards to stop K–12 teaching of an imagined “CRT.”<sup>3</sup>

By late April 2021, local journalists wrote, the [Rockwood district had hired “at-home security patrols](#) for some of their administrators who have received death threats,” and the School Board made a public plea to end local harassment. [The local educators’ union wrote in May](#) that “teachers, administrators and other staff members, most notably people of color, find themselves targeted on social media and in public fora.” In early October 2021, [local journalists reported](#), Rockwood parents organizing to support the school board “said what may have started as a debate has devolved into threats against district employees. ‘Just this week, we had references to lynching directed at our student services support director,’ said [one parent]. ‘And it’s inappropriate and we’re here to say it’s not going to be tolerated.’”

Such combative activity may reflect a particularly vocal minority in many communities experiencing the conflict campaign. Yet such voices often have an out-sized effect; this threatening tone intimidates educators and community members hired or elected to support learning in public schools. While tempers have at times flared on all sides during 2020–2021 [school board meetings also inflamed over COVID](#) policy and [masks](#), the loudest conflict campaign participants rallied people in public webinars, Facebook parent groups or online comments about forming “armies” to “fight back” or “defend” in “battle” and “war” on the “radical” or “woke” “far left,” “Biden,” “The Democrats,” and often public schools in general. Often, we saw anti “CRT” campaigners invite others to exit public schooling altogether, as handouts on “CRT” encouraged votes on school choice, [webinars](#) emphasized private school funding as solutions to “CRT,” or comment strings encouraged home-schooling to leave “government schools.” As documented by local media across the country, some targeting “CRT” literally [threatened local educators](#) personally by phone or email. Overall school board harassment even prompted [Justice Department intervention](#) in October 2021.<sup>4</sup> (See, e.g., [this letter](#) sent a school board member by a “CRT” opponent in Ohio.) Some vocal campaigners threatened educators’ jobs and school board members’ “removal” for differing opinions on K–12 curriculum or inclusion plans. The “toolkit” for [“Combating Critical Race Theory in Your Community”](#) (from the [organization](#) led by Trump’s OMB Director,

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<sup>3</sup> Two webinars are worth listening to in this regard. Speakers on the [December 2020 Heritage Foundation webinar](#) (co-sponsored with the American Legislative Exchange Council or ALEC) “Against Critical Theory’s Onslaught” first propose that CRT disempowers Black people through emphasizing systemic racism and that K–12 teaching should emphasize personal effort and triumph. Speakers then distort altogether both scholarship and K–12 teaching, e.g. in suggesting “early warning signs for parents to be aware of that would indicate critical theory was part of the curriculum” (one speaker says “when your little eight year old girl comes home and says ‘Mommy, I don’t want to be a boy,’” then adds that “some of these schools are teaching all kinds of outrageous renditions of critical race theory including sexual orientation.” Another Heritage speaker suggests anyone reading Howard Zinn’s *People’s History*, or any district running a diversity training with a high profile speaker or doing an equity audit, are signaling potential “CRT” work for parents to “fight back” against.) In another Heritage [webinar](#) in January 2021 (“The New Intolerance: Critical Race Theory and its Grip on America”), speakers target “the Left”; speakers argue that “Critical race theory abandons the teaching of facts” (offering K–12 ethnic studies as an example) and seeks to “destroy” “the family” and “work.” Speakers say that educators are now training elementary students as “revolutionaries,” and call parents to target their school boards.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, instances of threatening behavior at school board meetings in the following states, with anti “CRT” vitriol sometimes mixing with anti “mask” vitriol: [Alabama](#), [Arizona](#), [California](#), [Idaho](#), [Indiana](#), [Kentucky](#), [Michigan](#), [Nebraska](#), [Nevada](#), [New Hampshire](#), [Ohio](#), [Oregon](#), [Pennsylvania](#), [Tennessee](#), [Texas](#), [Utah](#), [Virginia](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Wyoming](#).

mentioned above), says bluntly that “The rule here is that any school board member that refuses to implement a CRT-free curriculum that mandates teacher compliance needs to be replaced, and replaced as quickly as possible.”

In this research, we were disturbed not by a diversity of views within communities about how schools should teach about issues of race and diversity or explore difficult issues in U.S. society, but by the **caricature-fueled and intimidation-oriented ferocity of much of the anti “CRT” attack on educators, which veered too easily into anti-democratic, even authoritarian-sounding efforts to censor and control educators in shared public schools so that such topics would not be taught or learned.**<sup>5</sup>

**The conflict campaign seeks to pit community members against others in their schools and communities.** The “our” or “us” called to “reclaim our” shared public schools is typically ideologically charged, with members of the community rallied against the “Left.” Sometimes, such community members are rallied against educators imagined as ignoring “academics” or “forcing” oversimplified arguments that “everything is racist”; sometimes, a signal is made to White parents, such as when “like-minded” parents are called to action against perceived “*anti-white*” “indoctrination” by “Woke” educators, when [primers on purported K–12 “CRT”](#) share decontextualized quotes seemingly attacking “Whites,” or when [Tucker Carlson](#) describes an imagined K–12 “CRT” as saying,

if you’re a straight White American, even if you’re a very small child, you’re guilty. It’s your fault. You’re a bad person. That’s what teachers will be telling your children this fall.

**In fact, the campaign often advances a mode of partisan politics that highlights perceived threats to White (or “straight”) identity, particularly by stoking fears of harm to White children, though the campaign (often via “conservative” spokespeople of color) also argues that people of color are harmed when positioned by “woke” educators as “oppressed”** (or that efforts to improve students’ opportunity access override “merit”). **The campaign also foments such division to inject partisan politics into (non-partisan) educational decisions and school board races.** As local [journalists in the Milwaukee area reported](#) in March of 2021, “The Republican Party of Waukesha County is funding political ads in the Elmbrook School Board race alleging students in public schools are taught that ‘all white people are racist’.... [the] flyer also says, ‘Your tax dollars fund leftist indoctrination in Elmbrook Schools.’” The campaign directly foments anger against public school unions, as well. One district equity officer from another part of the country sent us a flier circulating in their community from [optouttoday.com](#), titled “YOUR UNION LOVES CRITICAL RACE THEORY?” The flier shows a designed-to-provoke image of a frowning Black woman presenting to White adult listeners, next to a large poster saying “ALL WHITE PEOPLE ARE RACIST.”

Our review of campaign leaders’ websites and right-wing media coverage of key localized campaigns helped us start to understand **deep connections between monied organizations targeting public schooling overall, partisan political actors, right-wing media, and the “anti CRT” movement.**

**Our team often called the conflict campaign “partisan politics in plain sight”: targeting educators’ efforts to engage issues of race was often openly related to**

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<sup>5</sup> As [PEN America](#) put it as we were finishing our report,

The teaching of history, civics, and American identity has never been neutral or uncontested, and reasonable people can disagree over how and when educators should teach children about racism, sexism, and other facets of American history and society. But in a democracy, the response to these disagreements can never be to ban discussion of ideas or facts simply because they are contested or cause discomfort.

**battles for political power, in addition to seeking control of (and exit from) public schools.** Across the nation, as we explore below, openly partisan figures have cited anti “CRT” talking points about specific local communities, created national anti “CRT” “toolkits,” hosted local anti “CRT” gatherings or “trainings” often featuring GOP speakers, and exploited real arguments over schooling to lead people toward partisan base-building. Reading about “CRT” battles in a given community often led us directly to political figures local or national. For example, an article about an elementary school principal in Peoria, Arizona, who critiqued anti “CRT” activists, led us to [the Campus Bias Tip Line of the Young America’s Foundation](#), whose president is former Governor Scott Walker of Wisconsin. Arguing that “[We Are In a War for the Soul of Our Nation](#),” Walker’s site urges people to “become part of a plan to halt the Left’s attack on America, a plan to win the battle and the war,” “Instead of teaching young people to hate America.”

**As we show below, campaigners’ own words often openly reveal the specific quest for “CRT-free curriculum” as a leverage point for seeking political power.** In a May 2021 Fox News article on the Virginia governor’s race, “Russ Vought, the former Office of Management and Budget director who fought diversity trainings under Trump” (see also “[Toolkit: Combatting Critical Race Theory in Your Community](#)” above), told Fox that “if you’re a Republican, and you are not doing something to combat critical race theory, you have no idea where your people are.” Former Trump advisor Steve Bannon indicated on his “War Room” podcast in May 2021 that “The path to save the nation is very simple, it’s going to go through the school boards.” PEN America noted that “Bannon was even more explicit in a June interview about the political benefits of the campaign against critical race theory, saying “I look at this and say, ‘Hey, this is how we are going to win.’ I see 50 [House] seats in 2022. Keep this up.”

We also show below how **conservative media too has played a huge national role in spreading the conflict campaign to local communities, often spreading shared inflammatory anti “CRT” talking points, lifting up a single combative critic voice from one community, or amplifying already-loud media personalities caricaturing localized efforts to teach about race or racism.** Tucker Carlson’s image [here](#) is instructive (note his caption “THE LUNATICS ARE RUNNING THE CLASSROOMS”), as one considers his [millions of viewers](#) possibly imagining “anti-white mania” spurred on by the Democrat donkey. In this [episode in July 2021](#), Carlson used the phrase “civilization-ending poison” to describe critical race theory, saying, “How widespread is it? We can’t really be sure until we finally get cameras in the classroom.”

Such partisanized and media-fueled efforts to inflame people light real tensions in local communities, like a match on dry timber.

**Some of the debate over “CRT” seeks to divide communities over other issues altogether, with speakers campaigning against transgender rights or masks in schools while standing in front of anti “CRT” banners.** Indeed, many districts [experienced combative debate over masks](#) and [COVID policy](#) before and during debate over “CRT,” with [signs on both issues held simultaneously at school board protests](#). In July 2021 in Cherry Creek, CO, [local journalists described](#) how a far-right group “FEC United has been urging supporters to get involved in school board meetings to oppose everything from CRT to mask wearing in schools to vaccination requirements.” We saw both right-wing media personalities and local school board protesters merge rage about “masks” and “vaccines” and “sex” and “CRT.” Individual angry educators amplified virally amidst the anti-“CRT” campaign also refused transgender rights specifically. To her own millions of viewers in a July 2021 show featuring anti “CRT” speakers, [Fox host Laura Ingraham](#) notably listed

a conflated set of issues framed as “anti-parental trends” and a threat to “Judeo Christian values”:

From teachers unions to gender activists to Biden’s vaccine pushers, we’re seeing a concerted effort backed by some of the biggest financial interests out there to indoctrinate our children into a dark mindset of anti-Americanism.

**The conflict campaign also inflames and leverages anti-LGBTQ fears and biases.** A scroll through the [Facebook group for No Left Turn in Education](#) shows people complaining often about LGBTQ inclusive curriculum or activities, along with “CRT.” In September and October 2021 in Fairfax County, VA, for example (one target of anti “CRT” organizing), LGBTQ [students noted](#) a simultaneous uptick in critics attacking books with LGBTQ+ characters for “political gain.” In one Los Alamitos, CA town hall targeting both “CRT” and ethnic studies, an “organizing director of conservative activist group MassResistance” (which the Southern Poverty Law Center calls an anti-LGBT hate group) “spoke about his work opposing sex education and LGBTQ ‘safe zone’ stickers at schools” while suggesting “parents who oppose the ethnic studies curriculum to organize against members of the school board and “make their lives miserable.” (“We are not seeking common ground with these people,” [\[he\] said](#). “This is filth that needs to be removed completely.”) In [one fall 2021 video](#) called “Matt Walsh CRUSHES Loudoun County School Board on Critical Race Theory” (Loudoun County, VA, has been another targeted community, as shown below), the [Daily Wire](#) writer (in front of a banner dotted with GOP elephants) stoked rage about educators’ supposed “plan to sexualize children” as a “left wing religion.” “If you’re on the opposition and that scares you, then I’m glad that it does,” he said. The Loudoun County Republican Women’s Club tweeted a flier for his appearance with the political hashtag #SaveVirginia.

Such efforts to divide also openly indicate how the conflict campaign is clearly a quest to control more than education inside schools.

**Anxiety and anger about any school discussion of “BLM” specifically often permeated campaigners’ arguments in 2020–2021. We saw campaigners also inflamed to attack inclusion or equity efforts of any kind,** whether these were efforts to counter harassment, teach ethnic studies, improve students’ experience of mathematics, improve grading policy, teach history related to racism, let students choose their pronouns, attempt professional development exploring bias, or teach any lessons on basic inclusion today. In another virally amplified video, one mother in Putnam County, New York expressed concern to [NewsMax](#) that her daughter “was being taught to be tolerant” in school. She added: “At home we were teaching her what we believe in as a family.”

Some parents whose voices were amplified widely in the campaign talk as if they want to ensure that their children can go to school without ever being asked to be “tolerant,” or to listen to the painful experiences of other people in a shared nation. Indeed, the campaign *urges* parents to control schools *for their children only*, rather than to join other community members in a conversation about broadening curriculum and improving schooling *for all children including their own*.

To be clear, not all people who participate in conflict campaign activities likely embrace all of the goals and rhetoric of the campaign; the educators we surveyed and interviewed (Part 2) often pointed to the actions of a “vocal minority” or even particularly loud “individuals” linked to broader forces. **Indeed, it is quite possible that the campaign magnifies a small minority of voices; media strategies definitely show the strategic amplification of individuals.** Our focus in this Part 1 is on the campaign’s most-heard voices, overall patterns, and language/tactics widely broadcast *for* local uptake.

We explored both campaign texts (websites, reports, videos, toolkits) and localized versions of the campaign, as documented in media coverage of local communities that came up particularly often in our media analysis. **We noted shared campaign tactics across local, state and national efforts, which we explore in the remainder of Part 1:**

- ▶ Shared tactic: **caricature** “CRT,” “antiracism,” and “DEI” work more broadly
- ▶ Shared tactic: **conflate** triggering issues
- ▶ Shared tactic: use **combative** language and intimidate educators and board members
- ▶ Shared tactic: seek to restrict and **censor** (“ban”) offending topics related to race or diversity
- ▶ Shared tactic: seek **control** over both schools and government.

We now show these tactics in action. In the remainder of this Part 1, campaigners’ language will be louder than the voices of those supporting public schools’ race and diversity efforts, as we show some of the campaign’s internal logic, tactics, and connections.

We welcome input on lived experiences in these districts that differ from the following media-based analysis, especially since local media amplify the loudest voices.

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## Showing the Conflict Campaign in Action

### A local version of a common 2020–2021 timeline

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests of summer 2020, many institutions across the nation, such as Colorado’s Douglas County School District (DCSD), grappled with racism in their own communities. Some African American youth in DCSD spoke out about the harms they had experienced in district schools where more than 80% of the students are White. Black students described various examples of “racism and racial insensitivity” — from explicitly racist graffiti (bathroom scrawls of “kill n-word-s”) to daily classroom instances of peers’ stereotypes, and gaps in adult educator understanding of local or national [Black history and experiences](#). Actual Black experiences in the U.S. were rarely explored in curriculum. Other students later shared stories of bullying of “Brown” children and LGBTQ+ students, which the district had also tried to address by implementing the Anti-Defamation League’s “No Place for Hate.” [One student noted](#) that “Diversity, equity, and inclusion should be discussed and taught within Douglas County School families and in schools for there to be somewhat of a bearable environment for children of color.”

In early 2021, DCSD asked an advisory council to draft an equity policy statement acknowledging its “commitment to providing an inclusive culture” that “[ensure\[s\] all students, staff, and community members feel safe and valued](#)” and receive “equitable educational opportunities.” The statement noted that the Board of Education “would not tolerate ... biased practices ... discriminatory behaviors ... policies that support exclusion or intolerance ... [or] perpetuation of racism.” It called for the district to establish a system that would help it identify and respond to such problems.

In February 2021, DCSD invited the community to respond to the draft statement. In public comment strings, some community members approved: one noted the new equity policy “makes me really happy for our students because they’ll benefit from all of us being more aware, more inclusive, and less accepting of bias, shame and discrimination.” Others denounced “equity” efforts as “[child abuse, leftist propaganda, political indoctrination and anti-white.](#)”

District leaders responded to the initial round of community feedback by removing a sentence from the draft policy that had described meritocracy as a myth. With this change, the DCSD Board voted unanimously on [March 23 to adopt the equity policy.](#) District administrator Kevin Leung explained that DCSD’s first-ever equity policy should be understood as “[giving people what they need.](#)” It should not be viewed, he noted, as “a partisan issue.”

Despite Leung’s hopes, the adoption of the new policy was followed by increased critical attention from vocal members of the community who now associated it with harm to White students from what was now described as “Critical Race Theory.” At a school board meeting in late May, [as local journalists described,](#) several parents forcefully challenged the new equity policy. Rachel Kopfle, a parent and leader of a local chapter of the group, “No Left Turn in Education,” told the Board: “Within one week of CRT teaching, I watched my son become resentful and angry about the assumptions made about him because he happens to be white and male. Diversity will not work this way”:

Kopfle spoke on behalf of a local chapter of No Left Turn in Education, a right-wing organization that is “committed to rooting out subversive indoctrination,” Kopfle said. She didn’t specify which school district her son attended.

Kopfle added that dangerous ideologies “seep into the district with nice sounding terms: ‘diversity, equity, inclusion, anti-racism, social justice.’”

Seemingly bewildered by the attacks, DCSD Superintendent Corey Wise told the Board and community members that the district did not teach CRT because “[critical race theory is not in the Colorado academic standards for the core curriculum.](#)” His remarks did not appease the angry critics who aired their concerns about “CRT teaching” and the district’s decision to hire a consulting firm to offer equity and diversity trainings. Their criticism received rancorous applause throughout a two-hour public comment session.

The day after the May 25 board meeting, Superintendent Wise cancelled a staff summit with an outside consulting group that had led the district’s diversity training. The district also announced plans “to slow down and regroup on Educational Equity and Inclusive Excellence in DCSD.” The consultants themselves [described this move as,](#)

...allowing a handful of vocal White parents out of the thousands of parents in your district to dictate how to help educators become aware of, and address, detrimental impacts on children of color in this country and in DCSD, by demanding we not talk about race.

**We saw this arc in many local iterations of the conflict campaign: Amidst the racial reckoning sparked by summer 2020, a newly active conversation about harms to Black people and other people of color turned into a 2020–2021 conversation about harms experienced by students or adults asked to reflect on race or racism, particularly White people.**

Across the country, in summer 2020, students asked their school districts to counter experiences of harm to students of color and to explore race in society in more depth. In Elmbrook, WI in June 2020, for example, [a student alumni group “presented](#) the school board with a petition signed by 1,408 people stating that

‘our K–12 education did not prepare us to understand and analyze racial injustices that permeate our country.’” After the district publicly shared draft “equity principles” on May 21, 2021 that it had developed as one effort at improvement, [some parents](#) pushed back, arguing that the district’s work was “really critical race theory, which is Marxist political doctrine in disguise.” By June 8, as [Wisconsin public radio reported](#) of the local battle over the “principles,” “Ultimately, board members — some of whom expressed support for equity efforts in the district — voted 6–1 to remove them from its strategic plan.”

**How did “equity policy” and “equity principles” to also support Black and Brown students, and curricular efforts to broaden dialogue about improving a shared country, get reframed as “subversive indoctrination” hurting students and faculty invited to engage?**

**Other stories showed the same national arc — and the emergence of a national campaign built around a caricatured view of “CRT,” one deeply rooted in the conservative movement and partisan Republican politics.**

**The national timeline of the conflict campaign’s growth demonstrates a strikingly partisan-driven effort.**

## TIMELINE OF A CAMPAIGN

### Summer 2019

In August 2019, the publication of the *New York Times Magazine’s 1619 Project* invites exploration of the foundational U.S. consequences through today of enslaving Africans and African Americans — and the contributions of Black Americans to the nation. Teachers start to explore the resource to bolster knowledge about race and racism in American life.<sup>6</sup>

### Spring 2020

[George Floyd murdered](#) by police in Minneapolis, MN, on May 25. Protests against police brutality begin to grow massive throughout summer 2020, even as the pandemic rages.

Many education leaders write public statements against police brutality, and many teachers nationwide start to call for increased exploration of race, racism and inclusion in their classrooms, including more informed teaching of history.

### Summer 2020

As protests continue, in July and August 2020, [Trump makes a critique of schools core to reelection discourse](#). These sorts of phrases and frames would appear throughout the campaign:

Trump’s Fourth of July speech at Mount Rushmore declared that American children are taught “to hate their own country” in public schools.

In his August speech to the Republican National Convention, Trump pledged to “fully restore patriotic education.”

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<sup>6</sup> As educator interest grew in this analysis of slavery’s legacy, [various critics](#) (including from organizations seen later in the conflict campaign) started to argue publicly that (e.g.,) “The ‘1619 Project’ is being adopted as part of the curriculum in thousands of classrooms across the country. The political left is already in the process of turning our K–12 schools into social-justice boot camps, and this will expedite that effort.” As “CRT” became a catch-all for much such rage, rage against “CRT” at times named The 1619 Project specifically.

In an August news conference, Trump blamed education for protests over police brutality taking place across the country. “What we’re witnessing today is a result of left-wing indoctrination in our nation’s schools and universities. Many young Americans have been fed lies about America being a wicked nation plagued by racism.”

In mid July 2020, Christopher Rufo publishes an article in the Manhattan Institute’s journal titled, “[‘White Fragility’ Comes to Washington](#)” that warns of the rapid spread of “Critical race theory—the academic discourse centered on the concepts of ‘whiteness,’ ‘white fragility,’ and ‘white privilege.’”

Also in July 2020, Senator Tom Cotton introduces the [Saving American History Act](#), “To prohibit Federal funds from being made available to teach the 1619 Project curriculum in elementary schools and secondary schools, and for other purposes.”

## Fall 2020

On September 1, Rufo goes on the Tucker Carlson show and warns that Critical Race Theory is being spread by the federal government and calls on President Trump to ban all related training.

Three days later, Russell Vought, Director of the Office of Management and Budget in the Trump administration, issues [a memo](#) to the heads of all federal agencies directing them to cease federal funding of race-related diversity training on “white privilege” or purportedly using “The divisive, false, and demeaning propaganda of the critical race theory movement.” [Vought writes](#), “The President has directed me to ensure that Federal agencies cease and desist from using taxpayer dollars to fund these divisive, un-American propaganda training sessions.”

Two weeks later on September 17, President Trump announces the establishment of a panel called the “[1776 Commission](#)” to rival *The New York Times*’ 1619 Project and promote a “pro-American curriculum that celebrates the truth about our nation’s great history.” Trump calls demonstrations against racial injustice “left-wing rioting and mayhem” that “are the direct result of decades of left-wing indoctrination in our schools. It’s gone on far too long.” [In his speech](#), President Trump declared that “American parents are not going to accept indoctrination in our schools, cancel culture at work or the repression of traditional faith, culture and values in the public square. Not anymore.”

On that same day, Elana Yaron Fishbein, a mother in suburban Philadelphia who founded “No Left Turn in Education” to advocate against antiracist teaching, [appears on the Tucker Carlson Show](#). By the next day, her organization’s [Facebook page](#) grows from 200 to 30,000.

On September 22, President Trump issues an “[Executive Order on Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping](#),” prohibiting federal funds from being used for trainings that assign “fault, blame, or bias to a race or sex, or to members of a race or sex because of their race or sex” or suggest that “by virtue of his or her race or sex, members of any race are inherently racist or are inherently inclined to oppress others, or that members of a sex are inherently sexist or inclined to oppress others.” [As PEN America notes](#), “The executive order adopted sweeping rules that defined particular ‘divisive concepts’ dealing with race and sex in America, such as the argument that ‘the United States is fundamentally a racist country.’”

In late September 2020, the [Organization of American Historians](#) criticizes “the Trump administration’s misguided and dangerous attempts to politicize the teaching and writing of United States history,” arguing that “It is only through purposeful interrogations of our national story that we can appreciate the history of the United States in its full complexity and utilize our knowledge of it to inform our present and build a better future.”

### **Winter 2020–2021**

In early December 2020, Christopher Rufo and Jonathan Butcher of the Heritage Foundation lead a workshop “Against Critical Race Theory’s Onslaught: Reclaiming Education and the American Dream,” for [ALEC’s annual States and Nation Policy Summit](#). Participants from at least 20 state legislatures register to attend the session.

In mid-January 2021, members of the American Bar Association release a “lesson” on Critical Race Theory, explaining, “CRT is not a diversity and inclusion ‘training’ but a practice of interrogating the role of race and racism in society that emerged in the legal academy and spread to other fields of scholarship.”

On January 20, his first day in office, President Joe Biden [rescinds the Trump administration’s ban on diversity training about systemic racism, and the 1776 commission](#).

In February, Fox News reports that the Legal Insurrection Foundation of Rhode Island has launched a website, “[criticalrace.org](#),” to track instances of critical race theory and The 1619 Project being used in America’s classrooms.

In mid-March, Christopher Rufo [tweets](#): “We have successfully frozen their brand — ‘critical race theory’ — into the public conversation and are steadily driving up negative perceptions. We will eventually turn it toxic, as we put all of the various cultural insanities under that brand category.”

### **Spring 2021**

On April 28, Governor Brad Little signs [legislation that purports to outlaw teaching critical race theory](#) in Idaho public schools. The new state law — the first of its kind in the nation — prevents educators from “compel[ling] students to personally affirm, adopt, or adhere to” belief systems that claim “any sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin is inherently superior or inferior” or “[t]hat individuals, by virtue of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin, are inherently responsible for actions committed in the past by other members of the same sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, or national origin.”

Toward the end of May, the 1776 Project is [launched as a Political Action Committee \(PAC\)](#) that will raise funds to support school board candidates opposed to public schools teaching critical race theory and the 1619 Project. It is the first national PAC to target local school boards, that historically have been governed in a non-partisan fashion.

On May 25, [Tennessee Governor Bill Lee signs into law a bill that state Republican legislators described as a ban on teaching critical race theory](#). The legislation prevents teachers from instructing that “an individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously.” The state’s Education Commissioner is empowered through this legislation to withhold funds from schools that violate this prohibition.

Two days later, Montana Attorney General Austin Knudsen [issues a binding ruling](#) claiming that certain practices associated with “critical race theory” and “antiracist programming” violate state and federal law. The ruling goes on to say: “A school that permits, promotes, or endorses curricula or pedagogical methods that tell an individual that he or she should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race, almost certainly creates a racially hostile environment.”

On June 6, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis goes on [Fox News](#) and declares: “We’re not going to support any Republican candidate for school board who supports Critical Race Theory in all 67 counties or supports mandatory masking of school children. ... Local elections matter. [We are going to get the Florida political apparatus involved so we can make sure there’s not a single school board member who supports Critical Race Theory.](#)” DeSantis also pledges to ask the state Commissioner of Education to “ban” the teaching of Critical Race Theory.

### Summer 2021

In mid-June, a broad coalition of scholarly groups, including the American Historical Association, [issues a statement](#) objecting to legislation aimed at restricting teaching and learning about “divisive concepts” in public schools. The statement notes: “The clear goal of these efforts is to suppress teaching and learning about the role of racism in the history of the United States,” and adds that the proposed legislation, “seeks to substitute political mandates for the considered judgment of professional educators, hindering students’ ability to learn and engage in critical thinking across differences and disagreements.”

At the end of June, [more than half of New Hampshire’s Council on Diversity and Inclusion resign in protest](#) after Governor Sununu signs legislation outlawing teaching or training that communicates that someone “is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.” The former members of the council decry the Governor’s decision to sign into law “a provision that aims to censor conversations essential to advancing equity and inclusion in our state, specifically for those within our public education systems, and all state employees.”

On July 29, South Dakota Governor Kristi Noem [signs an executive order](#) calling critical race theory “un-American” and barring state officials from pursuing grants for federal education programs in history and civics, explaining that such programs are tied to critical race theory.

In early August, [new rules from Utah’s State Board of Education](#) go into effect prohibiting teaching that one race is “inherently superior or inferior.” The [State Board of Education adopted these rules](#) following a May [resolution](#) from the state legislature to ban any K–12 public schools from teaching lessons on “harmful” critical race theory.

### Fall 2021

On September 10, 2021, North Carolina Governor Roy Cooper [vetoes legislation](#) aimed at restricting teaching and learning about race and racism in public schools. Cooper states: “The legislature should be focused on supporting teachers, helping students recover lost learning, and investing in our public schools. Instead, this bill pushes calculated, conspiracy-laden politics into public education.”

In mid-September, [Texas Governor Greg Abbott signs](#) what the Republican legislature has characterized as an anti-critical race theory law, limiting how schools can teach about race and the history of slavery. This legislation replaces a law passed just three months before with even more restrictive measures.

On October 19, a coalition of civil rights groups [sues the state of Oklahoma](#) over a law enacted in May 2021 limiting instruction about race and gender in public schools. This is the first federal lawsuit filed that challenges a state statute implemented to prevent the purported teaching of critical race theory.

On November 2, Republican Glenn Youngkin is elected Governor of Virginia. Education and cultural issues are the centerpiece of Youngkin's platform. He promises to ban the teaching of critical race theory in Virginia's public schools.

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We now describe the engagement of local actors in the campaign, through tactics shared nationally.

## Local experiences, nationally connected, partisan-driven

2020–2021 saw the growth of various anti “CRT” organizations both national and local, with websites and Facebook presence, inviting local parents particularly to approach their local school systems. Some local parent leaders mentioned in the press were already highly partisan national figures. Ian Prior, a parent leader of new org [“Fight for Schools”](#) in Loudoun County, Virginia, [worked for](#) the National Republican Congressional Committee and in Trump's Department of Justice. [Another anti “CRT” “Virginia Little League Parent”](#) was [“described](#) as a ‘senior adviser’ to Trump's 2016 campaign,” [and] [“one of the most prominent lobbyists of the Trump era.”](#)

Googling language used or people mentioned in the campaign also often highlighted connections to “conservative” or right-wing organizations, many of which receive funding from the Koch Foundation. As one example, public “workshops” in winter 2020–2021 by the conservative think tank, the Heritage Foundation, included [“Against Critical Theory's Onslaught: Reclaiming Education and the American Dream”](#) (December 2020), hosted on the website of the American Legislative Exchange Council (which develops conservative and pro-corporate model legislation that is distributed through a network of Republican state legislators), and [“The New Intolerance: Critical Race Theory and Its Grip on America”](#) (January 2021). Heritage, an organization hoping to “stop the left's socialist agenda,” [celebrated anti “CRT” parent efforts](#) in August 2021 and offered a [toolkit](#) for more (“Issue Toolkit: Reject Critical Race Theory”). Presenters from the Heartland Institute, [self-described as](#) “one of the world's leading free-market think tanks” pushing for “personal liberty and limited government” as well as “Stopping Socialism,” were at the [Rockwood meeting mentioned above](#), explaining “CRT” to suburban Missouri parents. Conservative activist Christopher Rufo, relentlessly cited in the anti “CRT” campaign as shown below, [works for The Manhattan Institute](#), a national conservative thinktank.

Key figures in the campaign have been showcased in partisan events such as the annual [Conservative Political Action Committee \(CPAC\) conference](#). A July 2021 discussion titled “Head of the Class: Why is the Left Committed to CRT When So Many Parents Disagree?” included Prior, the anti-“CRT” parent leader and former senior official (mentioned above) from Loudoun County, VA, and Hannah Smith, a newly elected school board member from the Carroll Independent School District in Southlake, TX, both highly media-documented districts in the anti “CRT” campaign (Smith was also introduced here as a former clerk for Supreme Court

Justices Clarence Thomas and Samuel Alito). [The transcript](#) is worth reading in full for its intertwining of stated goals: to “change the way we fund our public schools” and “promote parental choice in education” (introduction), and also to rally people against K–12 schools’ attempts to engage issues of race, deeming terms like “diversity, equity and inclusion,” “social emotional learning,” “culturally responsive teaching,” “cultural competence,” “white supremacy,” “white fragility,” “white bias,” and “implicit bias” all as “buzzwords that have their roots in critical race theory” and make White children feel like “bad” people (“part of this is really to take down their self esteem”).

Coverage on Prior’s community of Loudoun County, VA also made clear how **right wing media has leveraged real local disagreement over equity efforts’ direction with a vast national media inflammation machine**. Searching Facebook for “Loudoun County” videos in September 2021, we located Loudoun-related media being amplified by Glenn Beck (at the time, 97K views), Ben Shapiro (1.8M views), and Lara Trump (9.9K views). [Fox News ran almost 80 segments on Loudoun County](#) alone between March and June of 2021, while mentioning “Critical Race Theory” 1,700 times over the same period. In our review, we could see how in June 2021, a Fox article about anti “CRT” activity in [Pennsylvania](#) or [San Diego](#) or [Illinois](#) would send readers to articles about Loudoun County. One Fox journalist wrote four of the fan-the-flames articles cited just in this paragraph, with titles like [“Virginia teacher says critical race theory has damaged community as frustrated parents demand changes.”](#) Other commenters used the language of “infection” to refer to Loudoun, as in “Critical Race Theory has spread beyond Loudon [sic] County... CRT has now infected North Carolina’s Wake County schools.” Conservative anti “CRT” personalities [used the Loudoun example](#) to encourage more “fighting” by “dads and moms” (“I was recently at an event in Loudoun County, Virginia,”... “fight back”). In May 2021, the same Fox journalist covering Loudoun [reported how](#) “The majority of Republican candidates for Virginia governor have signed onto a pledge opposing critical race theory, reflecting how politically salient the issue has become in both the state and the nation as a whole.”

The journalist himself had contributed to this “political salience.” On November 2, Republican Glenn Youngkin was elected governor of Virginia.

**A national network, working with right wing media allies, inflamed a conflict and used it both for partisan mobilization in Virginia and to propel other campaign activity around the nation.**

## **THE ROLE OF RIGHTWING MEDIA IN AMPLIFYING AND CONNECTING LOCAL PLAYERS NATIONALLY**

In May 2021, [as documented on YouTube](#), conservative media personality Glenn Beck interviewed Robin Steenman, who started the Williamson County, Tennessee chapter of “Moms for Liberty” after hearing about it on Beck’s show in March. On the program, Steenman describes a [“CRT 101 event”](#) with multiple trainers (including from other states) on “how to define” CRT and “how to push back against it”; Beck praised one such presenter (known for opposing affirmative action and ethnic studies in California).

In the video, “Mom for Liberty” Steenman tells Beck about how her local school board “crossed that line for me” when “they hired a diversity, equity, and inclusion firm to make policy for our students.” She was now going to every school board meeting and explaining “what diversity, equity and inclusion really is. Do you really understand what you’re voting for? And you should also understand that it’s not a good idea,” she said.

Smiling that all of this is “just fantastic,” Beck invites audience participation in a broader campaign:

if there’s any Moms for Liberty out there, groups that—we can help you, you just let us know. Because you guys are going to be the ones that stop critical race theory.

Beck then mentions anti “CRT” state laws, adding, “I thought, only 20? ... there should be 45 states with that law passed ... no, 50 ... and we’re not even at half yet.... you on the right, closest to your school, are going to be the ones that make the impact.” Mentioning that Tennessee legislation is still on the governor’s desk, Steenman publicly asks Governor Bill Lee and her own local superintendent, “serve your students. Stop serving the woke Left lobby.”

**As seen here, the conflict campaign stokes fear of the “woke Left” as controlling government as well as schools.** In a May 2021 Central Oregon school board race [locals called “unprecedented” “severe partisanship,”](#) for example, school board candidates spoke on Laura Ingraham’s Fox show about “breaking the woke monopoly.” [Local media described a June 2021 Vermont anti “CRT” rally](#) organized by a group hoping “to educate all Vermonters on the dangers of the Left’s public policy agenda,” featuring Republican organizers, candidates and representatives. In local trainings at times hosted by “conservative” organizations or even “**GOP**” [conveners](#) with participation from local or state politicians and guests fighting “CRT” elsewhere, campaigners have caricatured K–12 work exploring race or diversity/equity/inclusion as “leftist” “indoctrination” and linked local people to national anti “CRT” organizations.

In exploring the new parent-focused organization No Left Turn in Education, for another example (whose slogan is “Education not Indoctrination,” another campaign trope), we watched [this video](#) of founder Elana Fishbein on Tucker Carlson’s Fox show in September 2020. After complaining locally about June 2020 teaching about racism in suburban Philadelphia, “Fishbein, a former social worker, sent a letter to the superintendent calling the lessons a “plan to indoctrinate the children into the ‘woke’ culture.” Fishbein’s September 2020 Carlson appearance exploded her national presence. “By the next day,” [NBC reported](#), “No Left Turn’s Facebook page had shot up from fewer than 200 followers to over 30,000. The group now has 30 chapters in 23 states, a rapid expansion Fishbein credits to Carlson’s show.” These local chapters are the “boots on the ground,” Fishbein said, “confronting school administrators at board meetings and through records requests.” Notably, “Fishbein said she took part in a private briefing hosted by the Heritage Foundation in May that featured lawmakers from Idaho, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, Texas and other states to discuss model legislation to block critical race theory.”

NBC reported by June 2021 on “the rise of at least 165 local and national groups that aim to disrupt lessons on race and gender” and, with COVID and “CRT” rage combining, “50 recall efforts this year aimed at unseating 126 school board members, according to a new report from Ballotpedia.”

Across the country, campaign tools and resources train local people in similar perspectives.

## **ANTI-“CRT” “TOOLKITS” SPREADING THE CONFLICT CAMPAIGN’S DISTORTIONS AND SHARED LANGUAGE**

**Various organizations have produced explicit “toolkits” for working locally to “combat” or “ban” “CRT.”** Beyond actual differences of opinion about issues of race in U.S. society, often, **these materials spread a distorted caricature of both “CRT,” and K–12 efforts to learn about race and racism. Local media stories often showed these distortions being repeated verbatim in local communities.**

The “[Toolkit for Combatting Critical Race Theory in Your Community](#),” produced by the conservative advocacy organization Citizens Renewing America, presents a fully caricatured vision of the scholarly field of Critical Race Theory, which seeks to analyze historical patterns of racial discrimination embedded within institutions and enacted through policies. The toolkit states:

CRT seeks “to intentionally stifle any opinions deemed counter to their aims”....

“teaching children to disregard character and to measure people’s relative worth on the basis of skin color, sex, or other immutable or variable characteristics”....

“because people of color were discriminated against in the past, white people, including children in schools, need to be discriminated against now in order to make up for it and let African Americans catch up.”

Having riled up readers, the site invites users to “Report a School Promoting Critical Race Theory.” Other organizations turn such “tips” and reports into public maps, as seen below.

Families for Educational Freedom (FEF), a project of the International Organization of the Family (which the Southern Poverty Law Center describes “as an umbrella for a massive network of interconnected organizations, all pushing for restrictions to LGBT rights”) [describes its mission](#) using phrases echoed throughout the conflict campaign:

Our Mission: promotes the education, not the indoctrination, of children through serving the practical legal needs of families in K–12 public and private schools.... Among other things, FEF will help students, parents, and teachers fight the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and related ideologies that divide people into “oppressor” and “oppressed” groups, distort history, downplay individual responsibility and merit, and otherwise attempt to indoctrinate people into this Marxist worldview.

Across the conflict campaign, the well-worn terms “indoctrination” and “Marxist” echo loudly, as does the caricature that “CRT” teaches children to “hate themselves, each other, and their country” — even as antiracist and DEI work in schools actually seeks to *inspire* people to *value* all people, and to consider how to join together to create schools and a country that work for everyone.

The phrase “divide people into ‘oppressor’ and ‘oppressed’ groups” is another trope of the conflict campaign. (Actual antiracist/DEI work done well emphasizes complicated identities and urges unity in addressing all opportunity barriers.) ([Local news in Madison, WI](#), quoted a GOP bill’s author as saying “Critical race theory is ‘rapidly progressing into our beloved institutions’ and creating ‘categories of oppressed and oppressors, pitting them against each other.’”)

In Los Alamitos, a suburban community in Orange County, California (whose schools have experienced marked demographic change in recent decades, shifting from overwhelmingly White to majority students of color), [local media coverage](#) of April 2021 school board battles showed a striking repetition of anti “CRT” caricaturing keywords about “Indoctrination,” teaching “children to hate,” and the “oppressor/victim” dichotomy. (Local news described board meetings “rollicking with outbursts, prompting board members to plead for a ‘civil discourse.’”) “You want to teach our young children to hate their classmates and to hate themselves, that white kids are oppressors and should be apologizing for their skin color and Blacks are minorities or victims,” said one speaker; [another speaker said](#) “critical race theory” was “‘terrible and poisonous,’ making students, depending on their race, either ‘oppressors or victims.’” “It divides instead of unifies,” [said a local grandmother](#), “whose grandchildren are juniors and seniors in the Los Alamitos

school system. ‘Hispanics, Indians, Asians and Blacks will all feel like victims, and Caucasians will feel like oppressors.’”

Local news reported Los Alamitos students speaking at the school board to support district efforts at making curriculum more culturally inclusive; [students](#) notably used their own terminology. One high school student supporting the district’s elective offering argued that “As a community that has struggled with racism and all manner of xenophobia, we need to ask the community to denounce hate wherever we see it... Please stop saying this class is going to teach us that white people are devils. It’s not.” Another local high school senior supporting a proposed ethnic studies course explained that “‘I’ve seen every day people bullied for their skin color... and this is not acceptable.’ [Moreover, \[the student\] said](#) the circus atmosphere in the meeting room is ‘really indicative of the ignorance that this class (course) is trying to alleviate.’”

By May, [according to local media](#), as the school board stood firm on its intentions, “the Los Alamitos Police Department advised the board to hold their meeting online after seeing social media posts — some by groups based in other states — indicating a potential for violence. In recent meetings, activists from outside the district have heckled student speakers.”

It is quite possible that local community members also “heckling” have been inflamed by the anti “CRT” resources circulating in the campaign; [a local primer](#) circulating led new readers to these very resources.

[Toolkits like “Combatting”](#) (noted above) frame “CRT” as a war for “our society”:

... You can see what the strategy is: they want to split people into groups, tell them that they are oppressed victims, and then get those groups to overthrow our society and replace it with their ideology.

The [Toolkit](#) also scares the reader with a caricatured sense of pro CRT “activists” overwhelming “power” to “do their children harm”:

... once the Critical Race Theory activists show up, they will do everything in their power to take over your school, church, mosque, synagogue, club, business, government, police service, hospital, and any other institution you can think of.... to implement destructive CRT dreams into reality. It is incumbent on parents to always be on their guard and not invest power or potential in those who could do their children harm.

They will stop at nothing.

The Toolkit even uses the language of likely “attack” from “CRT” “activists”:

How will you be attacked?

As previously discussed, the way CRT and CSJ operate is as take-over ideologies. CRT proponents do not care how they win as long as they win. They are not trying to win an academic debate, they are attempting to socially replace you. Read that line again: they are not trying to win an academic debate, they are trying to socially replace you.

(This language of “social replacement,” bolded in the original, echoes a [long-standing “replacement theory”](#) chanted by neo-Nazis in Charlottesville, related to the conspiracy theory that immigrants/“nonwhites” are “replacing” “Whites” with the help of Jews.)

The guide calls readers to never “surrender” “control” of the “front”:

... We cannot surrender on the K–12 curriculum front. Critical Race Theory (and all other branches of Critical Social Justice) is part of a take-over ideology with an end goal of completely controlling all institutions that are a part of American life.

Notably, the “toolkit” says to users, “whether CRT is currently in your school system is mostly irrelevant to the purpose of this document. Actions to prevent CRT from entering your schools are similar to those you would want to take to ban CRT that is already in use....” It adds, “We cannot surrender” to “your opposition”.... “defeat them.”

“Toolkits” spread caricature of a threatening “CRT” and educators’ efforts generally via their “resources” or “get educated” pages. A Parents Defending Education guide to [“Understanding Woke Jargon”](#) defines “antiracism” as a call “to embrace sweeping new forms of racial discrimination.” Another [“cheat sheet”](#) on “social justice rhetoric” defines “inclusion” as, e.g. “an enforced separation of people by race.” The [“resources” page](#) of anti “CRT” organization No Left Turn in Education sends readers to (e.g.) conservative activist Charlie Kirk to get “educated” on “CRT,” along with [other fiery texts](#) by “CRT” opponents.

The top “What Is Critical Race Theory?” video amplified by “No Left Turn” was [this video](#), from an organization that [describes itself](#) as “the world’s leading conservative nonprofit that is focused on changing minds through the creative use of digital media.” In the video, James Lindsay, a mathematician and conservative cultural critic, compares “CRT’s” attention to race to Nazis and apartheid, defines “it” as “a counter American revolution,” and sums up,

The American experiment was given a 400 year tryout. And it doesn’t work. So let’s scrap it. That’s what they believe. Is that what *you* believe?

He adds, “so how do we stop Critical Race Theory before it infects the brains of too many decent Americans, especially young people?” “The answer is simple. Refuse to accept it.” “Defend Yourself. While you still can.”

Campaign speakers then call to “ban” any such work caricatured, from K–12 systems.

A major tactic of the conflict campaign thus is to caricature an entire imagined project of K–12 “CRT” as educators working to “discriminate” against and “divide” students by race, teach them to “hate America” as well as “to hate their classmates and to hate themselves,” and “create a hatred” of U.S. “institutions” and “values,” as a “Marxist,” “woke” “Left,” or sometimes “Democrat” ploy to “destroy America.” (Recall instead that UCLA Law Professor Kimberlé Crenshaw, a leading critical race theory scholar, describes *actual* CRT as a deeply “patriotic” effort to “become the country that we say we are,” fueled by belief in the “promises of equality.”) The “opponent” is often positioned as “infiltrating” and “infecting” “our schools” to “indoctrinate” “our children” (and educators via professional development). Ignoring actual K–12 antiracist efforts to unify around a vision of equal human value, campaigners imagine K–12 “CRT” teachers telling children to feel “bad” and “hate themselves” via activities requiring students to “hate” the country and White people as irremediable “oppressors” of the of-color “oppressed.” Participants then define any teaching or learning related to race and racism and even efforts to promote “diversity and inclusion” as “CRT,” all framed as hurting children and White children particularly.

Rufo himself provided movement participants a “briefing book” for such anti-“CRT” language use, [tweeting it](#) in June 2021. The book stokes White anxiety with quotes about race and “whiteness” or “white people” taken out of context from various scholars, many of whom are not considered critical race theorists. (The book also stokes other communities’ anxieties with caricatured and inflammatory talking points like “Critical race theorists believe that the state must actively discriminate against racial groups that are deemed ‘privileged,’ meaning whites and sometimes Asians.”) In a section called [“Winning the Language War,”](#) Rufo suggests that “To successfully fight against critical race theory, we must adopt language that is trenchant, persuasive, and resonates with the public. Here are some powerful

words and phrases to include in your communications.” Along with “Critical race theory divides Americans into oppressor and oppressed based on their skin color,” Rufo urges readers to use key caricatured talking points like “Critical race theory teaches children to hate each other and hate their country.”

**These phrases appear repeatedly across the conflict campaign.**

In April 2021, another [toolkit from the Heritage Foundation](#) (“Issue Toolkit: Reject Critical Race Theory”), an organization hoping to “[stop the left’s socialist agenda](#),” offered “background information,” premade graphics and call scripts, and even sample tweets (“Tweet This: The Biden Administration wants schools to teach critical race theory”) to circulate [distorting claims](#) like “Washington is bringing critical theory’s prejudice to your child’s classroom, and whether or not you are a parent of a student, we all should reject the notion that the next generation should be trained in bigotry.”

The [Heritage toolkit](#) offers talking points directly stoking racialized fear and grievance, suggesting, for example, that “critical race theory” supports generally “dividing Americans on the basis of race and apportioning resources based on skin color.”

It also suggests that people “submit a FOIA request” in the name of “transparency”:

How to Stop CRT in your School District

Transparency is an important tool to holding government accountable—shining a spotlight on CRT curriculum is an effective way to stop it.

We discuss the campaign’s FOIA tactics and invitation of “tips” shortly. We first discuss a related tactic of the campaign: to repeat inflammatory examples to halt teaching or professional development on related topics.

## **CIRCULATING AND REPEATING SINGLE INFLAMMATORY EXAMPLES**

In a section of his “[briefing book](#)” titled “Using Stories to Build the Argument,” Christopher Rufo argues that:

The strongest line of attack against critical race theory is to cite specific stories about critical race theory in practice. When you are designing your communications, weave in stories about the reality of critical race theory in American institutions. Ground your argument in facts and force your opponents to defend the indefensible.

Despite this call for “facts,” Rufo’s examples of “critical race theory in practice” are what Rufo decides is “CRT” — and such examples have circulated nationally.

One of Rufo’s suggested “specific stories” of “Critical race theory in schools” is this:

A middle school in Springfield, Missouri, forced teachers to locate themselves on an “oppression matrix,” claiming that white heterosexual Protestant males are inherently oppressors and must atone for their “covert white supremacy.” [Link](#).

The link goes to a [January 2021 article](#) Rufo wrote in *City Journal*, published by the [Manhattan Institute](#). In it, Rufo cited “[whistleblower documents](#)” he had received after a middle school professional development (PD) in this racially mixed, majority White, conservative-voting Missouri city had included a worksheet “oppression matrix” listing various possible identity-linked experiences of inequality.

Looking at the “Matrix,” one can see how a discussion might ensue among educators over how someone might be more privileged as “White” but less privileged as “female,” for example, and also over whether people really fit neatly into

these simplified boxes. Rufo says the offending PD also included a land acknowledgement (recognizing Indigenous predecessors), a document comparing “overt white supremacy” and “covert white supremacy,” and a request to watch a video of George Floyd’s “final utterances, including his cries for his mother.”

Rufo then sums up what he takes to be the Springfield district’s goal: replacing “American society” “with a regime of race-based redistribution.”

This middle school PD’s leaders perhaps could hardly have anticipated how their local discussion of the “matrix” would burn like a national wildfire.

Rufo repeated this example in a March [lecture at Hillsdale College](#), a “conservative” college in Michigan, using nearly the same language repeated in his “Handbook”:

In Springfield, Missouri, a middle school forced teachers to locate themselves on an “oppression matrix,” based on the idea that straight, white, English-speaking, Christian males are members of the oppressor class and must atone for their privilege and “covert white supremacy.”

Rufo recycled the same example in a *New York Post* article in May, “What Critical Race Theory is Really About,” reposted again as a [commentary for the Manhattan Institute](#).

Back in Springfield itself, in May, according to [a local paper](#),

Nearly 40 people stood before the Springfield school board Tuesday to either praise the district for offering diversity training or to accuse district officials of using critical race theory — as part of the training — to divide the community.

The journalist noted that “A major concern raised about the theory, and the district’s diversity training, is that all participants are asked to locate their place on a matrix of oppression and privilege.”

Rufo’s phrase on Springfield was cited almost verbatim by “CRT” opponents across the nation, in a mix of national and local media, in states with legislation and states without. (Just two of many examples include a [July Op Ed](#) written by University of Houston Architecture Professor Larry Bell for conservative outlet NewsMax, arguing, in part, that “Appropriately and urgently, CRT school indoctrination is shaping up to be an issue that will help to decide dozens of crucial upcoming mid-term House races,” and an [August letter to the editor](#) in Connecticut arguing that “CRT is simply repackaged Marxist claptrap” and “cultural revenge porn.”)

This phrase about Springfield’s “oppression matrix” appeared in June 2021 in a [statement by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis](#), as “The Florida Board of Education decided...to ban critical race theory from the classroom” (“Critical Race Theory teaches kids to hate our country and to hate each other,’ ... DeSantis (R) said after the decision.”) The Springfield example and reference to “oppression matrix” also appeared in [campaign materials for a superintendent of public instruction in Arizona](#) (September 2021), and a [Wisconsin Representative’s statement on cosponsoring](#) “a bill that will prohibit the use of federal funds to adopt, fund, require, or promote any policy, activity, or entity that promotes employee training based on CRT” (“we still have time to stop this Marxist-rooted nonsense”).

A mid September 2021 Google search for the phrase “forced teachers to locate themselves on an ‘oppression matrix’” led to over 1K immediate results repeating Rufo’s phrase largely verbatim, from [Long Island](#) to the [The Daily Caller](#) to the [Montana Family Foundation](#) to a [June op ed by Newt Gingrich](#) on Fox, calling the anti “CRT” “fight” “a winning issue for conservatives.” Comment strings on such posts often then quickly frame the target as “the Democrats” as well as public schools overall.

**The conflict campaign often leverages single examples of PD or teaching in single locations to try to limit or prohibit an entire realm of discussion in schools.**

(Seemingly to no avail, Springfield school representatives [tried to explain to The Daily Caller](#) that “media coverage has inaccurately represented this training by reporting incorrect and/or incomplete information, without appropriate context.”) Critics (sometimes including disgruntled educators as well as parents) lift up single sentences from books or professional development slides, or single examples of localized antiracist training or classroom teaching materials from communities, and amplify them using the internet, social media, and right wing media as evidence of seemingly pervasive egregious “anti-white” and “Left” U.S. K–12 teaching about race. Through this rhetorical attack, complex issues of race and diversity in our society are reduced to slogans; entire programs trying to engage such issues are written off as “indoctrination”; and basic efforts to discuss complex experiences and real disparities in a racialized society in order to improve all people’s lives are by definition off-limits for schooling. Such tactics also stoke and unite campaign activity *beyond* single communities: notably, this example of offending adult learning was leveraged widely to constrain opportunities for *students* to learn.

In a quest to “ban” a wide range of topics from being discussed in K–12 schooling, often, loud campaign participants seem to take issue with every term educators use to reference efforts to talk about race in schooling (see, again, Parents Defending Education’s guide to [“Understanding Woke Jargon”](#)), and to interpret *any* phrases about “diversity” or “equity” as evidence of teaching “CRT” or “Marxism.” A Wisconsin coauthor of [one anti “CRT” bill in Wisconsin](#) summed up that “the point of this legislation is to prohibit it from being taught in our government schools” (pp 2–6), with “it” seemingly meaning all of the following:

Additional terms and concepts below that either wholly violate the above clauses, or which may if taught through the framework of any of the prohibited activities defined above, partially violate the above clauses in what is otherwise broadly defined as “critical race theory”:

Critical Race Theory (CRT) Action Civics Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) Culturally responsive teaching Abolitionist teaching Affinity groups Anti-racism Anti-bias training Anti-blackness Anti-meritocracy Obtuse meritocracy Centering or de-centering Collective guilt Colorism Conscious and unconscious bias Critical ethnic studies Critical pedagogy Critical self-awareness Critical self-reflection Cultural appropriation/misappropriation Cultural awareness Cultural competence Cultural proficiency Cultural relevance Cultural responsiveness Culturally responsive practices De-centering whiteness Deconstruct knowledges Diversity focused Diversity training Dominant discourses Educational justice Equitable Equity Examine “systems” Free radical therapy Free radical self/collective care Hegemony Identity deconstruction Implicit/Explicit bias Inclusivity education Institutional bias Institutional oppression Internalized racial superiority Internalized racism Internalized white supremacy Interrupting racism Intersection Intersectionality Intersectional identities Intersectional studies Land acknowledgment Marginalized identities Marginalized/Minoritized/ Under-represented communities Microaggressions Multiculturalism Neo-segregation Normativity Oppressor vs. oppressed Patriarchy Protect vulnerable identities Race essentialism Racial healing Racialized identity Racial justice Racial prejudice Racial sensitivity training Racial supremacy Reflective exercises Representation and

inclusion Restorative justice Restorative practices Social justice  
Spirit murdering Structural bias Structural inequity Structural racism  
Systemic bias Systemic oppression Systemic racism Systems of power  
and oppression Unconscious bias White fragility White privilege White  
social capital White supremacy Whiteness Woke

[https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/hearing\\_testimony\\_and\\_materials/2021/ab411/ab0411\\_2021\\_08\\_11.pdf](https://docs.legis.wisconsin.gov/misc/lc/hearing_testimony_and_materials/2021/ab411/ab0411_2021_08_11.pdf)

It is this effort to “prohibit” a vast realm of race- and diversity-related topics from K–12 schools that makes the campaign lean antidemocratic.

We focus now on the campaign’s related tactic of asking local people to surveil schools for offending examples to “ban” in the name of “transparency,” often with combative rhetoric in the name of civic participation.

## TIP WEBSITES AND USE OF FOIAS

Again, community participation is a key goal in a diverse democracy, and keeping tabs on local education is a key form of such participation. Yet loud voices in the conflict campaign often seek to stop large swaths of topics from being discussed in K–12 education and to whip up anger against schools for political gain.

On the [1776 Project website](#) (self-described as “Promoting patriotism and pride in American history” ... “committed to abolishing critical race theory and ‘The 1619 Project’ from the public school curriculum”), the invitation to “Report a School Promoting Critical Race Theory” is the first frame seen by the user. This invitation keeps popping up throughout the site. In fact, there is almost nothing to this website other than text caricaturing “CRT,” “Anti-racism,” and “programs like the 1619 Project,” a [list of school board candidate endorsements](#), and a call to “report a school” and donate. (Notably, the bottom of the 1776 Project site says it is “designed and powered by [Reach Voters](#),” which describes itself as crafting “campaign strategies in Miami-Dade & Broward Counties.”)

The effort to “expose” through local “whistleblowers” sending often anonymous “tips” up a national chain is one key tactic of the conflict campaign. (As *The New Yorker* reported in June, “Rufo set up a tip line last October, and has so far received thousands of tips, many of which he thought were substantive.”) Parents Defending Education posts tips on offending local education efforts on an [“Indoctrination Map”](#) and says on its [“Expose” tab](#) that,

If you see bad things happening in your school, one of the first and best things you can do to fight it is file a Freedom Of Information Act request with your school district. Because schools are taxpayer-funded institutions, FOIA disclosure applies to them — enabling you to see how much money the school is spending on “diversity and inclusion” consultants and other pricey, destructive initiatives.

We depend on you to be our eyes and ears, so please contact us for assistance. The below guide to filing a FOIA request will get you started.

### **You are Parents Defending Education!**

Parents Defending Education also files [complaints](#) against [offending educators](#) with the Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights.

The issue of concern here is not civil rights complaints, nor FOIAs (though a South Kingstown, RI kindergarten parent filing 200 FOIAs at one time, [seems extreme](#)). The problem is not even “tips” about problematic education efforts. **It is the reliance on distortion and shaming in an effort to target and shut down educators’ and students’ attempts to learn about race, inequality, diversity, and inclusion more broadly.** Here, local activity intertwines with national exposure: in

Beaverton, OR, as just one example, a school district canceled a districtwide Zoom diversity training and held it in person due to fears of being “recorded” after a recording of a training and personal educator dialogue was “flagged” by Parents Defending Education and made it to national Fox News, where local educators were excoriated.

As another example, <https://whataretheylearning.com/> describes itself as “‘Woke-e-Leaks’ ... a parent-powered, K–12 transparency community to blow the whistle on what’s happening in schools.” The site reads, “you send your loved ones to school for education, not indoctrination, .... That’s why we need you to blow the whistle. Anonymously upload your own example to the site in seconds.” The “About” link encourages users to explore “Parents Defending Education,” and announces that “What Are They Learning” was started by a [journalist for the right-wing Daily Wire](#).

Parents Defending Education’s “[IndoctriNation Map](#)” leads to another set of “tips” reporting on the nation’s classrooms. “SHARE YOUR SITUATION/Submit an Incident Report,” notes the bottom of each page, with a click button “I HAVE A TIP!” If you “think you’ve found something great, let us know,” the site [tells users](#). “we can put it on our IndoctriNation Map and help to publicize your results!” Also inviting “tips” on objectionable teaching, Facebook groups like [No Left Turn in Education’s](#) whip up fervor against districts, schools, and even named local educators. After a June 2021 [Daily Wire report shared names of teachers nationwide](#) who signed a Zinn Project pledge to “teach truth,” a Facebook “parent group” in [Columbia, MO](#) listed local Columbia teachers who signed the pledge, sharing their personal photos and workplaces. “Community should call for their resignations. We need to put cameras in the classrooms starting with these teachers if nothing is done,” commented group members. In New Hampshire in August 2021, a local blog re-published full names and statements of teachers signing the Zinn pledge, titled “[Now That School is Starting Here’s that List of NH Teachers That Will Teach CRT Even If It’s Against the Law.](#)”

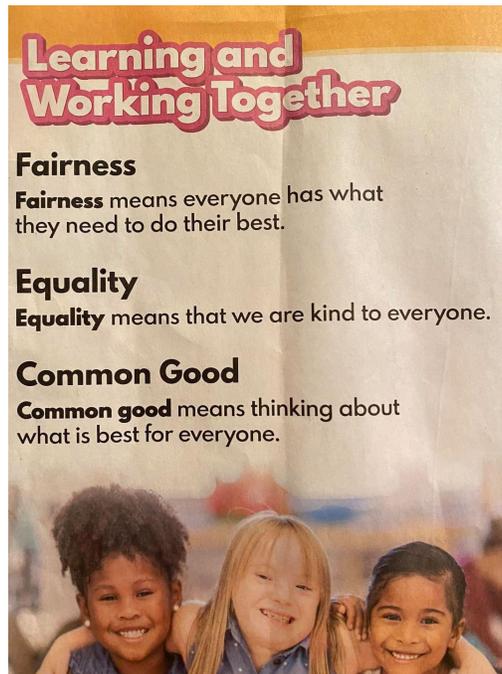
One might argue that teachers who have signed a [public petition declaring their commitment to teach the truth](#) about American history do not wish to have their identities remain private. Yet, by merely signing the petition, the teachers did not invite a wholesale invasion of privacy. And certainly, they did not mean to encourage further acts of intimidation. A commenter on Ian Prior’s “[FightForSchools](#)” PAC video exulted:

We need to have a place online that we can go and upload an audio file and have it scanned for words pertaining to CRT or gender issues or other crazy things teachers want to teach out [sic] kids. Then we could send out kids to school with a recording device in their backpack, and upload the resulting sound file when they get home, and we would be alerted to concerning curriculum.

Similarly, members of the [No Left Turn in Education Facebook group](#) in early September 2021 called for “Moms” to train students to record classrooms with cameras, here after critiquing this example apparently used in a Kentucky kindergarten (p. 43). While some members asked what was wrong with this particular flier, other members critiqued educators for “Communism” and “using the concept of ‘Common good’ from day one”:

Why don’t they just stop calling their classmates “friends” and use “comrades” instead while they’re at it. Seems awfully Marxist to me.

Again, one can imagine community members productively disagreeing about various teaching or professional development examples if they were shared in their full reality. The issue is not publicizing educators’ efforts deemed problematic, nor



critiquing specific aspects of public schools. **The tactic becomes anti-democratic when “tips” distort educators’ actual efforts to address complex issues and seek to restrict entire realms of learning as off limits.** The overall feel of many such “tips” is that *none of these topics belong in schools at all*, not that the public might productively debate how schools can teach or train effectively.<sup>7</sup> In the campaign’s use of anonymous, often unverified, and partial tips, misleading or incomplete characterizations can caricature real teaching and stoke rage against educators involved.

Do campaigners actually want a debate over *how* to talk and teach about fairness and equality in school, or to control *whether* to do so?

Campaign documents suggest the latter and skew toward intimidation. In calls to “ban” and “abolish,” and in loud calls to “remove” educators or board members acting in a way the campaign finds unacceptable, campaign videos and webinars, Facebook calls, or “toolkits” for attacking school boards often **try less to debate than to censor teaching and learning in K–12 about many aspects of U.S. society.** While some leaders in the campaign might argue that their goal is not to “ban” but

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<sup>7</sup> Other “tips” on Parents Defending Education in mid-September linked viewers to various DEI efforts deemed inherently objectionable and often framed *discussing subjects at all* as problematic, excoriating, e.g., districts’ proactive antiracist statements after the Derek Chauvin verdict for the murder of George Floyd as inherently inappropriate for school, or lambasting any use of antibias programs, such as No Place for Hate (“[Elwood Union Free School District adopts curriculum steeped in critical theory](#)”). A “tip” from [Fayette County Public Schools in Arkansas](#) simply uploads the entire Five Year Equity Competency Plan linked to the University of Arkansas. On [WhatAreTheyLearning.com](#), people have anonymously uploaded “tips” deriding everything from schools reading books by Ibram Kendi or Howard Zinn, to having a teacher training on racism at all. Other examples uploaded as offending include basic slides from “equity leads” training in Loudoun County, including [Padlets](#) (common reflection documents) re-sharing participating educators’ personal perspectives in PD events. Users uploading anonymously about Fairfax County, VA, complain that a [discussion of the Charlottesville White supremacist rally and the First Amendment was anti “Republican,”](#) and denounce effort to [try to talk about implicit bias with students](#). Someone also found [this example in a Massachusetts school district](#) problematic enough to post as a “tip,” rejecting curriculum “developed by Harvard University” focused on “Equality, Liberty, Respect for Diversity, Inclusiveness, Faith and Religion, Democracy, Safety, Happiness, Justice, [and] Patriotism.” By taking aim at all of these efforts, programs, and words as somehow inappropriate for school, the site often encourages users to censor entire realms of American ideas and experience from K–12 discussion.

to enforce teaching that celebrates the U.S. (“I’m a libertarian; the word *ban* gives me hives,” said the [President of Parents Defending Education to Time](#)), and while many campaign participants might in fact want to debate and discuss, the call to “ban” much teaching and learning about race, racism and other aspects of equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts pervades the movement.

## AMPLIFYING PARTICULARLY COMBATIVE EXAMPLES

The campaign often stokes conflict via right wing media or Facebook groups amplifying *particularly combative* examples. One [video](#) and accompanying NewsMax interview from a school board meeting in Putnam County, New York (“Mom tears apart school board over Critical Race Theory”), “racked up more than 4.6m views on Facebook alone and [was shared nearly 150,000 times.](#)” In the virally shared interview, the mom says schools were teaching kids “to murder police officers,” that the Board of Education has “committed treason against our children,” and that schools are “emotionally abusing and mentally abusing our children by teaching them communist values.” The host compares her speech to Paul Revere’s, saying to the audience with a smile, “We’ve been waiting for something like this.”

In this “viral” sharing, the campaign’s most inflammatory language — in toolkits, videos, websites, and interviews with amplified leaders — often involves terms like “war” or “attack” to describe efforts to “abolish,” “ban,” “remove,” “take charge of,” and “defeat” “critical race theory.” [Combating Critical Race Theory in Your Community](#) calls to “win” against “CRT activists” who “infiltrate” society and “your schools.” A “bootcamp” on [running for school board](#) held by FRC Action, the “legislative affiliate” of the Family Research Council ([deemed an anti-LGBT hate group](#) by the Southern Poverty Law Center) says that “A key battlefield in America’s culture war is in our nation’s schools” and mentions school board members “doing battle on the front lines.” “We’ll build an army,” [announced one speaker](#) on the anti “CRT” panel for CPAC (hailing from what he called the “largest conservative political machine in this country”). The campaign also uses inflammatory language about “threat” and “infections” and “taking over” to prompt people to “reclaim education,” as in an [ALEC workshop/webinar in December 2020](#):

The 1619 curriculum is infecting our schools. Diversity training is taking over our workplaces. How do patriotic Americans respond? Tune in as the Heritage Foundation has a conversation about the threat of Critical Theory manifesting in society and the important role state leaders play in reclaiming education and the American Dream.”

**A tactic of amplifying combative individuals’ examples to inflame others can undergird broader calls for censorship.** In early July 2021, for example, [Tucker Carlson amplified to millions](#) the vitriolic resignation letter of a Manchester, NH part-time afterschool coordinator who [said local professional development made him feel “dehumanized by anti-White hatred”](#) and ([as he tweeted](#)) “pathologized for being White ... pathologized for being normal.” Local politicians following up on the coordinator’s combative resignation [demanded to review](#) all professional development that “addresses the topics of ‘Whiteness,’ ‘implicit bias,’ ‘systemic racism,’ and ‘cultural awareness’” *and* any “curricular materials” for students “regarding ‘race relations.’”<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Carlson read aloud the resignation letter’s conclusion: “I wish the Trotsky disciples at Manchester School District nothing but failure in their ongoing request for civilizational degradation. I leave you with the only verbal response befitting an attempt at anti-White indoctrination. F--- you.” Several days later, the coordinator was invited to amplify his take to millions more in [a visit on Laura Ingraham’s Fox show](#) (along with Ian Prior of Loudoun County), saying of educator professional development, “all of these cretins come crawling in from their sewers and ratholes, and they begin their campaign of pathologization ... They project their venom and their hate.”

**The combative element of the conflict campaign seeks to override educators' explanations of their work and to intimidate educators from proceeding, ultimately threatening students' freedom to learn.**

Finally, some participants in the campaign veer explicitly into harassment and threat to personal safety, launched from both inside and outside local communities. In mid August 2021, the school board in Westchester, PA [decided to meet online](#) after threats were directed to the WCASD board by email, text, and phone. A Loudoun, VA school board member ["said she received 30 phone calls in one afternoon from people from around the country telling her she was a racist and indoctrinating kids. Both she and her husband received vitriolic Facebook messages, she said, and she asked police to escort her to her car after school board meetings."](#) ["In Nevada, Washoe County's school board halted in-person meetings in April, after residents filled a large auditorium and lobbed insults and threats of violence during the public comment portion."](#)

Such overall climate of threat also can lead to district educators walking back their own efforts on race, diversity or inclusion. In the Washoe County case, ["amid backlash"](#) after an apparent 11 hour meeting in June in which speakers [called school board members "Marxists, racists, Nazis and child abusers, among other epithets,"](#) local journalists [reported June 7](#) that "The Washoe County School District is taking a step back from the curriculum on social justice for elementary school students and will instead consider forming a task force to review what will be taught in classrooms."

In Loudoun, as a local educator put it to us in late September, the partisan targeting and media amplification of the district was scaring some educators away from doing the work on race, diversity, or "culture" that it had begun. We share many more such stories in Part 2 of this report:

They are winning in capturing the attention, making teachers in institutions doubt themselves and question, *is this cultural proficiency module CRT?* And doubt themselves. And people are fearful of having the conversations they were beginning to have last year as we were in this reckoning. ... People now are trying to dance around things, reword phrases and things so we can keep doing the work.

The conflict campaign makes educators "fearful" of "having conversations" through caricaturing an enemy, finding it throughout K–12 schooling, and attempting to eliminate it.

There is a final way the conflict campaign violates established democratic norms: through purposeful efforts to infuse partisanship into local non-partisan school board governance. The story of Southlake, Texas has been [profiled widely in the national media](#), most recently for an administrator urging that teachers [find ways to teach "both sides" of the Holocaust](#) to conform to new anti "CRT" state law. Southlake also is an example of how differences over teaching about race and racism and promoting tolerance can be leveraged to build a broader conservative mobilization in swing suburbs.

Again, the local desire to forge a governing majority is not itself inherently problematic. But by loud campaigners' own admission, the Southlake story is about using educational cultural battles as proxy wars for building a conservative coalition that can take back Congress and statehouses in 2022. That is what is troubling. At these moments, the conflict campaign is clearly an explicit effort from Republican operatives and conservative think tanks and funders to leverage racial anxieties associated with teaching and learning about race and racism as well as tolerance and inclusion *for partisan gain*.

## SEEKING PARTISAN CONTROL OVER GOVERNMENT VIA STOKING CONFLICT OVER SCHOOLS

Local media described a summer 2020 “proposal to combat racial and cultural intolerance in schools” in Carroll, Southlake’s “affluent,” “mostly white but quickly diversifying school district,” a politically contested district now serving over 60% White students. As in other districts we reviewed, Southlake had offered a [district plan](#) hoping to respond to longstanding local racist and anti-LGBTQ harassment, including White students chanting the n-word in a viral video. Students of color and LGBTQ students had shared routine experiences with racial slurs or hate speech, which students said teachers often ignored. The district plan’s “action steps” included hiring a Director of Equity and Inclusion to oversee the plan, “diversity and inclusion training” and curriculum for students, and “cultural competency” learning for teachers, plus efforts to “track and report microaggressions and incidents of discrimination” to prevent hostile environments. A Southlake Families PAC formed quickly in opposition, [with opponents arguing](#) “that the district’s plan would instead create ‘diversity police’ and amounted to ‘reverse racism’ against white children.”

In late April 2021, Dana Loesch, a parent in the community, appeared on the Tucker Carlson show to discuss. Fox News ran a story on the interview with the headline “[Dana Loesch slams Texas schools for implementation of racist lesson plans, urges parents to push back.](#)” Loesch is a former NRA spokesperson and *Breitbart News* employee. In the interview, Carlson speaks of Southlake’s “cultural competence plan” and says the district has “hurt” children. Loesch says, “I hope that all parents everywhere realize that, all it takes is, Tucker as you know, just to show up in numbers.” Loesch continues, “And the school and a lot of very far-left Marxist activists decided to exploit this as a way to implement critical race theory education ... And they expect parents to pay for it. We’re talking six figures.” She then quickly names “southlakefamilies.org is out there pushing back.” Tucker stares at the camera and responds,

Amen! This is happening everywhere. They’ll come in and they’ll wreck your school, they’ll hurt your children, they’ll take your money, they’ll bully you, and no one does anything. I’m just so grateful to hear of parents who ARE doing something.

Local anger in Southlake fueled not only a successful school board recall in May 2021 but other shifts in local government, [including the mayor](#). In a [video NBC credited to the Texas GOP](#) (minute 30, [here](#)), then-Texas GOP chairman Allen West urged victorious “Southlake Families” community members, “you’ve got to make sure that you export this to every single major suburban area in the United States of America outside of a blue controlled city.” Conservative writers quickly started calling it a “model.” Rich Lowry, editor of conservative monthly magazine *The National Review*, [shared his take on the Southlake experience](#) in a June 2021 article headlined “How Southlake, Texas, Won Its Battle against Critical Race Theory... and the lessons for everyone else.” In it, Lowry describes a local organizing meeting for “building an army” with a keynote by “the chairman of the Texas [Republican] party,” with the PAC raising “about \$75,000 that day.” The Southlake example was also mentioned in a Manhattan Institute article called “[How to Regulate Critical Race Theory in Schools: A Primer and Model Legislation.](#)”

Loesch reported on local elections on Twitter in May: “Parents are running institutionalized Marxist racism OUT OF THE DISTRICT,” [Loesch tweeted](#). (“Critical Race Theory ain’t coming here,” [tweeted the Southlake Families PAC](#).) Southlakefamilies.org [shared](#) immediately celebratory social media posts by Megyn Kelly, Ben Shapiro, Laura Ingraham, Christopher Rufo, and Charlie Kirk. Notably, [Rufo’s take](#)

on this localized story was explicitly partisan, and was less about the school board than the Presidency:

In 2020, Joe Biden narrowly won this district. Today, anti-woke candidates won by 40 points. Plan accordingly.

On November 2, 2021, “[candidates supported by a conservative political action committee](#) won majority control of the school board ... clearing the way for the board to officially kill the polarizing diversity plan.”

We thus end Part 1 by pointing out the irony of the conflict campaign’s projected accusation that K–12 public school educators have a “political agenda.”

The Wisconsin Institute for Law and Liberty, behind [this proposal for “curriculum transparency” law in Wisconsin](#), explained a need to monitor teachers for “the creep of political agendas into the classroom” and worried openly about exposure to non-“Republican” teachers, citing a supposed “pervasive effort to push liberal ideology onto children and openly shame or mock those who disagree”:

... there are about 79 teachers who identify as Democrats for every 21 who identify as Republicans. These margins are even worse when we consider teachers in the years with the greatest potential for political indoctrination — the high-school years.

A caricature of *all of public education* as itself a “Democrat” “agenda” characterizes national rightwing media treatment in the conflict campaign. As Fox News host Laura Ingraham [put it in May 2021](#),

INGRAHAM: But the Teachers Union bosses have totally embraced critical race theory. And of course, we know they have the ear of the Democrats.

The movement’s loudest language is perhaps overall one of seeking control — over shared schools most obviously, but also over the “political” realm: partisan government itself.

So, how does the campaign feel to targeted educators?

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**We now analyze a sample of educators’ experiences.**

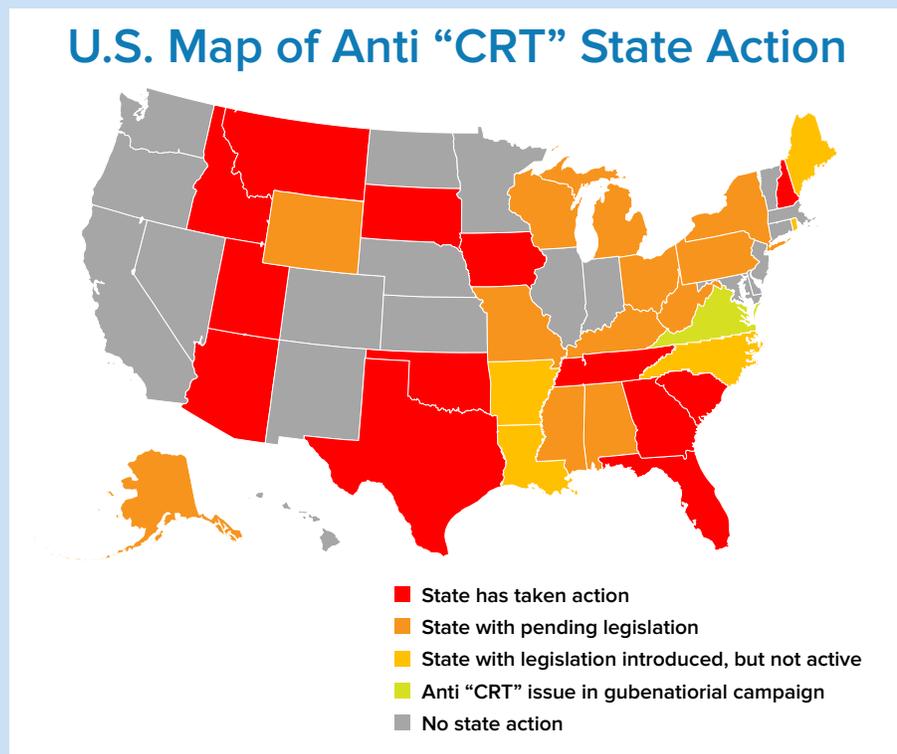
PART 2:  
Some Initial Effects of the  
Conflict Campaign on  
Local Educators

In this part of our report, we begin to examine how local campaigns are affecting educators and how educators are responding. Our analysis, based on a survey of educators from multiple national organizations and interviews with 21 district equity officers from sites around the country, includes educator experiences in states with anti “CRT” bills introduced or passed (more precisely, legislation, executive action, and politicians attacking a range of supposedly taught, often-imagined “beliefs” and topics related to race) and in locations where such sentiment affects educators’ daily work without bills’ presence.

Local “pushback” against teaching on race or racism (or against many aspects of equity, diversity, and inclusion effort) is not a new phenomenon for K–12 public school educators. Many of the educators we heard from in our survey and interviews — educators who tended to want to teach on such issues, or were hired to work on them, as noted below — indicated that the hostile environment for such teaching and learning has felt *stronger* than usual over the 2020–2021 school year to now, with more educators experiencing *heightened* fear of critics locally and beyond when they address these issues even in basic ways *or at all*.

**We offer an overview first of state bills affecting educators’ work, even as our analysis then continues to focus on *local* experiences of such restriction in the 2020–2021 school year to now.**

## AN OVERVIEW OF STATE BILLS



In the map above, states that have taken action to restrict teaching and learning about race, racism, and diversity are shown in red, states with pending legislation in orange, states where legislation was introduced but is no longer active in gold, and states that have not entertained state action are shown in gray. In addition, Virginia appears as light green to signify that anti “CRT” issues were at the center of the gubernatorial election in November 2021.

In November 2021, PEN America counted 54 separate bills introduced between January and September 2021 in 24 legislatures across the United States. Of these,

Forty-eight bills have applied to K–12 schools, of which nine became law, in Arizona, Idaho, Iowa, New Hampshire, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. ... The nine passed laws include language similar to the Trump executive order on so-called divisive concepts, laying out topics that are forbidden for teaching or training purposes.

In addition, state boards of education in several states — Florida, Georgia, South Carolina, and Utah — have adopted resolutions banning “CRT,” or “divisive concepts.” In Montana, the state Attorney General issued a binding ruling claiming that certain practices associated with critical race theory and “antiracist programing” violate state and federal law.

In many other states, legislation either is pending or has previously been proposed but is no longer active: Alabama, Alaska, Arkansas, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maine, Michigan, Mississippi, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, West Virginia, Wisconsin, and Wyoming.

Finally, 20 states have not considered legislation or executive action: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Delaware, Hawaii, Illinois, Indiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, Nebraska, Nevada, New Jersey, North Dakota, Oregon, Vermont, Virginia, and Washington.

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## Our Data

Our survey explored whether and how educators with a broad set of commitments to promoting tolerance have been impacted by the conflict campaign. The online survey, created in Qualtrics, asked educators about any “efforts in your school, district, or state to restrict or prohibit teaching & learning or professional development” and specific types of pushback they might have faced personally as they tried to teach about issues of race, diversity, and/or equity in 2020–2021. The survey also invited educators, through a series of open-ended questions, to share stories about any 2020–2021 efforts in their community to prohibit or limit either teaching or learning about these issues. Educators were encouraged to describe any such restriction efforts as well as their impact. A final section of the survey asked educators about their role in schools and districts, their demographics, and the name of their district.

To distribute the survey, we partnered with six national organizations that support educators (teachers primarily) to address issues of equity and tolerance. The organizations agreed to share our survey with their members. These were broad lists of educators oriented generally toward equity or antiracism work, who we reasoned were perhaps somewhat likely to have experienced pressure campaigns not yet documented in the news — and, if contacted through a trusted network, would perhaps be willing to share their stories. Our survey went out to educators in the following networks:

Major educator-support organizations willing to distribute our survey to their members: the Zinn Education Project; Facing History and Ourselves; Learning for Justice; and the Center for Antiracist Education, plus the smaller 2K-member #USvsHate list (K–12 educators attempting to do general anti-bias/inclusion work) and the 1.1K #Schooltalking Facebook group (educators seeking tools for antiracism and equity).

Between July 30, 2021 and September 15, 2021, 353 educators started the survey and 275 completed or partially completed it. 157 of the respondents shared information about themselves (though only 147 answered all such questions) and 119 provided the name of their school district. Given the nature of the conflict campaign, it is likely that many respondents were reluctant to share this information because of possible negative consequences for themselves and their students. Of the respondents who provided demographic information, a majority (60.4%) were classroom teachers, 20.4% were other school personnel (e.g., counselors), 11.0% worked for the school district, and the remaining 4.5% served as school administrators. A majority of survey respondents who provided personal information (76.2%) self-identified as White, with some identifying as Black (7.5%), Latinx (7.5%), and multiracial (6.1%). 82.0% of the respondents identified as female, and 73.2% of the respondents had been working in education for at least six years.

The respondents that provided us information about their districts work in geographically diverse locations. Thirty-three states were represented in our sample, and the four geographic regions (West, Midwest, South, and Northeast) were each well-represented. Most survey respondents who provided information about their location (85.6%) worked in districts identified as cities or suburbs, while a smaller number worked in towns and rural areas. Over half of survey respondents who provided the name of their district (55.1%) worked in districts that served a majority of students of color (compared to 35.5% in the population of U.S. school districts), and nearly half (42.2%) worked in districts that experienced rapid declines in the percentage of White students over the past 20 years (compared to 26.0% in the population of U.S. school districts). In terms of the surrounding political landscape, a strong majority of respondents who provided the name of their district hailed from locations characterized as liberal (60.5%) or liberal leaning (9.2%). Smaller proportions came from areas that are politically contested (11.8%) or conservative leaning (9.2%) or conservative (9.2%).

As a complement to the survey, we conducted two rounds of interviews (between March and October 2021) with 21 district central office equity officers (EOs), who work in 17 states across the country. These district staff are charged with leading Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion programming, policy, and messaging at the district level, and working with school-level educators on related professional development — to be what one EO called “the face of equity” for their district.

Five of the 21 equity officers (EOs) we interviewed work in urban districts, 16 work in suburban districts, and two work in a suburban-rural district. The EOs we interviewed were over half women, all women of color. We call these officers “EOs” below and name only their region. The majority of EOs work in districts that have experienced substantial or rapid student demographic change (17 of 21) and now serve a majority of students of color (13 of 21); 16 of 21 districts were politically liberal.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS<sup>9</sup>

### Racial Demographics of School Districts

Using the most recent data from the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), we place school districts into three groups of districts that serve roughly equal numbers of K–12 students in the United States. **Majority Students of Color** districts enroll 0–49.9% White students. **Racially Mixed and Majority White** districts enroll 50% to 84.9% White students. **Predominantly White** districts enroll 85% to 100% White students.

### Rate of Demographic Change in School Districts, 2000–2020

Using NCES enrollment data from the 1999–2000 and 2019–2020 school years, we explore the rate of change in racial demographics across U.S. school districts. We subtracted each district’s percentage of White student enrollment in 2019–2020 from its percentage of White student enrollment in 1999–2000 and then placed all districts into four groups serving roughly equal numbers of K–12 students. **Minimal Change** districts have experienced less than a 5% decline in White student enrollment; **Moderate Change** districts have experienced between a 5% and 9.9% decline; **Substantial Change** districts have experienced between a 10% and 17.9% decline; and **Rapid Change** districts have experienced more than an 18% decline in White enrollment.

### Location

We follow NCES in designating school districts as located in **Rural** areas, **Towns**, **Suburbs**, or **Cities**. In cases where districts include schools located in more than one of these categories, we designate the district according to the category where most of its students are enrolled.

### Region

We follow NCES in placing school districts in one of four regions: **West**, **South**, **Midwest**, and **Northeast**.

### Partisan Lean of Surrounding Community

We used the percentage of the 2020 Presidential vote that went for Trump in each Congressional District as a measure for the partisan lean of communities surrounding school districts. We labeled school districts “**Liberal**” if they are located in Congressional Districts where less than 40% of the vote went to Trump; “**Liberal Leaning**” if between 40% and 44.9% voted for Trump; “**Contested**” if between 45% and 54.9% voted for Trump; “**Conservative Leaning**” if between 55% and 59.9% voted for Trump; and “**Conservative**” if more than 60% voted for Trump.

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<sup>9</sup> For a more detailed description of these categories, see our Methodological Appendix.

**In educators' own words, where people worked seemed crucial to their experience of this conflict campaign.** Specifically, **educators referenced the existence or absence of local support for teaching about race or broader "DEI," and the behavior of local campaigners,** as well as whether state bills and legislation existed. We also highlight some *tentative* demographic patterns in our extended responses as we present data highlights below. For example, we note that in the few districts where educators told stories of little restriction or of administrators supportive of their efforts to talk about race or DEI, most were "liberal" districts with lower proportions of Trump voters, often (though not always) serving students of color predominantly. We also note that extended stories of conflict campaign activity, and the more extreme stories particularly, skewed often toward politically contested or conservative areas in districts that are majority White. (Some EOs hired to work in liberal communities also described voracious pushback from a "vocal minority" of "conservative white groups" or "politician and parent groups" within communities that had rapidly become less White over the past two decades.)

Importantly, all of these demographic claims should be understood as very tentative and fodder for future research. Less than half (119 of 275) of survey respondents provided information about their district location. The patterns that we are observing below about political climate or student demographics are thus based on the subset of respondents who told us the name of the district where they work, in telling extended stories about their experiences. Indeed, because we were interested in understanding experiences in local context, for our data highlights we rely almost exclusively on stories shared by those respondents who provided us with information on their school district. We explore demographic patterns formally in Part 3.

The survey respondents and EOs we interviewed are educators who overall are more likely to be working on the issues targeted in the conflict campaign. It is reasonable to think about our survey respondents as mostly school-level educators who are somewhat predisposed to teach about issues of race and racism and to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion, and our interviewed "EOs" as district employees who focus their jobs on these issues. **Yet the district or classroom work that many respondents described being targeted for doing was the basic work of discussing issues of race, racism, or inequality at all, or of promoting equity, diversity, and inclusion in any way.**

A majority of respondents indicated experiencing restriction efforts in 2020–2021 on issues ranging from "CRT" to race, racism, culturally responsive teaching, sexual orientation and gender identity, ethnic studies, and "DEI." To *illuminate* these experiences, we present the most detailed and contextualized stories from our data, as highlights.

These educators are an important group to listen to, because they were typically attempting to do such basic work before *and* during the conflict campaign; any described increase in challenges during 2020–2021 could be attributed to this year's particular climate. We also see in their experience how such teaching and DEI work has fared amidst the attacks on "CRT."

Of course, not all K–12 educators are inclined to teach in a manner that promotes tolerance and advances diversity, equity, and inclusion. Many educators are unsure about what role they should play in addressing issues of race and racism. And, in our ideologically diverse nation, some educators are skeptical about or even opposed to teaching and learning that engages issues of race or identity. Because we surveyed members of organizations that embrace the role of public schools in advancing tolerance, we likely did not hear from educators who favor restrictions on teaching and learning about race and inequality. Future research should consider how a broad ideological cross-section of educators think about, participate in, and/or have been impacted by the conflict campaign.

We promised respondents that we would not name them or their school, district, or community. Below, we often name respondents' roles and self-reported racial identities; we do not share details if it could reveal the specific location or person. We did not typically include, in our data highlights, data shared by people who were not K–12 educators in public schools and districts (e.g., university professors or educators from private schools) or people who did not describe a role. In reporting our findings, we note, where possible, the context of the district where educators work. Since very specific demographics could make a community or even an educator findable, we describe school districts by using demographic categories referring to the racial demographics of the students they serve; the rate of demographic change in their district (drop in White student enrollment since 2000); the location (rural, town, suburb, city, plus region of country); and the partisan lean of voters in the surrounding community. We also note throughout whether a respondent's state had passed or is considering legislation. See our Methodological Appendix for further explanation of demographic categories.

We recognize that this survey was taken at a moment in time — after a tumultuous 2020–2021 school year (in which the conflict campaign's pushback against educators and teaching spiked after a tumultuous, worldwide antiracist movement, amidst a partisanized pandemic), and specifically in summer 2021 through mid September 2021 when most schools were just starting up. The surveys offer insights on how a climate of conflict grew for many teachers through Spring 2021, as well as the ways that continued conflict campaign activities over summer framed a set of understandings as teachers prepared (or began) to return to classrooms for 2021–2022. EO interviews, completed in April and October 2021, show a fuller 2020–2021 school year “ramp up” of the conflict campaign through October 2021. In some cases, respondents took our survey as state-level legislation was still being introduced or debated.

Rather than counting check box tallies, our survey analysis focuses on the meatiest stories respondents shared in the open-ended portions of our survey. It was not uncommon to see respondents who indicated “no restrictions” in the check box portion of the survey later go on to describe being impacted by restrictions (or fearing potential restrictions) in more open-ended sections. Analyzed below are the stories told on our survey and in our EO interviews that illuminate local conflict campaign experiences.

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## Educators' Experiences in Their Voices

**In spring, summer, and fall 2021, many teachers and EOs described an experience of the conflict campaign as creating a newly *hostile environment* for discussing issues of race and racial inequality and more broadly diversity, equity, and inclusion.** Such issues never have been discussed or pursued easily in U.S. schools. Yet many **respondents described a heightened level of what many called “attack,” “intimidation,” and “threat” from legislation, outside “groups,” and local critics, particularly subgroups of highly vocal parents sometimes fueled by politicians.**

As we note, only one EO described a year free from anti “CRT” conflict. Some teachers described localities that pursued work undeterred by local anti “CRT” organizing, specifically if “the school district leadership continues to support the equity and antiracist education efforts.” Some educators described districts that actively “supported” teaching about race, cultural responsiveness, and bias throughout the entirety of 2020–2021. Many survey respondents clicking “no restrictions” explained explicitly that local leaders supported their work.

Yet many teachers and EOs across our data, including in places where no state level restrictions were passed or pending, described a trajectory over 2020–2021 in which basic efforts to engage issues of race or racism and any broader “DEI” became newly restricted and “attacked.”

Below, respondents detail ways that the campaign threatened support for local equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts. To date, this story is about *both* formal bills and local response to them, *and also* about how educators are experiencing local pushback from local people inflamed by a broader pressure campaign. Many educators in our sample have experienced fierce local pushback in 2020–2021 and *fear* such pushback in a general climate of threat and confusion — in states with bills and states without. While some respondents described systems firmly committed to backing up the right to learn about race and DEI, many worried about leaders’ lack of explicit “response” in this context of prohibition — and others described school and district leaders participating in restriction. Crucially, some teachers also report or anticipate restricting their *own* activity on these issues, and describe colleagues doing so — particularly if leaders are not firmly supportive of the freedom to learn. This restriction and self-restriction suggests serious consequences for the learning opportunities students will access going forward.

Some equity officers restated strong plans for “staying the course,” noting the importance of higher level back up from superintendents, school boards, and unions and district people’s crucial support for school-level educators. Some teachers sounded personally insistent that their students not be restricted from the opportunity to learn about these aspects of American life. But numerous respondents repeated the sense of being “terrified” by a sense of looming threat.

In general, a sense of waiting also permeated these summer and fall 2021 stories — waiting for whether larger forces and local critics would create a “combative year,” as one social studies teacher put it, or whether higher-ups and system leaders would stand up for the rights of students and adults to talk through these topics in school.

**We now share highlights from our survey and interview analysis, with key takeaway points bolded.**

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## Data Highlights

### Places Where Restrictions Were Not Felt

**Only one of the EOs we spoke to described a district free from conflict over “CRT” in 2020–2021. Some teachers did describe how they felt no restrictions; for some this response may have reflected our survey’s timing.** “No restrictions at the end of 2020–2021 school year,” said a White AP World high school teacher from a “liberal” urban Texas district with longstanding service to students of color.

**Some teachers sounded undeterred in their efforts, often mentioning leaders’ efforts to support learning “about race and racism” and “inclusion” effort. (We note that while the districts described here ranged in their percentage of White students, all but two were located in communities that are liberal or liberal leaning, as well as predominantly in states with no pending legislation.)**

An elementary teacher from liberal, suburban Connecticut said bluntly that “I’m not aware of any efforts to restrict teaching & learning.” A high school science teacher of color from a politically contested rural community in New Jersey, summed up that “No restrictions that I know of. We are trying to be more inclusive.” Another New Jersey elementary music teacher whose liberal and suburban district

serves a majority of students of color, said, “There haven’t been any restrictions so far in teaching or talking about these topics.” A third New Jersey elementary teacher from a liberal leaning suburb whose district serves a racially mixed and majority White student body, said that in the past year, “We were encouraged to reflect and grow through book clubs, movie viewings, and discussions about race and racism ... We had only encouragement to face these issues and to better our community.” A middle school librarian from a liberal Maryland suburb reported no restriction efforts and said that in 2020–2021, “We were educated on the history of racism in our country and given articles and books to read on the topic.” Also in a liberal city predominantly serving students of color in Maryland, a White middle school ELA teacher reported matter of factly, “I have a lot of autonomy in what I teach at my school and have not had any push back. I’ve recently used the texts *Stamped*, *Ghost Boys*, and *All American Boys* with no issues.”

In a predominantly White, liberal suburban Massachusetts district with moderate change (in a state with no legislation pending), a White high school teacher of U.S. History and AP Government said matter of factly, “We had professional development on diversity and inclusion. Now, district wide, we are reading a book titled *We Got This*.” In a large liberal city serving majority students of color in New York, a Black high school counselor recalled “emails from administrators acknowledging the killing of George Floyd, Brianna Taylor, and others. They offered resources with ways to learn more about institutionalized racism, and be an ally against social injustice.” The counselor noted, “There was no restriction to censor lessons on any topic race related.” A Washington DC educator (who did not list their role) clicked “yes” on some overall efforts to restrict but then implied that any such pressures were not locally felt:

To my knowledge, there are no efforts to restrict teaching & learning or PD relating to race or racism in DC Public Schools. DCPS is leading efforts with staff and teachers.

**Some educators also sounded unfazed by local anti “CRT” activity, specifically when describing local district support for “equity and antiracist education efforts.”** Many districts so described served mostly students of color.

One Latinx Equity Director in the district office of a suburban, liberal leaning, rapidly changing and now majority student of color district in California, noted that even while there had been some local “questioning from families” “asking if we are engaging in CRT instruction,”

So far, no changes have been made to our curriculum or the direction we are heading and the school district leadership continues to support the equity and antiracist education efforts.

**Some school-level educators described districts that actively “supported” teaching about race, cultural responsiveness, and bias throughout the entirety of 2020–2021, even if some legislation was pending at the state level.** In Pennsylvania, where a state anti “CRT” bill was introduced in June 2021, a White high school teacher in a liberal city district serving majority students of color noted,

We were the opposite — learning how to teach in a culturally responsive manner, having school based town halls in cultural awareness and actively trying to dismantle prejudice.

A White elementary school therapist in a similarly large, liberal, and majority students of color urban New York district, noted no restrictions at all, saying, “at my school we are explicitly instructed to teach culturally responsively.”

An elementary school dual language teacher/coach (self-described as a person of color) in a liberal, predominantly students-of-color Washington city, described the kind of work done seemingly undeterred in their district:

As a staff, we have been diving deep into our own personal journeys as anti-racists, and what that means. We are divided into cohorts depending on where we are on [the] journey, and we read books, article[s], listen to podcasts and watch excerpts, shows, movies that help educate us of what we don't know or weren't told. This is a slow and sometimes painful process, but it has helped us grow as a staff. I certainly hope that all our students always feel welcome and important in their skin and bodies.

The teacher described how the district had encouraged educators to think about teaching from multiple perspectives: "Communication directed educators to teach from a multi-ethnic lens by staying away from pushing majority thinking as the right thinking. The need to value the entire child and really evaluate what you are teaching as truth."

Indeed, some educators in this sample also expressed frustration that the race- and "equity" related efforts of 2020+ did not go far enough. A Latinx elementary school administrator in the same large, liberal, mostly student-of-color Pennsylvania city district mentioned above, had a less rosy view of that work than the colleague above, noting that while "All of the race and equity trainings began after the televised murder of George Floyd" and "The district sent out the race and equity mission statement and supporting links for us to read and turnaround to staff,"

The trainings have been surfacey and clearly have not led to any real change at school board level where they cut speakers off in mid sentence if the time runs out. The topics discussed by speakers are mostly an equity matter and yet they get silenced. How can the district say they care about race and equity and yet you do everything anti-race and equity. Their words do not match their actions!

Another Latina middle school teacher from a liberal, rapidly changing California city district enrolling a majority of students of color, noted that efforts in their district felt unrestricted, but "disingenuous":

People were asked to participate in training. Mostly BIPOC educators. .... Efforts have not been restricted. But they are disingenuous.

Survey respondents also wanted 2020+ antiracism done better. One Latina elementary school teacher in a liberal city district enrolling a majority students of color in Virginia (where the newly-elected Governor campaigned on introducing legislation) complained about typical professional development that still refused to deeply explore race issues as "the root cause of things." A White middle school Social Studies teacher from a liberal, rapidly changing Massachusetts city in a racially mixed and majority White district, described a clumsy effort from the district:

I think we got an email with some links to resources? We also got the book "For White Folks That Teach in the Hood and the Rest of Y'all" with no context or follow up. We are also not all white folk, and while we have a diverse student body, we are not "the hood."

... It's not so much the effort to restrict, but the enthusiasm of predominantly white administrators for "anti-racism" which results in their actually not hearing the voices of non-white staff and students, especially when those people are telling the enthusiastic administrators that they find their approaches, comments, and actions offensive.

**We note tentatively that all of these educators mentioning inadequate but DEI-supportive efforts by districts came from “liberal” communities. All but one served a majority of students of color.**

**Importantly, two teachers of color from more conservative areas who described no local restrictions indicated that no efforts at DEI had ever occurred to fight over.** An Asian American elementary teacher from a “rural, majority white district” in California noted,

I’m not sure the majority of my colleagues even have this on their radar. There has been no training or discussion on this topic.

A high school African American paraprofessional from a conservative Kansas town in a district that is racially mixed and majority White and undergoing rapid demographic change, clicked “no” on all our questions about potential restrictions and said bluntly, “We are in a Kansas rural school district and diversity is not discussed.”

**Yet many educators across our sample, including in places where no state level restrictions were passed or pending, described a trajectory over 2020–2021 in which efforts to engage issues of race and any broader “DEI” became more restricted and “attacked.”**

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We begin with data on equity officers’ (EOs) experiences and move to the experiences of school-level educators.

## **EOs describe the timeline of increasing pushback over 2020–2021**

In our EO interviews, some appeared at first to be describing longstanding pushback against DEI work from before the conflict campaign was in swing. Nationally, educator anxiety about discussing [race](#) and racism, inclusion generally, or topics deemed “politically” fraught, is nothing new.

**Yet equity officers described pushback against DEI efforts “ramping up” over the 2020–2021 school year.** One equity officer from a racially mixed and majority White and rapid change school district located in a liberal southern city in a state with some effort to pass legislation, noted the national role of recent federal-level targeting of “anti-bias” or “anti-racist” efforts:

During this last presidential election, when President Trump made a part of his platform that no federal organization could use funding to support anti-bias training, anti-racist training, that type of thing, it just seemed to kind of ramp up on the level that I hadn’t experienced the previous five years, I guess I should say. ... the topic became nationalized, so to speak.

One EO in a politically contested Northeastern suburban community whose district is racially mixed and majority White, in a state with pending legislation, noted similarly that “pushback” against “equity” and “curriculum” in the current school year had “started at a national level because of... the executive order to remove any of that type of stuff. So I think that has really impacted at least a lot of what people think is taking place when they hear the word educational equity.”

This EO also noted that **currently “loud and organized” pushback seemed to respond to energized efforts to expand “DEI” in 2020–2021, specifically after the Floyd murder and national protests spurred a national increase in statements, staffing, and policy focused on “equity.”** More specifically, “quiet efforts began in the Fall of 2020 after the district hired a Director of Equity. The pushback

became loud and organized by parents/community groups after the District adopted an Equity Policy,” with the district needing to respond with “letters to the community, public presentations and FAQ documents to define equity and outline district DEI efforts.” A pandemic year of online teaching also had some parents getting increasingly vocal about their “perspectives,” leading to teachers becoming anxious about what to teach in a “precarious situation”:

we had some circumstances where parents were actually unmuting and saying stuff and yelling into the class... Certainly we started to have some conversations around teachers asking, “can I, should I, what should I,” that type of thing, because we were in such a precarious situation.

**Yet the effort to “ban” “CRT” had vastly exacerbated preexisting tensions over the 2020–2021 school year. EOs described both state pressures and specific conflict campaign tactics locally present in their districts.**

**Indicating the campaign’s broader targeting of “content” under the umbrella of “CRT,”** a DEI director from a predominantly White and conservative midwest city district in a state with pending legislation noted, “The senate GOP members for the state of Michigan introduced a bill to ban teaching CRT and anything deemed ‘Anti-American.’ They outlined plans to reduce funding for school districts caught teaching such content after an investigation.”

The district educator also elaborated on how local “community members” with “concerns” fueled by “faux hysteria about CRT” were “purposefully lumping” together broad realms of work to “attack” as inappropriate (just as campaign tool-kits explored in Part 1 advised):

Social studies teachers are stressed out, and questioning whether the lesson plans covering various history projects will be attacked. I respond to several phone calls and emails a week addressing CRT concerns from community members. I am concerned about these groups going around and creating faux hysteria about CRT. They are purposefully lumping anything that has to do with DEI, Cultural responsiveness, SEL, under the CRT umbrella.

As the EO from the contested, suburban Northeastern district put it, local activity in summer 2021 “had a lot in common to what we’re seeing kind of on the national scale”:

In June and then again in August we had very large crowds, I would say roughly 75 people or more, attend school board meetings and speak during public comment in opposition to equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts. Most of the negative comments [were] focusing on the notion that equity and inclusion is essentially racist against dominant groups.

And in our particular case, last year we conducted a district equity audit. And so at our May board meeting, the results of that audit and data was kind of summarized and recommendations from that audit were summarized. So then [at] the subsequent meeting, which was June, there was a large crowd pushing back relative to a lot of what was discussed there. And then in August, ... a large part of the public participation [was] kind of an organized effort to call for stopping the equity work altogether, [for] removing the position which is the position I hold, director of equity. And it got a lot of public attention in my particular case because our meetings are recorded and live streamed. We actually had a clip of one of our community members who spoke in opposition [to our work] go viral, for lack of a better term.

... [local critics said] something to the effect .. that the diversity, equity and inclusion programs create division, or they sow division, and the idea that we don't have a problem with racism. ... At a subsequent meeting, then there was a discussion of critical race theory and saying that we were teaching gender diversity and putting ideas in students' minds around diverse gender identities and things of that sort.

The EO noted how **critics had conflated various district efforts with "CRT," seemingly "intentionally":**

Associating social emotional learning with critical race theory was another common theme. Whereby in our particular case, social, emotional learning and the curriculum materials that we use there have been in place for years.

... And I think it's intentional, you know, I don't think it's a 'oops.' .. It was misinformation — that "equity means CRT and CRT means changing the curriculum so that it tells white people why they are bad." That was kind of the message ... none of that of course, was part of the work that we were doing.

The EO also explained **local anti "CRT" opposition as driven by explicit partisanization of a spring 2021 school board race:**

Well it's school board seats. So in my particular district, we have [a majority of seats on the ballot in November] ... [and] the primaries took place in May. And so this all heated up in our particular district, really heightened following the May board meeting and up until now.

And some of the main people in opposition that are coming ... the people who kind of are the frequent flyers, if you will, who come to the board for meetings — they've been very clear about thinking that ... our sitting board was pushing their "Democratic agenda." Like they've said those things. And then there's been a lot of information within the community, again, all public on social media, in different places, or even in our newspapers, that many of the community members who come and speak in opposition to equity are door knocking and donating and doing those things for the school board candidates that are running against what they call kind of as "left wing Democrats."

A Black diversity and equity district officer in a rapidly changing, conservative leaning urban Western district with no pending state legislation (now racially mixed and majority White) described a sense that "efforts to restrict" a range of topics ("Racial Identity Development, Identity, Cultural Competency, Racism, Anti Racism, and Culturally Responsive Practices") "began in June" 2021 related to "board seats," possibly catalyzed by "outside orgs":

We are unclear on where these efforts began, but we believe that they started with outside orgs who are trying to flip board seats this November. Parents are leading some of the efforts. We also have boards in the [surrounding area] who have actively banned CRT.... my current district is not currently taking action to restrict, however parents and outside agitators are beginning to zero in on us. My school district has responded by pointing towards our district equity policy ... and denying that we are teaching it [CRT] in schools.

The officer added that as "anti-CRT parents" and "outside agitators" "zeroed in," with "anti-CRT" "demands" targeting all of "equity, diversity, and inclusion," districts were "folding" to pressures: **"The districts around us are folding to the demands of anti CRT parents who put the work of equity, diversity, and inclusion into this**

**bag ... as this happens I see our boards becoming targets for folks moving their agendas.”**

A Black DEI Director in a substantially changing, contested suburban district (racially mixed and majority White) in a northeastern state considering legislation noted that **through local open records requests, people were targeting anything related to “Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, Social Emotional Learning, Culturally Responsive Teaching” along with so-called “Critical race theory”**:

The local Right to Know (open records) law was the main tool used to restrict DEI. All records, emails, professional development etc. related to DEI were requested and shared on social media pages, letters to local media etc. to incite fear/anger and misrepresent the DEI work taking place in schools. June began the concentrated efforts to attend School Board meetings and demand DEI be stopped.

A Black equity staff from a midwest community noted the local experience of “policy organizations” as well as state legislators:

One of our policy organizations .... is sending FOIAs asking for teachers’ lesson plans that contain these topics!... All this occurred shortly after [state] legislative body began considering a ban on CRT (which by the way is not being taught in K–12 curriculum).

**While EOs described experiences particular to the anti “CRT” campaign, EOs also indicated that pushback generally was not new to their professional lives.**

An EO in a racially mixed and majority White, rapidly changing, liberal Southern city district in a state where legislation was introduced, noted that “since I’ve been here in 2014, there’s at least a monthly, sometimes more than, you know twice a month freedom of information requests on, you know, any material we develop.” An EO from a majority students of color liberal suburban district in the South noted that while the “overwhelming” majority “find the work valuable,” some folks in the district “don’t believe in this work at all.”

**Yet EOs made clear that the anti “CRT” campaign made such tactics more vehement.** An equity officer in a racially mixed and majority White rapidly changing, liberal, suburban Southern district in a state with pending legislation noted a broad state and local context of feeling increasingly surveilled since March 2021, including “Politician and parent groups, House Bills, FOIA requests, a website set up by the lieutenant governor for parents to report on indoctrination; parents asking for their students not to do SEL lessons; [and] questions about CRT and SEL to principals.”

**EOs indicated the need for district “response.”** Amidst this combination of pressures, this EO said, **the district had offered “no real response”**: “The district wants to do a equity campaign to explain what equity is ... They had a PR firm create CRT and Equity talking points that staff has access to.” The district educator said that without stronger district “response,” the climate “puts me and staff in fear of our jobs.” Furthermore, they noted, “Students are angry and confused because they want to learn the truth and they want staff to be held accountable to eliminating inequities.”

One county office educator in Southern California, with no legislation pending, noted how **politicians in the local anti “CRT” campaign also targeted specific “curriculum” and programs**:

Carl DeMaio, a former elected official in San Diego, hosted a town hall meeting in Coronado under the umbrella of his Reform California organization and stated the No Place for Hate curriculum was CRT in schools and people should call on the school board for anywhere the curriculum is being used to stop.

**EOs also had to support “stressed out” school-level educators through confusion and anxiety.** An EO from a large, liberal, racially mixed and majority White, rapid change city district in the South in a state with some effort to pass legislation, noted that while “I would say that we’re not necessarily more or less under attack than we usually are” in a district known for its proactive equity efforts, currently work was getting more “stressful” given broad anti “CRT” “narratives.” As some “board comment” opposition mounted to “CRT,” educators were now asking for district guidance on whether they were (e.g.) allowed to teach anything at all about “being Black”:

the board comments start to get pretty real. It’s like people speaking in front of the board or either sending in written comments. And so that seems to apply pressure, kind of like in a systemic way ... like how narratives are driving ... this work. But then also teachers and principals start getting really stressed out because they are so afraid that anything that they do is going to be critical race theory, right? Like if I even speak about someone being Black, right, that’s critical race theory.

So we see a lot of the kind of stress and anxiety that comes from our schools. And so they’re looking to us to kind of say, “can I do this? Can I not?” ... It’s hard.

The EO made clear that **this work was being made especially “hard” by “impeccably organized” opposition**, with “organizers” even engaging local students in collecting tips on teachers’ efforts to discuss “anything that was sensitive,” then sending them to state legislators:

I would say that like the craziest thing has been the fact that you know, teachers will teach something correctly in their classroom, they will teach like the correct history. [But] what we had happening is a group of right-wing organizers who are impeccably organized. Like you got to give it to them; they are impeccable. And they’re like, they have form letters ... they are organized like ... to the max. They were encouraging students and families to take pictures of and to collect anything that was “critical race theory,” which ended up being a catch all for anything that was sensitive, so we got LGBTQ stuff in there. We got all sorts of stuff, but they compiled a binder, a legitimate three ring binder that they sent to every Congress person in the state.

And it was called the “[school district name] indoctrination binder.” So people could see it when they came to our office. But it was interesting because when you look through it, you saw that students were being encouraged to take pictures on the slide in their classroom, or they were copying stuff. Or they were like screenshotting things out of just anything that had anything to do with anything sensitive.

And it was a problem we had to address. We had to go through, we had to go look at all the different things and say, “how are people teaching this?” And so ... it becomes ... just a headache of like, “I have to go back through and say, that’s not critical race theory. It’s this, that’s not what that is. That’s this,” you know, and just kind of like constantly re-address it and talk to people all the time. Who are, “oh, I got this binder, I’m a state Congressman. Tell me about how you’re indoctrinating kids.” “Okay. I’d love to tell you how about how that’s not the case, you know?” So it’s, it’s more just like just like the heavy lift all the time of trying to correct what is misinformation.

The campaign in this EO's area engaged state actors and local ones together; other EOs felt more generalized threat. One EO in a rapidly changing, majority students of color, liberal Western city in a state without legislation discussed more generally than personally how "the new anti-CRT movement" seemingly fueled an overall effort to "put some stops to any DEI efforts" in many "school districts." In contrast, an EO from a conservative leaning western city in a majority students of color district described quite personally a local "witch hunt" targeting all professional development ("PD") in a search for "critical race theory," in a state with no pending legislation:

I've had inquiries about seeing any PD that I've taught, [people] wanting the whole PD — like curriculum and scope and sequence. And what did I teach? And then also wanting the names of every teacher that took said PD.

An EO from a racially mixed and majority White, rapid change, politically contested city district in a Western state without legislation noted **the role of local chapters of national conservative organizations in spreading highly racialized caricatures of "CRT" to win Board elections:**

the [local newspaper] is running ... quotes from people who are running [for] school board, who they also happened to endorse, so we have like a newspaper actively working against our efforts with this group called — I think it's FAIR, the Foundation against Intolerance and Racism. [Another group] are actively sending out flyers. The flyers came from Opt Out Today. And we got something to all union members. It was really, really gross. 'Your union loves CRT.' And on the front, there's an audience of white people, white adults and children. And there's ... a black woman ..... And she's next to an easel that says 'all white people are evil,' or 'I hate white people,' something like that. And so those, like these flyers are showing up in our doctor's offices, it's all throughout the community. It's super saturated. So just like that, like we went from nothing to, within a month like I got my first racist phone call on Friday, and I have folks telling me "the work you're doing is a lie from the depths of hell." I can't even fathom the craziness.

In early November, the EO wrote to say that multiple school board seats in their district flipped and are now held by "conservative, anti-equity" individuals — a shift this EO feared might bring a halt to DEI efforts or, they noted, "It could look like me not being here."

**EOs and other district-level educators responding to our survey indicated that they felt particular pressure in 2020–2021 as "the face of equity." EOs describing this increased conflict in 2020–2021 shared how a larger and localized context of threat and "intimidation" led to fear to "do the work" in states both with and without pending legislation.**

A Black diversity and equity district officer in a racially mixed and majority White, rapidly changing, politically contested western city in a state with pending legislation noted that **some of the targeting was quite personalized for EOs, often people of color, as the "face of equity":**

I am personally impacted because I lead the work. My district has been highly supportive of equity work and has been careful in its communications to the public, but as the face of equity the attacks are on me.

**Some EOs made clear that "personal attacks" for their work were not necessarily new.** An EO from a racially mixed and majority White, rapidly changing, liberal southern city in a state with some legislation effort, noted more generally

that, “But you know, just sometimes the personal attacks... are, you know, a bit much in terms of when you get emails and you get mail that kind of suggests that, you know, what we’re doing is tearing down America.”

**Yet again, EOs described such “attacks” as increasing over the anti “CRT” campaign from a “vocal minority.”** A Black DEI office educator quoted above from a racially mixed and majority White politically contested suburban Northeastern district, in a state with legislation pending, described how “as a DEI educator and person of color,” she had experienced “increased stress levels, received personal threats and racist messages, [and] calls for my firing”:

To date the district has been steadfast in DEI commitment, however we were generally unprepared for the type of behavior and vitriol that has come to local board meetings.

She added that even while “steadfast,” the district was not seen as proactively “accepting of DEI”:

Other teachers of color in our district have left for other districts perceived to be more accepting of DEI. Generally, it has led to an overall fear of educators to “do the work” of DEI because of the vocal minority in our community.

**EOs shared further experiences of intimidation specifically in the form of “personal attacks” and threats causing fears for their physical safety.** An EO from a racially mixed and majority White, rapid change, conservative leaning Midwestern suburb, in a state with legislation pending, described, “You know, folks sending me like death threats through my Twitter account, stuff like that,” in this era of “standing behind” the “Black lives matter” movement:

And we stand behind Black lives matter because Black lives do matter. So we, so I wrote that [public] statement and in response negatively, I got the nasty emails, I got the conservative folks sending me emails. I had open records requests being placed on me. You know, folks sending me like death threats through my Twitter account, stuff like that. And it, it impacted me quite a bit too, cause it gets to the point where ... I’m ... just driving to work and then having to make sure I park in the line of sight of a camera so that if something were to happen, it will at least be on footage. So like it got like that, that personal and so, so yeah, there was just a lot of emotion.

**EOs repeatedly used the word *intimidation* (and in one case, “white intimidation”) to describe the approach of some community members (as well as some outsiders) “serving as agitators to slow the work that we’re doing,”** as one EO from a conservative leaning suburban Midwest district (enrolling a racially mixed and majority White student body in a state with pending legislation) put it. This EO also noted how **community members, specifically parents of color, were “afraid to speak up and silenced,” and less likely to participate in school board meetings due to “racially hostile” climates.**

EOs sometimes spoke of “groups” that were both local and external. One EO from a liberal, racially mixed and majority White, rapidly changing Northeastern city, in a state without legislation, referenced **“conservative white groups” who “go after” “diversity position[s]” and “administrators of color,”** including through FOIAs of text messages, surveillance of activities through “screenshots of PowerPoints and trainings,” and using “blogs to try to attack individuals” as if they are “teaching people to hate white people and all this ridiculousness,” all as tools “to silence the work.”

An EO from a racially mixed and majority White, rapid change, liberal-leaning Western suburb in a state without legislation, noted that recent pushback was unanticipated and “more than I’ve seen”:

We do get pushback from the community members who don’t support this work, you know I think doing Black history month, we get death threats, you know...it was more than I’ve seen, more than we ever expected to happen. You know, that kind of pushback of their threats and the hate, some of, some of the hate emails we got, I saw four or five of them, probably from the same person, but it was something that we didn’t anticipate or expect.

**Some working in rapid-change, predominantly of color liberal-leaning districts also described how even a “vocal minority” could cause “anxiety and fear” given an uptick in “hate emails” and personal threats.** An EO in a liberal, majority students of color, rapidly changing Western city district in a state without legislation, described “very concerted efforts to put some stops to any DEI [diversity, equity, and inclusion] work in school districts” (her own, and others’) by a “vocal minority.” In a large, liberal, moderately changing California city, enrolling a majority students of color, one district administrator summed up bluntly,

Q: How did efforts to restrict teaching affect you and your colleagues?

A: Creates anxiety and fear; there have been threats.

**Notably, a number of the district EOs interviewed — all people of color — are now looking for a new job, or have already transitioned to a new job outside their district.** This hints once again at the importance of local district responses to pushback both external and internal.

## Teachers’ Experiences of the Conflict Campaign

**On our survey, teachers and other school-level educators (e.g., counselors) also indicated a spike in efforts to limit their work over the course of the 2020–2021 school year,** even as some indicated that pushback to race-related or DEI work was not wholly new for them. In extended stories, **teachers described increased incidents of challenges to what was taught and discussed in classrooms. As both external and local critics challenged a caricatured vision of “CRT,” many teachers experienced anxiety about even basic efforts to discuss race and pursue inclusion. This was the case in states with legislation and states without.** We note district demographics below when respondents named their district.

One White secondary history and English teacher from a liberal, moderately changing city district in California noted that pushback on Ethnic Studies had been happening for the “past five years.” Yet an educator from Orange County noted how tension over “CRT” exacerbated prior tensions with some parents beyond “ethnic studies” alone:

OCDE (Orange County Dept. of Ed) has been having discussions on Ethnic Studies and CRT. There have been some protests and OCDE has been hosting speakers who have been advocating to limit. Mostly parents are leading the opposition. It’s not even all parents, just the ones who come from whiter districts. The Dept of Ed seems to be responsive to these criticisms and are approaching a more conservative decision.

**Some teachers’ stories also indicated how local opposition to “critical race theory” spiked after districts started “pushing forward with” “Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion initiatives” after a summer of national protests against Black people’s murder by police.** In Connecticut, a White teacher matter of factly talked about the work to learn “about race and racism” that had been going on in their

district “this year,” including efforts at first to listen to “BIPOC graduates” and learn from their experiences and to learn in PD “about topics such as institutional racism and its impact on our students, our own privileges as white educators, having uncomfortable conversations with students, and examining our curriculum to make it more inclusive.” Then, a local parent of a former student started “accusing teachers and administrators of indoctrinating students with the ‘racist’ ideas of critical race theory.” The parent used tactics and arguments echoed across the conflict campaign (Part 1):

Began in December, 2020, by a local citizen (parent of former public school students). This person and his supporters made repeated unreasonable requests to the school committee and called for the firing of several school administrators and teachers. He spoke at length (20 minutes or more) at each school committee meeting and wrote multiple letters to the local paper. He appeared on local talk radio shows, always accusing teachers and administrators of indoctrinating students with the “racist” ideas of critical race theory. He made an FOIA request for any district staff emails with words such as “race, racism, George Floyd, critical race theory” and many more. In July, 2021, he presented a resolution to the school committee that would prohibit the teaching of divisive topics—the text of the resolution matched the one being presented in many other districts across the country (Partisanship out of Civics act by Stanley Kurtz).

A local antiracism community group, along with other citizens, responded by speaking at the school committee meeting for over five hours to oppose the resolution. The committee unanimously defeated the proposed resolution.

**In this case, local community actors and the school committee stood firm on supporting local educators. In other cases, districts themselves seemed to participate in “limiting” learning.** A White social studies teacher from a majority students of color, rapidly changing, conservative city in North Carolina, a state where legislation was vetoed by the governor, described “district and school officials” offering “no comment” or even providing “guidance to limit” as local “attacks” and “threats” from “exceptionally vocal” “white parents” spiked amidst state efforts “to control curriculum”:

There have been numerous debates to control curriculum through the state BOE, general assembly and now local districts. The local districts have provided guidance to limit the teaching of “divisive concepts” as defined in the new state bill. Parents have been exceptionally vocal and have threatened to storm school board meetings. Conservative politicians are instigating actions of White parents. Media shunning, social media attacks, threatening emails, threats of job loss or fines are all actions that have been experienced. No comment by district and school officials. ...

**Teachers thus noted how in the absence of vocal district support for teachers, a combination of efforts instigated by “politicians” and driven by local “vocal” often “white parents” spiked “anxiety” in teachers, with “threats of job loss or fines,” “social media attacks,” “threatening emails,” or other consequences.** One educator in a conservative, rapidly changing, and rural district in Indiana, a state with no legislation pending, summed up, “I’m scared! I have more anxiety about teaching certain things.”

A White teacher in a predominantly White, conservative leaning rural Michigan district, spoke poignantly about **the detrimental impact of “the campaign” on teachers’ mental and emotional health and, their use of “curriculum”**:

The campaign to sanitize and withhold truth about history from our students took a serious emotional toll on several of my colleagues and myself in the English department. The restrictions impeded our curriculum adoption review and created a hostile environment.

A White teacher in Connecticut noted that **fear of being “attacked publicly” led to self-censorship**:

Many colleagues have expressed concern about being the next one to be attacked publicly for teaching about race. Some have admitted that they avoid these topics because of this.

**At times, educators’ worries merged fear of local public “attacks” with fear of external forces: some respondents came from states with new state-level legislation efforts and shared a sense of newly threatened restriction on the topics covered and taught in schools. Some indicated colleagues wanted to leave the field.** One Texas district educator in a liberal district mostly serving students of color described “dissecting the bill” locally with colleagues, “and thinking about its impact on our work and our personal well-being. Many expressed anger, sadness, and frustration to the point where some wanted to leave education altogether.” In Tennessee, a state with legislation passed, a White teacher in a moderately changing, conservative city district enrolling a racially mixed and majority White student body had blunt advice for other teachers in the climate of restriction: “Get out now before it gets worse.”

Others are starting to document this campaign-related churn in the field, particularly for educators of color.

## The local effects on topics covered and taught in schools

### STATES WITH BILLS

One White elementary school teacher from a majority students of color, rapidly changing, conservative suburban Texas district, noted that “Equity, MLK Jr, Snyder Act, anything discussing slavery, current events” all felt targeted by state law. The teacher then indicated the local district’s role in *interpreting* this targeting: the **broader advice given teachers locally was to “avoid any controversial issues,” leading to colleagues “shying away” altogether from more fraught U.S. history**:

We were told verbally during a PowerPoint presentation with the district counsel that we should avoid any controversial issues and only teach the “facts” of anything that might be divisive.... My colleagues are shying away from teaching anything in history or social studies that could be offensive.

In contrast, notably, a Texas teacher in a liberal city long serving students of color noted state-level but not yet local restriction, saying, “not in my district.... I only know of the efforts being led by the Texas state legislature.”

**Other teachers in states with bills described colleagues made newly “afraid” of teaching.** A White elementary teacher from a racially mixed and majority White, conservative town in Idaho, a state where legislation was signed in April 2021, noted that after caricatures of teaching “culturally responsive practices” and “current events” as “CRT,” some colleagues had newly become “afraid of being forced to teach ‘Critical Race Theory,’” while some colleagues were “afraid” to

engage locally targeted topics like “Black Lives Matter, LGBTQ+ Pride, gender/sexuality (sex education)” at all.

**Teachers also described feeling a vague threat of “general restriction” of school-level instruction in states with pending legislation.** A high school teacher in a predominantly White, liberal, Ohio suburb noted that what *felt* targeted was “any text or conversation portraying slavery as anything EXCEPT a betrayal of our country’s founding principles.”

**Teachers pointed out that anti “CRT” critics actually seemed to attack an entire wing of work in education, which respondents often described simply as “DEI” (diversity, equity, and inclusion), “history” itself, teaching about “race or racism,” or anything “challenging.”** How leaders then responded made the difference: **School level educators also noted district leaders “pulling away” currently from earlier commitments to “culturally responsive” and “social-emotional learning.”**

Some educators described experiencing newly “ferocious” local pushback on race teaching starting in early 2020, including with the 1619 Project (see timeline, Part 1). A Latinx high school English teacher from a predominantly White, conservative leaning rural district in Michigan (where a bill is under consideration) described a rapid effort to censor a teaching effort starting in fall 2020, fueled by social media and even “local politicians”:

My lessons on implicit bias using NYT Learning Network “First Encounters” was targeted in the fall of 2020. The campaign to have me resign, removed or disciplined came swift and with great ferocity! Unfortunately, it began with a disgruntled highschool student and was marshalled by a parent. My lesson started at 9:00 am, and by 10:30 am, Facebook was crawling with demands to have me fired. (Note: I have been a highly qualified and award winning teacher in this district for 30 years!)

Local politicians tried to get involved. Parents asked for my lesson plans and demanded I stop teaching from the NYT and the book Invisible Man. They also called for my resignation. Thankfully, I had an outpouring of support from former students and parents. Administration and school board members were also very supportive. What it all came down to was a parent claimed I promoted defunding the police and was trying to indoctrinate students to believe they should be ashamed to be white. Another note: I am Latinx ... the only teacher of color in the district. I plan to teach Invisible Man and NYTimes again this year!

While the teacher noted support from “administration and school board members,” they also noted how **administrators soon “cautioned” additional restrictions for colleagues:**

Administration cautioned my mentee against teaching from the 1619 Project and using specific language that suggested feminist or queer studies. .... Currently, there is a movement amongst parents to have our posters, texts and assignments monitored by a review board.

In North Carolina, a state with legislation pending, a White high school teacher who did not name a district told of **“critical race theory fears” fueling local efforts to target any discussion of “1619 materials, white privilege, CNN,” through “snitch” websites and demands for “cameras” to record teachers:**

In NC the lieutenant governor maintains a website for parents to “snitch” on teachers. Parents harangue the school board at a meeting that is supposed to be about masks, but public comment here is largely

about critical race theory fears. Parents demand cameras in class so they can see if teachers are indoctrinating or not.

In this climate, they said, **even leaders were actively pulling away from insisting on accurate history when faced with political pressure, leaving teachers encouraged to adopt a striking two-sides-ism.** The teacher wrote in shock, “My SUPERINTENDENT asked us to advise students to ‘ask your parents’ rather than insist that the Holocaust was real”:

We received professional development to help us navigate this political environment safely. Our superintendent attended and told us to advise kids to “ask your parents” instead of try to show evidence to a child whose family swears the holocaust didn’t happen.

**In consequence, the teacher noted, teachers were self-censoring:**

We are scared to get in trouble and I have avoided subjects I usually would’ve taught because I don’t want to be accused of indoctrinating. ... White students in my district have become empowered to deny white privilege and say that it is “reverse racism,” [and people] completely dismiss voices from poc [people of color].

Teachers thus noted how local district response shaped the effects of external pressure. **Confusion over what teachers “could teach” in states where “bans” had been passed or were even just under consideration also pervaded some teachers’ responses, showing the destabilizing effects of the campaign via confusion as well as fear.**

**Teachers in states with bills described a localized fear of losing funding, and a sense of wide-ranging “prohibition” on teaching “concepts” at all.** A high school teacher from a racially mixed and majority White, substantially changing, conservative district in Tennessee, pasted the text of their state’s law into our survey, noting that “TEA [their union] and my district have responded ineffectually”:

Tennessee has been trying for years but put restrictions into law in July 2021. This was led by governor Bill Lee and state legislature. We now have a law that will take away state funding from schools if teachers teach any of the following:

“The following concepts are prohibited concepts that shall not be included or promoted in a course of instruction, curriculum, instructional program, or in supplemental instructional materials:

- a. One (1) race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex;
- b. An individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously;
- c. An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment because of the individual’s race or sex;
- d. An individual’s moral character is determined by the individual’s race or sex;
- e. An individual, by virtue of the individual’s race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex;
- f. An individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or another form of psychological distress solely because of the individual’s race or sex;
- g. A meritocracy is inherently racist or sexist, or designed by a particular race or sex to oppress members of another race or sex;

- h. This state or the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist;
- i. Promoting or advocating the violent overthrow of the United States government;
- j. Promoting division between, or resentment of, a race, sex, religion, creed, nonviolent political affiliation, social class, or class of people;
- k. Ascribing character traits, values, moral or ethical codes, privileges, or beliefs to a race or sex, or to an individual because of the individual's race or sex;
- l. The rule of law does not exist, but instead is series of power relationships and struggles among racial or other groups;
- m. All Americans are not created equal and are not endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, including, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness; or
- n. Governments should deny to any person within the government's jurisdiction the equal protection of the law.

TEA and my district have responded ineffectually.

The teacher's response seemed to accept the above prohibitions as prohibiting "CRT," noting, "We were sent information on the new laws. We have voiced our discontent but the governor has said critical race theory will not be taught in TN no matter what anyone may say."

As noted by [others](#), much of the law's actual language bans a caricature of "CRT," with bullets not even part of CRT, much less K–12 teaching; other language bans concepts and ideas. **This teacher voiced a sense of threatened consequences for discussing a broad range of issues in U.S. society. The teacher described an overall sense of restriction, with the very "ability to teach" seemingly "taken away":**

They have taken away the ability to teach actual history and critical thought. We cannot properly investigate bias, power structures, or opinions and how to properly back them. They are taking all nuance and deeper thought stripping the subject of its actual value.

... Students will not be able to effectively investigate the world around them and the racism, sexism, and bias they experience. They will not be taught an actual form of history but instead taught to regurgitate propaganda without question or critical thought. They will lack the skills to properly back their own convictions and assess the bias and conviction of others. They will lack the skills of nuance and ability to question and therefore improve the world around them. They will be led to believe it is possible to be entirely unbiased despite inherent bias in everyone. They will be dissuaded from making real-world present connections to the past.

**Teachers in states with bills also spoke of awaiting "instructions" from school and local leaders on actual restriction while sensing overall prohibition on "beginning discussions in class about race, gender, or sexual orientation,"** as did this White middle school social studies teacher from a racially mixed and majority White, substantially changing, conservative suburban district in Tennessee:

These efforts began this school year with the passage of laws in the Tennessee Legislature. These efforts were made by lawmakers and parent groups. The law is attempting to restrict teaching critical race theory and prevents teachers beginning discussions in class about race, gender, or sexual orientation. Lawmakers fear that teachers will indoctrinate students with 'anti-American ideas.' I have not responded

currently as we are still receiving instructions about we can and cannot teach.

As a social studies department we were told that we cannot say things are racist. We were also told we cannot say it was sexist to keep women from voting... These efforts have made my colleagues and I feel like we cannot teach truth and that we have to deny students' [identities] and realities.

**Some respondents noted how educators were proactively censoring specific aspects of their own and others' work both out of fear of new "policy," and due to instruction from local higher-ups.** An Idaho educator noted that "folk interpretations of policy are being reported to me from schools/districts in north Idaho," with people acting on a sense that "culturally responsive teaching" and related professional development were now off limits given legislation:

I partner [with] a lot of tribal departments of education which work with public schools either on their nation or serving their citizens. PD I have previously been involved in with tribes have been halted. In one case, a tribal leader was told that there will be no more "culturally responsive teaching stuff" in their school.

The educator noted how both teacher confusion and a sense of districts' pending restriction (fueled by "parents and lawyers/politicians") was leading to an overall self-restriction by teachers:

Teachers I have talked to have felt they need to change their curriculum if they teach about critical thinking and social justice approaches to education. Particularly any curriculums that teach Native American histories or Black history. In school districts I partner with in my region (northern Idaho, Eastern Washington), I have heard reports such as "my superintendent wants to make a statement in support of banning CRT," "we no longer have culturally responsive teaching work groups," and the conflation of anti-masking and anti-CRT. Parents and lawyers/politicians have voiced baseless claims about being marginalized for being White in school board meeting in a school district north of me.

**In states with pending legislation, educators shared a sense of looming "attack" on "what is taught."** One high school educator from a predominantly students of color, liberal, suburban Ohio district even described severe financial consequences in "neighboring districts":

Neighboring districts were attacked at spring primary votes (their levies did not pass) and our principal and administration received calls on both sides of the issue beginning in April. Our school district has responded that our various DEI efforts and teaching materials will continue to be used.

While the teacher described local efforts to continue with "DEI" ("We received materials from our DEI office as well as created, linked to, and shared resources.... [some] of us completed a DEI training this summer"), they noted **local faculty "terrified, confused and/or demoralized" due to fear of both "the state legislature" and local "parents"**:

Many are fearful of potential actions by the state legislature and being attacked by parents. We will take professional development time this fall to address concerns and to provide support so that colleagues may continue to teach about issues of race and history responsibly. Many faculty are terrified, confused and/or demoralized by the threat of state legislature action to restrict what is taught — the bills proposed

in Ohio are written broadly. ... Students feel marginalized, angered and stunned by the “anti” actions in the state legislature and neighboring school districts.

**Some teachers described restrictions by their own school leaders as well as states.** A teacher in Missouri, a state where legislation was introduced in spring 2021, described how in January 2021 a principal requested “not to include any materials that are political in nature, in my Government class.” Colleagues then had to try to figure out what “CRT” was:

... My colleagues and I have discussed CRT because although we all have been teaching many years in the social studies field none of us were familiar with this term. After researching we came to the conclusion that this must be an attack on colleges since that is the only place we could find reference to it.

... The state I live in attempted to pass a law prohibiting the teaching of it but since I’ve taught in the state for over 20 years and have never heard of it I was not concerned. I was concerned when I read part of the law and the restrictions it was making but was even more concerned with how they could possibly enforce it.

**A lack of district “response” to restriction effort also was chilling teaching and learning by both adults and students.** A White high school-level instructional coach from a racially mixed and majority White, politically contested city district in South Carolina, a state with legislation that has passed, noted that their district was still seemingly deciding how to respond to apparent prohibitions on teaching “Critical race theory” when other district efforts (“actionable plans to train staff and faculty in implicit bias, REI [“Racial Equity Institute professional development] and other trainings” were actually underway. Since “June 2021,” they said, the “state superintendent said we cannot teach Critical race theory.... my school district has not responded.”

## LOCATIONS WITHOUT STATE BILLS

**Notably, teachers in places with no state prohibitions also felt a censorship drive by local critics inflamed by broader forces, often also noting tactics common in the conflict campaign.**

A White district official from a racially mixed and majority White, rapidly changing, liberal district in suburban Washington state, noted how local “parent groups” were targeting a lot of concepts as inappropriate to discuss in school:

Sexual orientation, gender identity, and critical race theory have all been the targets of heated conversation and opposition by (mostly) parent groups. While the groups agree that equity and equitable access to education and outcomes is important, they do not believe that talking about the aforementioned topics is necessary.

A White teacher from suburban New Jersey, in a racially mixed and majority White, rapid change, contested district, described how **local pushback “led by parents” often “associated with parent groups on social media” or “individuals from outside our community” created a “chilling” atmosphere for “teaching and professional development” even in a state without legislation pending.** Their district had apparently put out a strong statement about racism in fall 2020. The story indicated various common tactics in use locally by spring 2021, by “parents and their allies”:

In May or June 2021, efforts were underway in [our district] to attack teaching and professional development that addresses systemic racism,

sexual education, texts and teaching that represent members of the LGBTQIA+ community, among other issues related to curriculum & instruction.

Efforts were led by parents, many of whom are associated with parent groups on social media. Other individuals from outside our community came to join the fray.

These parents and their allies in this effort have taken to board meetings and other community forums to deliver incendiary remarks, often not grounded in the reality of classrooms or curriculum, to attack teachers and their freedom to deliver instruction on topics that are meaningful to students, and that are politically (but not educationally) contested today. These parents and allies have also filed freedom of information requests from our school administrators demanding access to emails, as well as years worth of lesson plans.

District policies on academic freedom and on adherence to board-approved curriculum have been circulated by leadership to staff, but without a clear and direct statement from district leadership or union leadership, many educators are concerned about the “chilling” atmosphere this will have on teaching and learning. Thankfully, there are no state laws at this time in NJ that are directly attacking teaching and learning.

They concluded that **as educators were “left wondering” what they could do, and in the absence of “a clear and direct statement from district leadership or union leadership,” many were “choosing to avoid” “controversial” topics:**

The official communication has referenced district policies, while unofficial communication and rhetoric has been cautionary.... Educators are left wondering what they can or cannot do in the classroom, often feeling like they now have to ask permission before addressing any “controversial” topic, or choosing to avoid it altogether.

**Other teachers described feeling left in limbo over what they were allowed to do.** A White middle school teacher from a racially mixed and majority White, conservative leaning rural Virginia district, a state without legislation but a governor’s race deeply connected to the conflict campaign, described a local targeting of “Critical Race Theory,” noting, “The opinion pages of the paper are filled with letters to the editor about our children (white) are being treated poorly and made to feel bad about their skin color,” even as “Students want to know the whole truth.” The educator had become “Unsure what I am allowed to say and teach.”

**Even in places with no actual restrictions at the state level, the broad campaign made some educators “hesitant” about “teaching about equity and social justice topics,” in case “parents or the community complain” and “administration” acquiesced to their demands for “restrictions.”** A White high school Social Studies teacher from Connecticut described feeling anxious given overall “movements” elsewhere in the state to target teachers, and given insecurity about “the broader local community,” even as local administrators were so far supportive:

In my local community where I teach, there have not been any restrictions on teaching about race and racism; I am aware of some movements in other areas of the state. ... The communication I have received in my district and school has been supportive. Resources have been provided about how to structure difficult conversations with students and strategies for helping adolescents process contemporary events.

This has been communicated through email, faculty meetings, and opportunities for professional development. Teachers have been invited to a number of voluntary activities related to equity and social justice and there have also been required sessions as well. Equity and social justice are priorities for the leadership in our district. There are some indications that the broader local community may not be as supportive of these efforts.

The educator described a growing personal sense of “hesitancy” nonetheless:

Hesitancy about how families, students, and the larger community will react when teaching about equity and social justice topics. Me and my colleagues are aware of the political landscape and worry about being “in the hot seat” when it comes to these issues. If parents or the community complain, then administration may need to calm the waters and we worry that this may result in restrictions or a watering down of the topics we examine in our classes.

A Vermont teacher who did not name a district noted that after local pushback “led by parents and politicians” who had “written letters to the local paper” and organized meetings including a state senator,

The teachers I work with are more on edge about our positions. We are generally supported by administration, but we anticipate pushback from parents and kids where we didn’t have any before ... We are not a racially or culturally diverse community, but students are becoming more vocal on both sides.

**For many teachers answering our survey, a sense of being “on edge” due to both local and external pushback loomed, chilling efforts to teach and learn — particularly if support from “administration” was unclear.**

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Some educators had experienced 2020–2021 efforts to censor specific texts and topics.

## SPECIFIC PROHIBITIONS

Combining multiple respondents’ voices from across the country, educators (who did not always name locations) described 2020–2021 targeted texts and topics as including (as a subsample):

Facts, memoirs, speeches, letters, video, audio and other recordings of Americans that have been or are enslaved, exploited, disenfranchised; ..... [texts about] Enslaved people, Unionisers Past and Present, Faults of the Founders and Today’s Legislature (bribery, adultery, smuggling, tax evasion, and so on), the Amendments to our Constitution, speeches by U.S. politicians, critical speeches, writings, any other medium by Cesar Chavez, Helen Keller, Eugene Debs, President Eisenhower, Robber Barons Then and Now, Massacre American Style, Mother Jones, novels, auto biographies, poetry, biographies, maps, and so on; 1619 Project, novels that include LGBTQ characters, *Stamped*, various materials from Learning for Justice, identity mapping activities, a Black Lives Matter sign, Indigenous History for Young People, Newsela articles, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *A Raisin in the Sun*. Unit: Genocide in social studies while reading *The Book Thief* in ELA, January 6th 2021, Tulsa race massacre, Inclusive Pronouns, GSA club creation, many picture books, systemic racism, SEL, Culturally Responsive Classroom Management, “addressing or normalizing lgbtq issues, lifestyles, or

identities,” Culturally Responsive Teaching, “underserved and under-represented students in STEM,” DEI, a play about MLK Jr, etc., “Finding our own bias and learning about systemic racism,” “gender and race,” “Anything published by Gloria Ladson-Billings,” “understanding and protecting Transgender students,” Nic Stone’s *Dear Martin*,” the picture book *All Are Welcome*, “attack on key words such as ‘diversity’ ‘social justice’ and ‘inclusion,’” “anything suggesting systemic racism or oppression of ANY group.”.....

**Some teachers described the 2020–2021 arc from districts’ energized diversity and inclusion work to currently “going silent.”** In New Hampshire, a state with legislation, a White middle school teacher (who did not name a location) described a “huge sad dark cloud” descending over “DEI initiatives” that the district celebrated in 2020, noting, **“Many people just don’t want to touch it now so the extremists are in a sense winning”:**

In 2020 my district was proud to accept my award of a year long sabbatical to promote the Just Schools program in New Hampshire. They ramped up their initiatives to do better in terms of diversity in hiring practices, social justice and SEL in our schools. Since parents began to protest “CRT,” attack my work and a new law was passed about not teaching people are “inherently racist” the district has basically gone silent about these initiatives from what I can see and seems to be in a “everything will be fine if we can just stay neutral” mentality.

This put a huge sad dark cloud over my effort to support DEI initiatives in my district and beyond. Many people just don’t want to touch it now so the extremists are in a sense winning.

In some locations by fall 2021, teaching of “CRT” was proactively prohibited by local higher-ups, even if states had no legislation. An elementary school music teacher from a majority students of color, rapid change, liberal suburb in Colorado, noted as school began in 2021, “In our start of year PD, it was listed that we could not specifically teach ‘critical race theory.’”

Others described local educators attempting to protect work in fall 2021 by clarifying it was *not* “CRT.” An educator from California said that,

At one of the all district in-service days at the start of August, there was a workshop about CRT. We were told that we do not teach CRT, unless it comes up in Ethnic Studies or Deconstructing Race(ism) courses or something similar.

A middle school social studies teacher from a racially mixed and majority White, substantial change school district in a politically contested Washington town, noted that in their site,

We were instructed that CRT was a legal term, and we don’t teach law. Another teacher responded that our district equity team had built a different definition that meant we did teach CRT. Admin said they’d check into it, but haven’t reported back. Tone was very “do what you want, but don’t call it CRT,” which I can live with.

**A few educators who pointed out local targeting of specific curricular materials by “parent groups” mentioned colleagues who also opposed teaching on “CRT” or race.** A White district office induction mentor from a racially mixed and majority White, rapid change, liberal leaning, suburban district in Washington state, described how other district “staff members” sometimes agreed with local

“opposers” campaign tropes about “equity work” as “hate and indoctrination toward white folks”:

Parent groups seem to be the loudest opposers, but there are staff members within the district that agree. Most of the actions taken have been small-scale efforts: letters to local news stations, letters to the editor, Facebook groups, school board bashing and the accusation that engaging in the equity work is a form of hate and indoctrination toward white folks. Our district has responded by saying we will strive for equitable outcomes for all students, we do not adhere or condone racism in any way, shape or form. For myself, I have made it my intentional goal: to have conversations about race, privilege, and power and use my white privilege to effect change in our school system.

While this educator and their rapid-change liberal district seemingly supported “conversations” to continue through firm restatement of antiracist intentions, others described how when colleagues joined or even “acquiesced” in a “ban” on “CRT, 1619 & the like,” the move could exacerbate intimidation of younger teachers. One White high school history teacher (who did not record a location but described a state-level “ban”) noted how some colleagues agreed with the “state BoE” and “Parent organizations inflamed by politicians and Facebook” in targeting “CRT, 1619 Project, and anything else that might cast light on the injustices of the past”:

The movement started at the end of the last school year and raged over the summer. Parent organizations inflamed by politicians and Facebook led the charge and state Republican legislators quickly used the issue to garner more support. The state BoE banned CRT, 1619 & the like after a massive influx of complaints, misinformation, and accusations of anti-American activity.

About 75% of the teachers supported the ban ... I am not one of them.

In such a place where “Most support the ban of materials no one even teaches,” the teacher said, local higher-ups had “forbidden” specific texts, leaving younger teachers “understandably cowed”:

We were forbidden to use certain curriculum resources. Most teachers acquiesced ... to this point I haven’t changed anything. In February I will be eligible to retire with a full pension, and while I don’t want to retire, I refuse to whitewash the truth.

I still teach history warts and all. I may not teach CRT per se, but I believe the reason so many students hate history is that they are continually inundated with such tidy little stories of heroics. Many younger teachers have been understandably cowed by the restrictions.

The teacher concluded,

There are many small battles not worth fighting, but there comes a time where you must draw a line in the sand and dig in against hysteria that will harm future generations.

**Many teacher stories shared on our survey expressed a sense of “fear” and “being cowed.” Teachers described both restriction and resultant *self* censorship due to both external and local campaign activity, in states both with and without legislation — that is, if higher-ups did not firmly support the work.**

As a White teacher from a conservative town in Kentucky (a state with legislation filed) said of their racially mixed and majority White district, **support and “encouragement” kept some teachers “still teaching the texts they always**

**have,” even as others were starting to “reevaluate” their use of texts given the fear fomented by a state climate of “banning”:**

The state legislature in Kentucky has a republican super majority that jumps on every conservative bandwagon in terms of banning people’s freedoms and limiting civil rights. My school district is very supportive of teachers and encourages discussions and texts about the history of race and racism in this country. ... My district encourages teachers to participate in anti-racism professional development, book clubs, and discussions. .... So far, I don’t think there has been an impact on students in terms of instruction because teachers in my district are still teaching the texts they always have ... [Still], I may reevaluate some of my text selections in my English classes. We are a single income household relying on my income and I cannot risk getting fired because of the books I teach.

In Colorado, a White teacher in a racially mixed and majority White district in a conservative leaning suburb summed up **a dynamic of teacher self-censorship after a year of “tremendous” pushback on “race and gender,”** including parents angry about “Asking for pronouns on a ‘get to know you’ worksheet for high schoolers [or] Anything having to do with race”:

**We are avoiding any topic that could potentially be incendiary. We’re afraid to teach anything about race, including Frederick Douglass, and my colleague said she’s afraid to teach the bill of rights.**

### **“DEEPLY DIVIDED COMMUNITIES”: LONGSTANDING EFFECTS OF THE CONFLICT CAMPAIGN**

**Teachers in various locations summed up their current state as being “terrified to teach” in “deeply divided communities.”** In predominantly White, substantial-change, liberal, rural Massachusetts, where the district and principal were making some efforts to address issues of “equity, diversity and inclusion” even “forcefully,” local “vocal” parent complaints and “murky” overall guidance on teaching “controversial topics” were making one middle school civics teacher “terrified”:

When the school committee held a meeting about diversity, equity and inclusion a vocal group of parents insisted on a statement that CRT will not be taught from the committee. Our principal has forced staff to learn about white privilege. ... Our school committee issued a statement in support of black lives matter; however, I don’t think the statement reflected a community consensus. They also hired an equity, diversity and inclusion expert to work with staff during the upcoming year.

As a civics teacher, I am terrified to teach in this polarized environment. Also, we are supposed to contact the school committee before teaching “controversial topics”; however, what these issues are is murky.

We are a deeply divided community and do not agree on values.

Some respondents mentioned anticipating a longer-term “combative” dynamic in their broader communities. In a racially mixed and majority White, substantial-change, liberal, suburban Massachusetts district, a White K-8 social studies teacher noted that “I teach in a very progressive district, so one of our focal points in 8th grade is race and racism.” Still, even this teacher anticipated a “more combative” experience with parents in 2021–2022:

I did not experience any restrictions on my content during the 20–21 school year. However, I anticipate that this year will be more combative. I think parents will be on heightened alert to social studies curriculum.

In a majority students of color, liberal California city, a White middle school Social Studies teacher noted that while “The efforts by the public to restrict our work toward inclusion at the middle school level for myself and my colleagues has been almost non-existent,” it was the broader social community that felt different after all the “angry verbiage,” with an orientation against public school teachers overall:

... This is where I really see the change. There is lots of angry verbiage being thrown around on social media. People giving ultimata about never allowing their child back in a public school, complaints about taxpayer money being wasted on promoting the liberal agenda, and threats of moving out of California altogether because of the Democrats education “agenda”. It is ugly ...

In a racially mixed and majority White district in a politically contested California town, a special education teacher noted that “This is creating a division among co-workers.” A White high school teacher in a predominantly White, liberal Ohio suburb (predominantly White) noted an additional consequence: more educator exhaustion. “We have to spend personal time fighting against their attacks on honesty in education.”

A White elementary teacher from racially mixed and majority White, substantial-change, conservative-leaning urban Virginia, a state where issues related to “CRT” were central to the governor’s race, noted,

We have felt stressed about some of the public and community’s push-back. Multiple overly vocal people aren’t seeming to be open to listening to other perspectives to try to come to an understanding and advocate for “justice for all.”

A White high school math teacher in a majority students of color, rapid-change, contested city in California, noted that the year’s experience had likely lasting effects, with “Relationships between parents and teachers strained due to eroded trust.”

## **BACKING UP THE LOCAL RIGHT TO TEACH AND LEARN ABOUT ISSUES OF RACE AND DIVERSITY**

**While many of the stories shared with us were stories of fear and anxiety about teaching about race/racism or broader issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion, responses also indicated repeatedly that what would be taught by educators and learned by students depended on local district and school-level leadership — including in states with bills pending.**

Many respondents said this explicitly. We focus again first on the voices of EOs and district-level staff. EOs indicated the importance of **clear communication and support action from districts, school boards, and unions.**

An EO from a majority students of color, rapid change, liberal suburban district in the South pointed out the need to explicitly “push back” against “opponents” themselves “pushing back,” specifically by **“really talking about what it is that we’re doing” in educators’ own terms:**

The important thing that I’m learning is we have to continue to push back against the opponents of this work by really talking about what it is that we’re doing ... to make sure that each and every young person that is involved in the school system has an adequate opportunity, has adequate access, and have everything they need to be successful and make sure that we do what we can to help them achieve success.

One EO from a majority students of color, rapid-change, liberal district in a Western city, also noted **the importance of clear messaging about what the**

**district was, in fact, doing** (here regarding Ethnic Studies), amidst “CRT” pushback fueled by “an outside group”:

The most recent pushback is [against] the notion that whatever an outside group has defined as CRT, that we are shoving this into kids and into schools. And so our message, and I use this even as I talked to parents, is that we, *our* approach is ... historical inquiry, and we want to understand all the values, all the perspectives of our students and the communities that they come from.

An EO from a racially mixed and majority White district in a politically contested, suburban Northeastern district in a state with pending legislation said similarly that from the spring “into this year,” district staff had worked to craft clear communications about what the district was actually doing:

[W]e spend a lot of time first and foremost, with our administrators kind of prior to the school year providing what, what equity is and what equity isn't. We developed an FAQ on what is critical race theory, are we teaching critical race theory? What is SEL? So we did an FAQ and put that out on our webpage as a public document. We shared that with all our faculty and staff to try and answer some of those questions and shared that with our community.

An African American district office educator from a predominantly White, conservative city district in Michigan, a state with legislation pending, similarly emphasized their district's definition of effort to “create inclusive spaces” while refusing to be “deterred”:

We are battling misinformation. People rely too heavily on one source of information. In particular Fox News. I understand that this is just the next thing for the GOP in particular to create faux outrage about. It will pass. And we cannot let it deter us from the work of creating inclusive spaces where ALL feel safe, welcome, and loved.

A district EO in a racially mixed and majority White, rapid change, liberal Southern city with state legislation pending, noted how **being able to repeat superintendent and school board support for racial equity work allowed educators to stay the course with existing equity priorities**, work, and messaging, saying, “we just lean on, you know, really what our board has asked us to do, what my superintendent has asked us to do.”

An EO in a majority students of color, rapid change, liberal suburban California district, noted **the importance of having clear and “firmly established” district messages from the top**, plus united supports from all board and cabinet and policies offering direction and clarity. Along with their own “reassurances” to school-level educators, this combination seemed to be strengthening educators against being intimidated into restrictions in a district where “a quarter of” the population might have been “anti CRT”:

I would say maybe a quarter of our district would consider themselves anti CRT, whether they know what that means or not. And I think it plays out a lot more at the school site level where a teacher and or principal get pushback. And so my work has been calling, you know, supporting some of those folks with the tools they need and the language and reassurances they need to support their work. I think there's various strong consensus amongst all seven of our board members and all of our cabinet members and all of the leadership in the district that that's not going to change the way we're doing things. We already have a firmly established vision, values, policy framework, etc., and [so], when

people come to come at us with [anti] CRT work, we can say like, “we don’t explicitly teach CRT. So like, you know, it’s not in our standards. It’s not mentioned in our textbook.”

**Respondents also mentioned the importance of clear messaging by districts about what was taught.** In South Carolina, a state that has passed legislation, an educator said, leaders offered guidance through “explanations of what was exactly in SC Social Studies Standards. Restating CRT was not mentioned or taught in SC.” In a moderate-change, majority students of color district in a liberal California city, a district instructional officer described how the district attempted to respond to a host of tactics. After local “parents, political activists on social media, public accusation of indoctrination, accusations of erasing history, public accusation of making White students feel bad, requests to opt out of courses and or lessons; [and] freedom of info requests,” the district had responded with “written response, parent information sessions ... media interviews.... [and] Professional development session on selected topics.” The educator also noted the key role of students in backing up work: “Students are advocating for representation in the curriculum.”

As a backup tactic, the district educator suggested,

Be clear on your position. Every level of the organization must stand together. Enlisting co-conspirators when the negative attacks happen. Work with media to get your story out there. Don’t let it be told only through social media and news clips that over simplify. Keep communication going even with those who disagree.

An EO from a majority students of color, rapid-change, liberal city district in a Western state also pointed to **the importance of district staff’s own support for school principals**, to ensure “principals feel good about their platform and their vision moving forward, because they’re going to get more of the hate groups, if you will, against these kinds of inclusive practices that we’re trying to do”:

It’ll be interesting as we begin to open up schools, and as we enter fall and kids are back in school, to see how, how much that is impacting our schools and how much we have to make sure our principals feel good about their platform and their vision moving forward, because they’re going to get more of the hate groups, if you will, against these kinds of inclusive practices that we’re trying to do. ... So I know the burden falls more on the principals who are like on the ground level, dealing with these parents, but at the district level there’s clear support for this equity work across the board that I don’t worry too much about that conservative population.

A suburban equity officer in a racially mixed and majority White, rapidly changing, liberal district in the west, described **continuing efforts at “listening to all perspectives” but still “staying the course with our ... narrative of creating safe, inclusive environments for kids”**:

So I think that’s where being mindful of being very responsive to the majority of our, our clientele, but also paying attention to the African-American advocacy groups and the more so right-leaning White groups just listening to all perspectives, perspectives to make sure we’re staying the course with our, you know, narrative of creating safe, inclusive environments for kids. Absolutely .... I feel like there’s very clear support for the work and ... neither our board members nor our superintendent are interested or swayed by any of those [anti “CRT”] arguments.

Another EO from a racially mixed and majority White, rapid change, liberal suburb in the west, called the debate **a local “opportunity to learn and teach,”** even

as they said bluntly that given Board and top “boss” support, local critics “need to understand .... we’re not going to stop doing the work because you disagreed with us.” The EO also mentioned **union leaders and community groups as two additional key sources of support enabling them to continue the effort to improve existing equity work**, noting, “fortunately we have a union that buys into this work”:

To me, it’s an opportunity to learn and teach. And we may, we may walk away from it totally disagreeing. And that’s fine. But what they need to understand is we’re not going to stop doing the work because you disagreed with us. But once again, it goes back to having a boss that supports the work, you know, and, and a school board that does also, and without those two things working together, this work would be very, very difficult.

Another EO in a majority students of color, rapid-change, liberal suburban district in a Western state, described all the work necessary in a “very political” job, to get various stakeholders “on board with really making some serious commitments to this and feeling connected to this work”:

It’s also building relationships with the unions ... all of our labor and bargaining units is a huge part of my work too. Basically they’re all run by mostly White folks, you know, across the board and each union, maybe with the exception of our bus drivers union. And so there’s [effort] to get them on board with really making some serious commitments to this and feeling connected to this work.

We note that the majority of these optimistic backup plans were articulated by EOs in places where legislation has not been initiated or has not yet passed.

**Teachers also reported district colleagues and local supporters backing up their right to teach and learn about such topics (and to continue building their skills for doing so), emphasizing the crucial role of district-level backup as well as local community activity. Teachers in districts with varying politics discussed the importance of leaders’ communication and leadership, both at the district level and at the school level.**

A White high school public charter teacher from liberal Washington D.C. noted how **system leadership had more explicitly and “vocally” countered external legislative efforts by stating local “values”**:

In D.C. the efforts to legislate against the inclusion of critical perspectives of race, racism, and oppression more broadly in public education spaces has largely been led by Republican congressmen from other parts of the country. The primary sponsor of the relevant legislation is Representative Glenn Grothman of Wisconsin. In early June, Rep. Grothman introduced a bill that, following the language of similar bills across the country, redefined critical race theory while seeking to limit its inclusion in public schools. Because D.C. does not have voting representation in the national legislature, schools in D.C. are, in part, under the authority of Congress. The Chancellor of D.C. public schools (DCPS) released a statement shortly after Grothman’s legislation was introduced that refuted the bill’s stance, claiming that it was an effort out of line with DCPS’s values.

The teacher indicated how **“vocally committed” school leadership also had played a role in supporting antiracist efforts and professional development, so teachers too could continue to “grow”**:

My school and its leadership are vocally committed to anti-racist and anti-oppressive ways of teaching and knowing the world. Our school’s

leadership continued that commitment by encouraging faculty to use our voices to advocate for the scholarly inclusion of critical perspectives. Additionally, my school has (for almost a decade) included a Racial Equity in Education Seminar (REES) as part of our new staff's introductory professional development. Unique to the '20–21 school year, school leaders partnered with community organizations to hold intentional spaces for educators and other community member to have conversations about race, justice, anti-racism, community, trauma, and healing.

Because of my school's leadership, I have continued to feel that my voice as an educator and my scholarship matters to the work we are collectively doing. I feel secure in my position and know that I will continue to have the support that I need to be challenged and grow .....

A White teacher from a racially mixed and majority White, rapid-change, politically contested district in suburban New Jersey, called for inviting more voice from “less vocal” supporters and advised that **districts and “school and union leadership” needed to more explicitly back up basic freedoms to “address topics,” knowing “the presence at board meetings of ‘anti-CRT’ voices may not be representative of the community at large”:**

It is important to find ways to bring in voices from parts of the community that might be less vocal and not attending board meetings. The presence at board meetings of “anti-CRT” voices may not be representative of the community at large.

Educators need to hear from school and union leadership clearly and explicitly what their freedoms are to address topics that could ultimately help students thrive in the real world.

A charter school K–8 administrator in California also spoke of the role of school leadership in continuing calm dialogue with parents with even “outrageous” “complaints”:

There have been no efforts to restrict learning/teaching. There have been questions from parents who have heard or read somewhere that we are trying to remove all white history. With conversations they seem to feel more comfortable.... Sitting and hearing parents complaints without writing them off is so important, even when they say outrageous things. Educating them on what we do is also helpful.

Other teachers tried to articulate the clarifications needed from districts and others. A White elementary teacher from a racially mixed and majority White, substantial change, conservative leaning district in rural Virginia also suggested the importance of “Teaching about what C.R.T. truly is; it's not saying that I should be ashamed as a white person, but rather, that I should learn from the horrible mistakes that we have made as a country and world in regards to our treatment of BIPOC.”

**Repeatedly, teachers returned to the importance of both leaders and teachers meeting critics with matter of fact descriptions of necessary student support, teaching, and learning.** A Latinx California teacher in a majority students of color, rapid-change, liberal suburb, concluded:

I would find this whole situation funny if it wasn't so serious. The push-back does not scare me and I will continue to teach my students principles of equity and justice..... Don't let people that know nothing about teaching/pedagogy to dictate how instructional time is spent.

Remember that we are trying to develop well-rounded students and prepare them for a wide world of diversity.

A Black high school counselor in majority students of color, urban, liberal New York, offered his own version of a proactive statement to share with critics, in a state with legislation pending:

As educators it's our duty to address the topic of racism and discuss it openly with our students. We work with diverse populations that experience racism too frequently. To not talk about racism is dismissive of their race and cultural experiences.

**Some educators suggested that districts could back up teachers' work to support students with both clear statements of what educators were doing and direct dialogue with local critics.** A White teacher in a predominantly White, liberal leaning Rhode Island suburb (a state where legislation was filed) described how their district attempted to continue to engage in dialogue with critics locally, such that "no actions have been taken other than questioning":

Our school district has been contacted and asked if we are teaching Critical Race Theory or Culturally Responsive Teaching by community members, parents and some town council members. I have heard that this happens about once a week. I believe it began toward the end of the school year and continues through the summer. My understanding is the questions have been met with honesty. We have not adopted Critical Race Theory, but we are trying to practice Culturally Responsive Teaching. Many of the questions come from community members with very little understanding of either Critical Race Theory or Culturally Responsive Teaching, evidenced by the nature of their questions. To my knowledge, no actions have been taken other than questioning.

## A Call for Intergenerational Support

**In such efforts to handle the conflict campaign, some educators said *they* needed support from the local community. In a variety of partisan contexts, in states both with and without legislation passed or pending, both EOs and teachers suggested intergenerational community action.**

An EO from a racially mixed and majority White, conservative leaning district in the Midwest expressed gratitude that despite a local climate of intimidation amidst pending legislation, local parents of color were "navigat[ing] this racially hostile space" and speaking up to support district educators, including after a new superintendent of color had been introduced:

we had eight comments, four were super negative [with] a lot of racially coded language, but the other four comments were from parents of color voicing strong support of the hire and happiness.

**Respondents also shared appreciation for collective, intergenerational local organizing efforts backing up both districts and teachers in efforts to keep learning.** One educator in liberal, suburban Ohio (with pending legislation) described how local community members were proactively "Getting organized, Creating events, Talking to school board members, Engaging youth, Strengthening talking points, Raising money," noting too, "Several students in [this district] are involved & speaking out against the legislation."

**Both district staff and teachers in all sorts of locations noted the importance of educators rallying together to protect the right to learn.** An African-American district office educator from a moderate-change, conservative city

district in Michigan (where legislation is pending) described how “A cohort of educators across [my region] meets regularly to discuss and brainstorm an appropriate response. We are starting by sharing information about what CRT is and the work occurring in schools.” An equity officer from a majority students of color, rapid-change, liberal district in the suburban South, in a state where bills had been introduced, summed up, “We need to support each other and speak up.” In Texas, with legislation passed, a White district curriculum director in a liberal city district serving majority students of color concluded that both voting and “professional learning communit[ies]” among educators would be the ultimate backup to inclusion work:

It is critical to stay informed of current legislation impacting public education. Contact your representatives! Vote! Also, find and maintain a professional learning community. It is integral to find people that you can lean on and ask for support.

A White social studies teacher from a racially mixed and majority White, rapidly changing, conservative city district in North Carolina, a state where the Governor vetoed a bill, noted that,

This is a serious and critical time in which we have to unite to protect educators for standing up for the authentic teaching of the past and to educate students in the uncomfortable history of slavery, caste system, and racial injustice.

A White educator from a racially mixed and majority White, rapid-change, contested city district in Minnesota noted how beginning in summer 2021, local supporters of the district responded to a local “Informational” meeting “led by the American Experiment” by writing “letters to the editor”:

Email messages to those who registered and/or attended. Protestors packed several local school board meetings and made lots of noise. Letters to the editor. I responded with a letter to the editor. The school board responded by approving new vision and mission statements that included equity for all students.

**Others emphasized how *students* wanting to discuss these important topics could be “listened to” and tapped more often as supporters.** A White high school social studies teacher from Connecticut noted the untapped power of local student “interest” in calling for the ability to learn, noting, “Students are more interested than ever in issues around equity and social justice and are capable of engaging in inquiry that is more respectful than what we see from adults.”

**Other teachers pointed out the need for intergenerational organizing to back up the right to teach, learn, and deliberate real world issues.** In a state without pending legislation, as one White high school math teacher in a majority students of color, rapid change, contested city district in California indicated, local parents’ “demands” and “accusations” could also “scare” teachers unless communities organized as “students, parents, and teachers” to push boards and the district to support the right to teach and learn about “controversial issues”:

A few months ago, parents started attending school board meetings discussing Critical Race Theory (and along with it equity, race and racism, etc). A small group of educators joined a larger parent group (and students of those parents) to petition the board during public comment at meetings. There were letters written to the board demanding they take action, accusations of teachers doing harm to students (e.g. indoctrination) and freedom of information requests related to CRT. The board even drafted a resolution on CRT. In response, we gathered

students, parents, and teachers to speak at the board meeting on the harms any resolution on CRT would cause. The board elected to take no action on the resolution.

The teacher explicitly noted the role of local students in backup: “Luckily, in speaking to the board, ... students were heard.” The educator noted that the district, too, had backed up educators with “an emailed affirmation of our right to discuss controversial issues in our classrooms, along with a reminder of pre-existing board policy on bringing controversial issues into the classroom,” supporting the board’s ultimate decision to override local calls for an anti-“CRT” resolution:

We were scared for a while. Thankfully, the board took no action so our academic freedom will not be restricted.

The teacher concluded that,

The parents looking to ban CRT, equity, etc. are often loud and rude. Many of their arguments are unfounded. In our case, it was helpful to counter that with well-reasoned and respectful statements. I find it most effective for convincing others, rather than stooping to the level of disrespecting those who are disrespectful/disagreeing with you.

**Finally, both EOs and teachers offered a final piece of advice for districts to handle the conflict campaign: support educators to keep building their professional capacity for guiding such teaching and learning, to persist in doing it effectively.** An EO from a racially mixed and majority White district in a liberal suburban Northeastern community, with state legislation pending, noted the crucial importance of districts continuing to help build teachers’ own “capacity” to actually teach successfully about “these really difficult topics.” A White high school social studies teacher in Connecticut said the same:

Teachers need training in how to engage in difficult conversations and how to teach hard history and current events in a professional manner. Some teachers avoid the controversy and teach conventional, watered down versions of various topics. Other teachers might push their own perspectives on students too much. Teachers need more assistance with strategies for guiding students to develop their own opinions that are based on evidence. Teachers and schools also need to offer more opportunities for students to engage in respectful and meaningful dialogue about these topics — this is what democracy is.

## The Stakes of the Year to Come

As our study period ended, EOs expressed particular concerns about potential shifts in local governance. Noting the work environment around DEI work as “a constant state of political whirlwinds,” an EO from a majority students of color, rapid-change, liberal, Suburban northeast district discussed the stakes of upcoming school board elections, pointing out how these results would shape and potentially curtail district equity efforts:

We had a board that was solidly supportive of equity. I think we still have a board like that, but the politics may sway the answer. And so to be honest with you, I think I’m in a constant state of political whirlwinds when it comes to this work.

An EO from a majority students of color district in a politically contested western city in a state that has taken action against “CRT,” anticipated that the ultimate

long term effect would be school board turnover, after “conservative” pushback fighting both “equity work” and masks:

At our last board meeting. We had this group that is sending out a bunch of anti-maskers, you know, to schools, but they’re also, when you go to look at their web page, are anti-equity work and [focused on] how to stop that work from happening in your district — they are known for flipping boards. So my concern, my immediate concern right now is we have three board seats up in November. And if those board seats, our board is pretty progressive right now, which is really unheard of in [district name]. But if those board seats flip to a more conservative kind of demographics, then we ... I know we will lose our superintendent. And then I think the equity work will stop.

As we finished this report, the EO emailed us to say that anti “CRT” candidates in their community had just flipped the board.

The conflict campaign has, as intended, further divided and disrupted many already-divided school communities, often creating a hostile environment for teaching about race and other forms of diversity in our society — and so, threatening students’ freedom to learn. Part 3 takes a structured look at *where*.

PART 3:  
The Conflict Campaign in  
Local School Districts

The conflict campaign has garnered considerable public attention and prompted 30 states to either initiate or enact executive action restricting teaching and learning about race and racism. To date, 13 states have passed legislation or issued decrees. At the same time, a great deal of conflict has played out at the local school district level, often in school board meetings. In many cases, these local conflicts were highlighted and exacerbated by the campaign as a whole.

**How broadly has the conflict campaign impacted local school districts? Which districts have been affected? Has the campaign prompted school boards to take formally documented action on “CRT” or other related issues?**

To explore these questions, we analyzed our unique data set of media stories covering “CRT” and public schools between September 2020 and August 2021. Most of this media coverage featured stories in local news outlets that paid particular attention to institutions such as public schools. Even amidst the financial pressures on journalism, local news sites are widely dispersed across the nation and hence well positioned to report on the local politics of public education. Regarding the anti “CRT” campaign, this coverage tended to center around school board meetings and focus on formal actions such as board resolutions.

Our decision to use news stories to examine the local impact of the conflict campaign is partially based on the obstacles to collecting timely and candid information directly from district officials or school board members. Amidst the swirl of the conflict campaign and the polarizing tone of public discourse, it is likely that most district officials or school board members would have been wary of responding to a national survey.

In this section, we begin by describing our methods for gathering and analyzing the media stories. We then present an overview of which school districts have been named in these stories, drawing particular attention to those districts that have been “impacted” by the campaign. We define “impacted” districts as those where there is some evidence of local campaign actions (such as petitions, recall efforts, freedom of information requests, etc.) or of contentious school board meetings that addressed “CRT.”

Below, we analyze the location, demographics, and political leaning of these impacted school districts. We also consider whether these impacted districts are more likely to reside in states that have attempted to enact legislation or pass executive orders on “CRT.” Finally, we turn to an examination of school board resolutions related to the conflict campaign. Our analysis considers the number, size, and characteristics of districts that have passed resolutions, as well as whether these resolutions have advanced or resisted the conflict campaign.

## Methods for Media Analysis

We collected articles from the news archives NewsBank, Dow Jones Factiva, and Google that used the phrases “school district,” “school board,” or “public schools” along with the term “critical race theory.” We searched for articles published between September 1, 2020 and August 30, 2021. After cleaning and removing duplicates, our news search yielded 10,024 total articles, more than half of which came from local news sources.

We generated a list of unique school districts named in the 10,024 articles using a combination of auto-coding (i.e., by capturing all capitalized words preceding phrases such as “School District” or “Public Schools”). Auto-coding was supplemented by manual article review to ensure that issues related to “critical race theory” arose in the identified districts. District names were paired with the location where the article was published to distinguish between, for example, Douglas County West Community Schools in Nebraska and Douglas County Community

School District in Colorado. Finally, we linked our list of school districts to data collected by the National Center of Educational Statistics (NCES). NCES provides current and historical information on district location, enrollment, and student racial demographics.<sup>10</sup>

While our data collection was systematic and thorough, our list of 894 unique districts impacted by local efforts to challenge or debate the presumed presence of K–12 “CRT” does not reflect all districts that have been impacted by the conflict campaign. Some news articles covering “critical race theory” and public schools may not have been archived by NewsBank, Factiva, or Google. Given that Google sells advertisements, it is additionally possible that they favor certain news outlets over others. Further, there may be school districts that encountered pressure from parent groups or activists but such contention was not reported. And this may be particularly true in the smallest districts with the least media coverage. As such, the number of districts that we identified as being touched by localized conflict campaigns should be viewed as a lower limit.

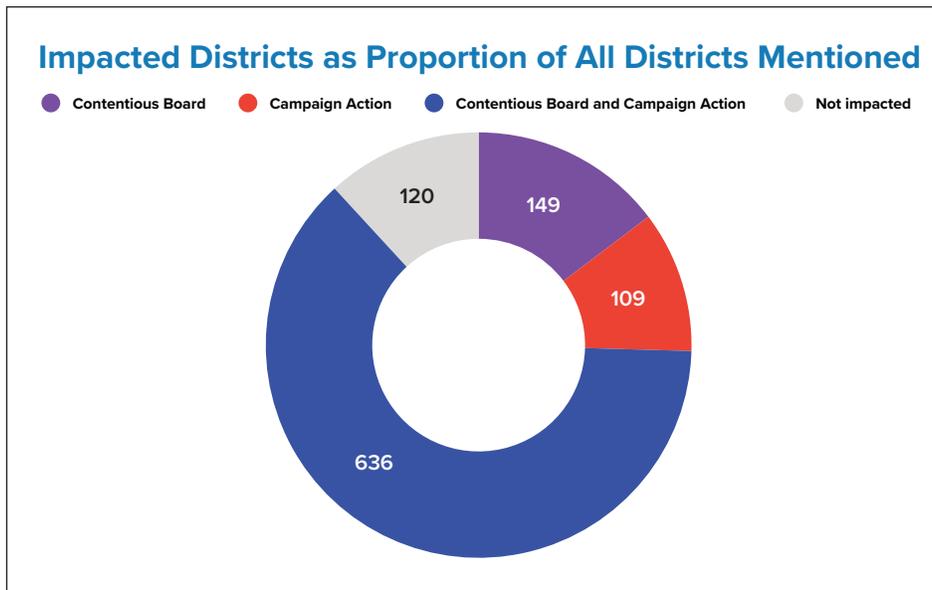
## Impacted Districts

1,014 unique districts are named in the 10,024 articles on “critical race theory” and public schools. In some instances, the media stories mention districts for reasons unrelated to “critical race theory” and the conflict campaign. We were interested in identifying districts where there was some evidence of local actions related to the campaign or contention at school board meetings. We thus searched articles about the named districts for a set of action terms associated with the conflict campaign’s key goals (see Part 1): “Recall,” “Petition,” “Resign,” “FOIA,” “Resolution,” or “Censor.”<sup>11</sup> In addition, because the conflict campaign specifically sought to provoke local “battles” over “CRT” and to “take back” local school boards (Part 1), we searched for cases in which discussions of “CRT” had prompted divisive and/or angry interactions in school board meetings. We searched articles to see whether the word “Board” appeared together with any one of a number of terms that suggested heightened contention such as, “Heated” or “Bitter” or “Harass,” “Threat,” or “Violence.”

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<sup>10</sup> We offer only a brief summary of our methods for media analysis here. A longer discussion of our approach is presented in our methodological appendix.

<sup>11</sup> For terms such as “FOIA,” we also searched for related terms such as “Freedom of Information,” or “Records request,” or “Public record.”



All together, we identified 894 unique school districts that likely have been impacted by localized conflict campaigns. (There were only 120 instances of districts named in articles about “CRT” and schools that showed no evidence of impact.) In the vast majority of the 894 impacted districts, there was evidence of both contentious board activity and campaign action. **In articles covering more than half of all impacted districts, the words “censor” or “ban” appeared and roughly one third of districts were associated with the terms “resolution,” “petition,” and “resign.”** (See Table 3.)

In keeping with the dramatic rise of the conflict campaign, what began as a small number of impacted districts grew substantially over time. Media covered 48 impacted districts in fall 2020, 313 additional districts in winter and spring 2021, and 533 more in summer 2021.

**Table 3: Actions in “Impacted” Districts**

Actions	# of Districts	% of Impacted Districts
Recall	197	22.04%
Petition	260	29.08%
Resign	271	30.31%
FOIA	138	15.44%
Resolution	310	34.68%
Censor	521	58.28%
Any Action	745	83.33%

**Impacted districts enroll 17,743,850 students, or 35% of all K–12 students in the United States.** Similar numbers of impacted districts are “Large” (enrolling 15,000 or more), “Mid-Size” (enrolling 5,000–14,999), or “Small” (enrolling 1,000–4,999). A few (6.8%) impacted districts are “Very Small,” enrolling less than 1,000 students.<sup>12</sup> (See Table 4.) It is possible that so few “Very Small” districts show up as

<sup>12</sup> The total population of K–12 students in the United States is roughly evenly distributed between three categories of districts: 1) Very Small and Small districts; 2) Mid-Size Districts; 3) Large Districts.

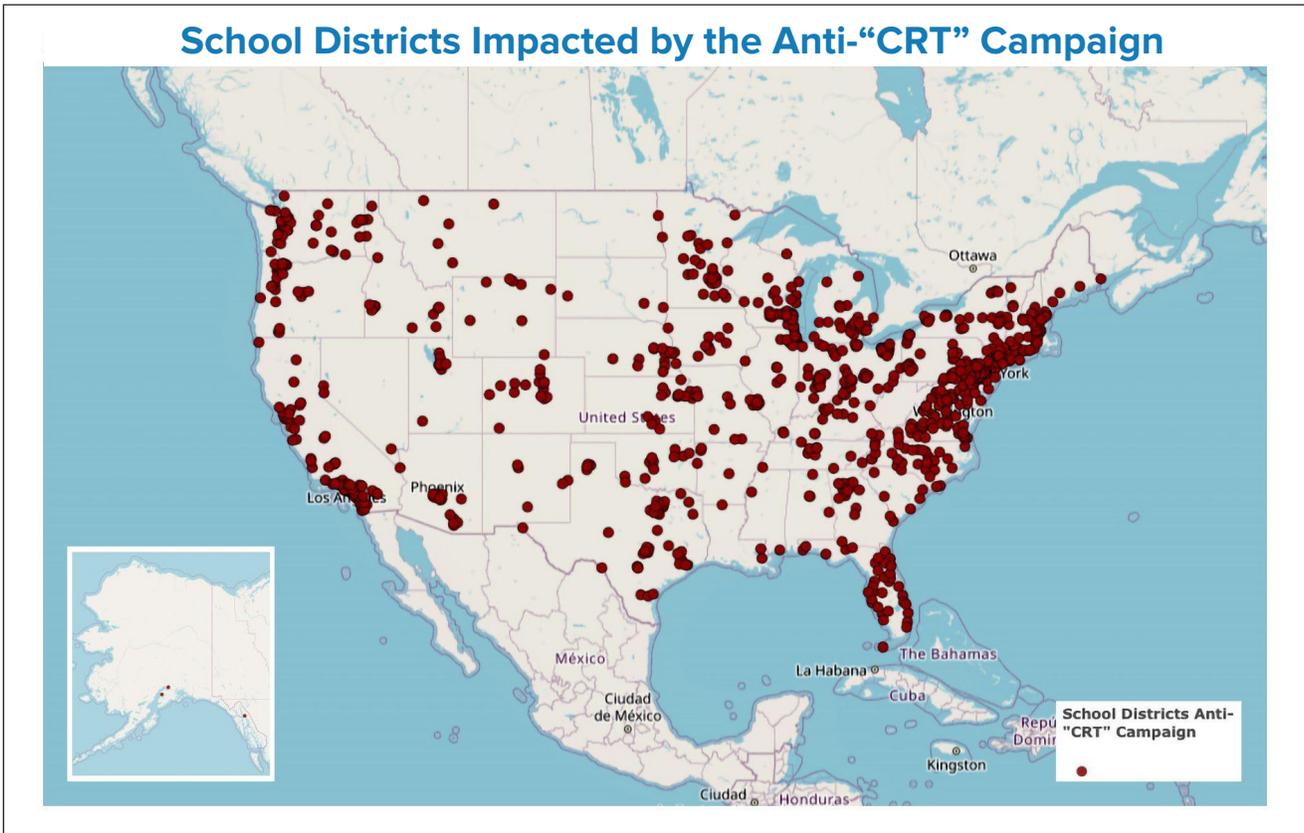
impacted in our list because local journalism does not provide the same quality of coverage for these districts as exists for districts that enroll more students.

**Table 4: School Districts Impacted by the Anti “CRT” Campaign, by Enrollment**

Size of District	# Districts Impacted	% of Impacted Districts
Very Small (0–1,000)	61	6.82%
Small (1,000–4,999)	287	32.10%
Mid-Size (5,000–14,999)	277	30.98%
Large (15,000+)	269	30.09%

The impacted districts are widely distributed across the United States. Below, we present a map with each of the 894 impacted districts designated with a red dot. These districts are located roughly evenly across the West, Midwest, South, and Northeast regions as seen in Table 5. 48 states and the District of Columbia are home to at least one impacted district. Only Delaware and Hawaii (which governs its schools through a statewide agency and hence does not have any local districts) do not include an impacted district.

**There does not appear to be any relationship between state efforts to pass or enact anti “CRT” rules and the number of impacted districts in a state.** Roughly the same proportion of districts have been impacted in states that have initiated action to ban “CRT” as in states where no such efforts have been undertaken. **Thus, we see that *local* activity around the conflict campaign matters tremendously, *in addition* to the context of state-level legislation.**



**Table 5: School Districts Impacted by the Anti “CRT” Campaign, by Region**

Region	# Impacted Districts	% Impacted Districts in Region
West	223	24.94%
Midwest	237	26.51%
South	250	27.96%
Northeast	184	20.58%

**Even as impacted districts are distributed broadly across the United States, they tend to be concentrated in communities with one or more of four distinguishing characteristics.**

**First, impacted districts are more likely to serve suburban communities than cities or rural areas or small towns.** Using data from the National Center of Educational Statistics, we found that more than 40% of impacted districts are located in the suburbs, even as suburbs house only 23% of all districts nationally (See Table 6.)

**Table 6: School Districts Impacted by the Anti “CRT” Campaign, by Location**

District Location	# Impacted Districts	% Impacted Districts
Rural	150	16.78%
Town	128	14.32%
Suburb	371	41.5%
City	245	27.4%

**Second, impacted districts are more likely to be characterized as “Racially Mixed and Majority White” than “Predominantly White” or “Majority Students of Color.”** We placed all impacted districts into these three categories that are roughly equal in terms of number of districts nationwide. School districts enrolling 0–49.9% White students were defined as “Majority Students of Color School Districts,” districts with 50–84.9% White students were defined as “Racially Mixed and Majority White School Districts,” and districts with 85–100% White students were defined as “Predominantly White School Districts.” Almost one in two of all impacted districts are “Racially Mixed and Majority White Districts,” while one in three is a “Majority Students of Color District,” and only one in six is a “Predominantly White District.” (See Table 7.) This means that in real places, localized conflict campaigns **could particularly restrict White students and students of color from learning together about issues of race and diversity, and restrict educators from learning to better support students. Large numbers of students in “majority students of color” districts could also be restricted from learning about issues of race and diversity in history and today’s society.**

**Table 7: School Districts Impacted by the Anti “CRT” Campaign, by Racial Demographics**

Racial Demographics	# Districts	% Impacted Districts
Majority Students of Color	317	35.46%
Racially Mixed Majority White	419	46.87%
Predominately White	158	17.67%

**Third, districts that have experienced dramatic demographic change are far more likely than districts that have experienced little or no change to have been impacted by localized conflict campaigns.** Between 2000 and 2020, the percentage of White students enrolled in K–12 public schools in the United States fell from 61.7% to 46.1%. However, not all districts experienced the same level of decline in White enrollment. We used data from NCES to examine changes in the percentage of White students enrolled in districts between 2000 and 2020. During this period, roughly equal numbers of districts nationwide experienced: “Minimal” change (less than a 5% decline in White student enrollment); “Moderate” change (5% to 9.9% decline); “Substantial” change (10% to 17.9% decline); or “Rapid” change (more than 18% decline).

**More than 7 in 10 of all impacted districts experienced “Substantial” or “Rapid” demographic change. Indeed, districts experiencing “Rapid” change were more than three times as likely as districts with “Minimal” change to be impacted by the conflict campaign.** (See Table 8.)

**Rapid demographic change is the strongest single predictor of whether or not districts have been impacted. Communities with rapidly diminishing White populations seem to have been caught up more in conflict campaign activity. This means that in the very districts where students’ families and communities have experienced rapid demographic shift, the conflict campaign could particularly restrict students (and educators) from analyzing that experience.**

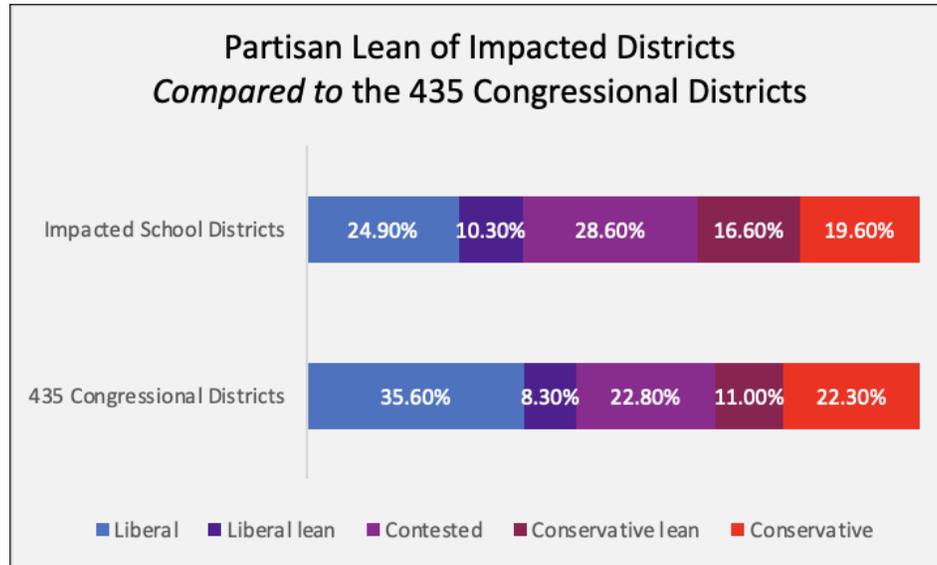
**Table 8: Rate of Demographic Change, 2000–2020 in Districts Impacted by the Anti “CRT” Campaign**

Change % White 2000–2020	# Impacted Districts	% Impacted Districts
Minimal	106	12.09
Moderate	152	17.33
Substantial	238	27.14
Rapid	381	43.44

**Fourth, school districts located in politically contested or politically leaning areas are more likely to have been impacted by localized conflict campaigns than school districts in liberal or conservative communities.** We used the percentage of the 2020 Presidential vote that went for Trump in each Congressional District as a measure for the partisan lean of communities. We labeled school districts “Liberal” if they are located in Congressional Districts where less than 40% of the vote went to Trump; “Liberal Leaning” if between 40% and 44.9% voted for Trump; “Contested” if between 45% and 54.9% voted for Trump; “Conservative Leaning” if between 55% and 59.9% voted for Trump; and “Conservative” if more than 60% voted for Trump. Using this measure, **we see that the largest group of impacted school districts are “Contested.”** A broader pattern can be seen in the

chart shown below. 55% of impacted districts are either “Contested” or “Leaning” toward Liberals or Conservatives. By contrast, only 42% of *all* 435 Congressional Districts are either “Contested” or “Leaning.” Hence deeply conservative and deeply liberal communities are underrepresented among impact school districts given the prevalence of these highly partisan districts in the country as a whole.

**Given the partisan intentions of the conflict campaign and the campaign’s particular rallying of White and “conservative” anxiety to that end (Part 1), we cannot say whether partisan targeting or local dissent over race and education drives conflict campaign activity toward such contested and politically leaning districts. We simply note here that the campaign has taken root particularly in these politically divided communities.**



Looking at the set of impacted districts that are fully contested or leaning in one partisan direction, we see that **the conflict campaign could particularly restrict students whose parents are arguing over politics, from learning together about issues of race and diversity.**

## School Board Resolutions

Across many parts of the country, the conflict campaign has fueled some community members’ concerns about the effects of “critical race theory” in local public schools. As shown in Part 1 and 2, these concerns often have prompted actions by local activists, sometimes intertwined with outside organizations. Many media articles highlight efforts by community members or outside advocates to compel school boards to ban “CRT.” (Recall that media stories about more than half of all impacted districts reference “ban” or “censor,” indicating the campaign’s purposeful orientation toward restricting the ability to teach or train about race and diversity.) Campaign-inspired efforts included letter writing, FOIA requests, phone calls, public comment during school board meetings, and much more. In numerous instances, conflict campaign activities threatened school board members, district officials, and community members who did not share the campaign’s goals.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, instances of threatening behavior at school board meetings in the following states, with anti “CRT” vitriol sometimes mixing with anti “mask” vitriol: [Alabama](#), [Arizona](#), [California](#), [Idaho](#), [Indiana](#), [Kentucky](#), [Michigan](#), [Nebraska](#), [Nevada](#), [New Hampshire](#), [Ohio](#), [Oregon](#), [Pennsylvania](#), [Tennessee](#), [Texas](#), [Utah](#), [Virginia](#), [Wisconsin](#), [Wyoming](#).

**How have local school boards responded to calls to ban “CRT”? Have boards passed resolutions? If so, what do these resolutions say? Are there patterns that illuminate which districts have taken action?**

To examine these questions, we reviewed articles about the 310 school districts in our data set that mentioned resolutions or board statements. We looked for evidence that the school board had voted on a resolution. In cases where boards were still considering action by the end of August 2021, we searched outside our dataset for articles that might provide an update in September and early October. When media articles reported on boards passing resolutions on “CRT,” we searched for the text of these resolutions on public websites hosted by the school district.

**The most striking finding from this analysis is that relatively few students are enrolled in districts that have passed resolutions banning “CRT” or ideas that the campaign associates with “CRT.” Whereas 35% of all K–12 students in the nation are enrolled in the 894 impacted districts, less than 0.5% of U.S. students attend schools in one of the 22 districts that have passed resolutions banning “CRT.”**

Thus, the efforts of the locally facing campaigns described in Part 1 have created a *context of hostility* to teaching and work on race and diversity affecting more than a third of U.S. students; educators in Part 2 of this report make clear that many *educators* have been made newly terrified to work on and discuss the issues targeted, through both bills and local activity. *Yet few districts have to date actually formally banned such work.* Indeed, some districts’ formal responses focused on clarifying districts’ work or supporting DEI goals. ***Today, as indicated throughout Part 2, the fate of DEI work or teaching on race and diversity could be up to local districts.***

In all, our analysis yielded a list of 45 districts in which school boards passed resolutions related to the conflict campaign as well as 13 additional cases in which school boards defeated or postponed resolutions associated with “CRT.”<sup>14</sup> The resolutions can be sorted into four groups:

- 1) Prohibitions on “CRT” (9 districts);
- 2) Prohibitions on ideas that the campaign ascribes to “CRT” (13 districts);
- 3) Clarification about the meaning of “CRT” and what the district is teaching (10 districts); and
- 4) Opposition to the conflict campaign and affirmation of DEI goals (13 districts).<sup>15</sup>

## Resolutions Prohibiting “CRT”

Nine school boards have passed resolutions prohibiting “CRT.” (See Table 9.) In seven of these nine districts, the proportion of White students enrolled has dropped by at least 10% over the last two decades. Moreover, White enrollment has fallen by more than 20% in Colorado’s District 49 as well as in Georgia’s Cobb County and Cherokee County. The two districts in this group that have not seen “Substantial” or “Rapid” demographic change—Wyoming’s Sheridan County and Pennsylvania’s Midd-West—are both located in very conservative communities where more than two-thirds of the vote went for Trump. Indeed, all but one of the nine school boards passing resolutions prohibiting “CRT” are located in Congressional districts where the majority of voters supported Donald Trump in 2020. These districts that have passed prohibitions on “CRT” are far more conservative than the broader pool of impacted districts.

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<sup>14</sup> As noted above, our media analysis likely understates the number of districts that have passed resolutions related to “CRT.”

<sup>15</sup> The full text for most of these resolutions can be found [here](#).

**Table 9: School Boards Passing Resolutions Prohibiting “CRT”**

State/District Name	Enrollment	% White	% Trump Vote	Location	Resolution Date
Colorado, District 49	23,890	55.9	54.1	city	8/12/12
Colorado, Montezuma-Cortez SD #1	2,779	48.0	51.6	town	9/21/21
Georgia, Cherokee County	42,766	65.7	56.9	suburb	5/20/21
Georgia, Cobb County	112,097	36.6	42.9	suburb	6/10/21
Kentucky, Gallatin County	1,634	87.0	64.8	rural	6/15/21
North Carolina, Craven County Schools	13,410	48.6	60.9	rural	8/2/21
North Carolina, Yancey County Schools	2,415	83.2	55.4	rural	8/9/21
Pennsylvania, Midd-West SD	2,106	96.7	67.3	rural	6/14/21
Wyoming, Sheridan County SD #2	3,579	87.6	70.4	town	9/8/21

The 9 school boards presented their case for prohibiting “CRT” in one of two ways. The more ideologically charged argument, from school boards in North Carolina’s Craven County and Yancey County, asserted that “CRT” presents a negative view of American history that is divisive and guilt inducing — a framing from the conflict campaign. Drawing on President Trump’s 1776 Commission, Craven County’s resolution states that “CRT” aims to replace “the magnificent history of the United States” with “divisive theories” that will “indoctrinate our children” and make them “ashamed of and divided by race” — key phrases repeated in the conflict campaign (Part 1). Even as Craven County board members decry any “intentional effort to indoctrinate children with a specific political ideology,” they suggest that schools should only teach history that is “unifying, inspiring and enabling” and “agrees with our founding fathers that all people are indeed created equal.” (Presumably, teachers in Yancey must then focus on the second paragraph of the Declaration of Independence, but ignore the fact that many who signed it were slaveholders.)

Several other school boards crafted resolutions that framed the case for prohibiting “CRT” in terms less typical in the campaign. Indeed, some anti “CRT” resolutions oddly appear to affirm ideas that the conflict campaign attacks: a commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion. Cherokee County and Cobb County in Georgia created nearly identical resolutions that articulate the view that “safe, diverse, and inclusive schools are critical,” and that it is sometimes necessary for the district to provide “unequal resources to meet unequal needs.” Then, without providing any explanation for why or how these commitments might be undermined by “CRT,” the resolutions advance what can only be described as a non sequitur:

NOW, THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED by vote of the members of the Cherokee County Board of Education at a duly called meeting held on May 20, 2021, the Cherokee County School Board and Cherokee County School District in pursuit of the aforementioned goals and objectives will NOT implement “Critical Race Theory,” also called CRT, in our schools — not under that name nor by any other name, nor will we be using The 1619 Project in our schools — not under that name nor by any other name.

While the resolutions’ claims clearly do not hold together logically, they may well reflect the tenuous political position of board majorities in ideologically diverse communities. That is, Board members may nod toward inclusion while banning

“CRT” in an effort to appease both constituents who are riled up by the campaign *and* community members who embrace values of equity and tolerance.

## Resolutions Prohibiting Ideas Ascribed to “CRT”

Another group of 13 school boards passed resolutions banning practices or ideas that they associate with “CRT.” Nine of these boards serve districts located in rural areas or small towns. Strikingly, 5 of the 13 boards lead schools in North Carolina. (See Table 10.) The case of North Carolina’s Johnston County suggests that partisan mobilization in the state is a likely reason for this concentration. Strikingly, the all-Republican Board of Commissioners in that county threatened the school board that they would withhold \$7.9 million in new school funding until it banned “CRT.” Indeed, the [County Commissioners rejected the school board’s first resolution, and did not agree to grant the funding until harsher language was put in place.](#)

**Table 10: School Boards Passing Resolutions Banning Ideas They Associate with “CRT”**

State/District Name	Enrollment	% White	% Trump Vote	Location	Resolution Date
Arizona, Continental Elementary District	678	72.6	43.9	rural	6/14/21
California, Paso Robles Joint Unified	6,882	38.8	36.9	city	8/10/21
California, Ramona City Unified	5,373	75.2	52.7	town	8/12/21
North Carolina, Bladen County Schools	4,249	35.5	54.7	rural	8/10/21
North Carolina, Brunswick County Schools	12,610	72.0	58.1	rural	6/10/21
North Carolina, Cabarrus County Schools	35,818	47.8	52.5	city	7/12/21
North Carolina, Johnston County Schools	37,414	52.2	41.1	rural	10/1/21
North Carolina, Moore County Schools	12,897	62.4	52.5	rural	7/12/21
Pennsylvania, Clarion-Limestone Area SD	832	98.8	71.2	rural	8/18/21
Pennsylvania, Mars Area SD	3,402	95.1	58.7	suburb	8/17/21
Utah, Iron District	10,543	79.8	56.1	town	7/27/21
Virginia, Amherst County Public Schools	4,115	66.7	59.8	rural	5/13/21
Washington, Peninsula School District	9,545	76.6	39.6	suburb	7/21/21

The school board resolutions prohibit teaching concepts that the conflict campaign has ascribed to “CRT” (see Part 1), such as that a particular race is superior to another, inherently racist or oppressive, or invariably deserving of personal blame and feelings of guilt. Of course, none of the resolutions draw connections between these ideas and texts associated with critical race theory — because these ideas do not reflect critical race theory.

In most cases, the resolutions lay out these concepts in a series of bullet points that share language with GOP-led state legislation and campaign documents. North Carolina’s Bladen County presents language that is almost identical to that used in several other districts in its “Resolution to Ensure Dignity and Nondiscrimination”:

1. That one race or sex is not inherently superior to another race or sex;
2. That an individual, solely by virtue of his or her race or sex, is not inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive;

3. That an individual should not be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment solely or partly because of his or her race or sex;
4. That an individual's moral character is not determined by his or her race or sex;
5. That no individual, solely by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex;
6. That no individual, solely by virtue of his or her race or sex, should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress; and
7. That the United States comprises of persons that are all created equally.

A few resolutions also warn against efforts to use classrooms for political purposes. These resolutions suggest, without evidence, that “CRT” imposes a narrow political viewpoint. The resolution in North Carolina’s Brunswick County is particularly interesting in this regard. It lifts up the importance of “impartial study and discussion” of controversial issues and the “dissemination of factual information,” in distinction from teaching that uses “social theories of any kind (i.e. Holocaust Denial Theory, 9/11 Theory. Critical Race Theory)” which it says should not be shared with “students unless approved by the Brunswick County Board of Education.” The not so subtle subtext of Brunswick County’s resolution — shared in several others — is that “CRT” presents ideas that are outside the bounds of reasonable and decent moral communities. The resolution thus prohibits any student engagement with a major field of academic scholarship, even as it distorts that scholarship.

## Clarifying Resolutions

Ten school boards passed resolutions clarifying that their district does not teach “CRT.” Most of these districts are Conservative leaning and all but one enroll Racially Mixed and Majority White or Predominantly White student bodies. (See Table 11.)

The three resolutions from boards located in Southern states — Georgia’s Forsyth County and Virginia’s Botetourt County and Chesterfield County — included language that suggested the Board did not approve of “CRT.” The resolution in Forsyth County declares that the district “does not and will not teach, nor promote, Critical Race Theory.” Even more pointedly, in Chesterfield County, the board stated: “Critical race theory is not supported by members of the board. In Chesterfield, our goal is unity, not division.”

But the majority of these clarifying resolutions adopt a neutral tone in explaining that “critical race theory” is not taught in local schools. For example, the board in Nebraska’s Columbus Public Schools issued this statement:

Critical Race Theory is just that, a theory. The instruction of this theory is better served in post-secondary institutions. We teach the adopted curriculum by the Columbus Public Schools Board of Education in a public meeting, which does not include CRT.

Similarly, the statement from Kansas’ Lansing Schools highlights that critical race theory reflects “material generally discussed at the college level, not at the K–12 level.” This statement, like a few others, also explained that “CRT” is not part of the state standards.

**Table 11: School Boards Passing Resolutions Clarifying the Meaning of “CRT”**

State/District Name	Enrollment	% White	% Trump Vote	Location	Resolution Date
Georgia, Forsyth County	50,602	54.7	53.3	suburb	5/27/21
Kansas, Lansing	2,638	71.4	56.3	town	9/13/21
Minnesota, Wrenshall Public School District	369	97.3	56.3	rural	7/28/21
Nebraska, Columbus Public Schools	4,204	53.1	56.3	town	8/20/21
Pennsylvania, Gateway SD	3,430	51.4	34.4	suburb	8/17/21
Pennsylvania, Penncrest SD	2,679	94.0	58.7	rural	8/12/21
Virginia, Botetourt County Public Schools	6,615	88.0	59.8	rural	8/11/21
Virginia, Chesterfield County Public Schools	63,127	48.5	45.3	suburb	6/1/21
Washington, Chehalis School District	3,273	87.7	50.6	town	6/15/21
Washington, Richland School District	14,221	70.2	57.8	city	6/24/21

### **Resolutions Opposing Anti “CRT” Campaign and Affirming DEI**

A final set of 13 board resolutions aim to counter the messages of the conflict campaign and sustain efforts to promote equity, diversity, and inclusion in local public schools. Crucially, there is a good deal of ideological diversity across these 13 communities. Seven of 13 are located in areas where the majority of the 2020 vote went for Trump. (See Table 12.) Six of the 13 board resolutions are from boards located in Liberal or Liberal Leaning communities. Yet, even in the most liberal of these communities, more than a third of voters supported Trump, showing that **in ideologically diverse and even conservative districts, districts can in fact stand firm on students’ rights to learn about race and diversity.**

**Table 12: School Boards Passing Resolutions Against Anti “CRT” Campaign/ Affirming EDI**

State/District Name	Enrollment	% White	% Trump Vote	Location	Resolution Date
California, Solana Beach Elementary	2,961	49.7	37.4	city	6/17/21
Connecticut, Guilford School District	3,236	82.8	38.8	suburb	4/26/21
Georgia, Decatur County	4,732	34.2	43.4	town	6/3/21
Michigan, Cheboygan Area Schools	1,585	84.3	57.9	town	8/23/21
Michigan, Traverse City Area Public Schools	9,437	88.6	57.9	town	7/26/21
Minnesota, Brainerd Public School District	6,782	91.1	56.3	town	7/19/21
New Hampshire, Concord School District	4,308	79.8	44.8	town	5/3/21
North Carolina, Durham Public Schools	33,726	18.9	44.8	city	5/20/21
Ohio, Athens City	2,721	84.9	56.3	town	6/24/21
Ohio, Yellow Springs Exempted Village	680	66.6	51.4	rural	7/8/21
Oklahoma, Oklahoma City	35,895	39.3	51.4	city	5/10/21
Tennessee, Metro Nashville Public Schools	85,747	27.4	36.7	city	8/24/21
Washington, Spokane School District	30,464	67.0	53.0	city	8/26/21

Seven of the board resolutions powerfully denounce efforts by their state legislatures to pass anti “CRT” legislation. For example, in New Hampshire, as state lawmakers considered a “CRT” bill (which later was signed into law), Concord’s school board passed a resolution about the important role of public schools in helping “students to critically analyze the world around them and learn the ways sexism and racism are interwoven into our systems and cultures, so that as a community, we can work together to end the cycles of these inequities.”

In Athens City, Ohio, board members similarly challenged two proposed state laws that would “support a false or diluted understanding of our history.” The board rejected the claim that teaching about “race, racism, gender, sexism” is “divisive,” arguing that these concepts speak to “realities deserving of dialogue and understanding.” A couple hours west of Athens, the school board in Yellow Springs, Ohio declared that their students — who they described as “Fearless Thinkers” — are ready to take on this challenge:

Our Fearless Thinkers are strong. They are able to handle the truth of this country’s creation and history in all its complexity. They come to our school buildings each day to learn and to question. That inquiry is at the heart of education and it will be choked by these two bills. We teach our Fearless Thinkers to carefully examine our history in all its complexity. We ask them to explore what the author James Baldwin meant when he wrote: “American history is longer, larger, more various, more beautiful, and more terrible” than we fully appreciate.

The Yellow Springs board characterized Ohio’s proposed legislation as “dangerous bills,” and encouraged community members to “not only vote these bills down, but to vocally speak up against the divisiveness these bills cause to the students of Ohio.”

The school board in Decatur passed its resolution just hours after the Georgia State Board of Education issued its statewide ban on “CRT.” It condemned the state’s “misguided and “ill-informed” action and decried its attack on “local control.” Decatur board members reaffirmed the district’s commitment to “addressing the origins and presence of race and racism.” They pledged to “further our efforts

toward anti-racist leadership and fostering inclusive educational environments where every student and staff member feels a sense of belonging and is treated with dignity and respect.” Defiantly, the board declared:

We will not accept educational environments where students are subject to conditions in which their identity makes them a target of abuse. Nor will we accept a resolution that treads dangerously close to limiting our staff’s and students’ First Amendment right to free speech.

In addition to these local board efforts to challenge state action, six school boards passed resolutions affirming their commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusion and engaging issues of race and racism. As noted in Part 1, across the country, many school boards passed such resolutions in the summer or fall of 2020, before the conflict campaign gained steam. But school boards that considered such resolutions in spring and summer 2021 faced strong challenges from sectors of the community activated by the conflict campaign, and some passed affirmative resolutions anyway. Board members in Republican majority areas such as Traverse City, Michigan or Spokane, Washington took heat in spring/summer 2021 as they adopted resolutions acknowledging systemic racism in their communities and pledging to uproot bias and discrimination.

Guilford, Connecticut offers a particularly interesting case of a district that weathered the conflict campaign and still stood firm in support of students’ right to learn. In late April 2021, the board approved a “Statement on Addressing Equity and Social Justice in Guilford Public Schools” which reads in part:

Institutional racism is a part of American history and educators must explicitly address this reality and create a culture that helps eradicate it moving forward. Guilford Public Schools must strive to be a community in which all students feel safe, supported, and recognized, and must support critical thinking about all aspects of our history and current experience. This is done by engaging and supporting students in rigorous exploration of historical and current documents, consideration of a variety of resources, careful analysis of the arguments made and the strength of the evidence supporting them, and classroom discourse.

The statement closes by inviting the broader Guilford community “to become part of the conversation as we continue to meet the challenges that racism and injustice present to our students and our community.”

Guilford board members knew that many vocal opponents of their efforts would take up their invitation — but they likely did not realize the breadth and ferocity of this engagement. Over the next few months, attacks on board efforts grew substantially. The most conservative and contentious opponents not only challenged the board’s Democratic majority, but the Republican members as well. A group of anti “CRT” activists swept the Republican primaries for the five open board seats. [These activists drew national media to Guilford and appeared on national Fox News several times.](#) Some analysts predicted that these activists would ride their cause to a board majority that could replace the board’s commitment to equity with a ban on “CRT.”

But, this outcome was not to be. [A group of parents and community members joined together to form the “Protect Guilford Schools” coalition which called for “an honest, inclusive and equitable education for all children.”](#) Their campaign elicited extraordinary community support in the November 2 board election. [Guilford boasted the highest voter turnout in the state,](#) and the “Protect Guilford Schools” slate of candidates swept the open seats by a 2–1 margin.

# Postscript

This report was fueled by our team’s urgency to begin to understand a current national phenomenon affecting educators, students, and local communities. It reflects our careful but rapid efforts to collect and analyze an array of relevant data on the conflict campaign and its effects. There remains much to be learned. We hope that other researchers will delve more deeply into next questions demanding deeper attention, e.g., local campaigners’ motivations, networks, school experiences, and media use; specific connections between local, state, and national actors; and educators’, system leaders’, and school board members’ experiences over time with the conflict campaign and specific critics in local contexts.

We particularly encourage localized study of *how many* local stakeholders are actually involved in each local campaign, to understand whether and where local activity involves a “vocal minority” of inflamed individuals and “groups” (as much of our data suggested) vs. a substantial proportion of local people. Next research can help assess the extent of the conflict campaign’s local presence in specific places, to help educators react calmly to, engage, and even unify local critical voices rather than anxiously overreact to them.

The legislative context shaping educators’ work also obviously demands ongoing research. We suggest increased research on educators’ real, complex efforts to undertake, improve, and continue teaching, learning, and work on race, racism, and “DEI” in specific places — both locations with restrictive legislation and locations without. We also encourage research on successful interactions uniting local stakeholders despite inflamed differences, and on how students and lesser-heard parents are experiencing all this.

We offer this report as our first, rapid-response take for the field. We welcome critiques, insights from parallel projects, and next iterations.

# Methodological Appendix on Media Analysis

## News Search Parameters

We conducted a comprehensive search for text-based news stories addressing the theme of “critical race theory” and K–12 education published between September 1, 2020 and August 31, 2021. Articles were retrieved from three news archives: NewsBank (2021), Dow Jones Factiva (2021), and the internet search engine, Google (2021). There are multiple ways of searching Google for news; we queried Google’s RSS News feed, extracting the top 100 results per day. Results from our queries were restricted to news sources based in the U.S. and written in English. We used the following search logic: (“school district” or “school board” or “public schools”) and “critical race theory.” This search limits results to news articles that mention the phrases “school district” (or “school board” or “public schools”) and “critical race theory” anywhere in the article. In total, after processing (described below), our news search yielded 10,024 total articles (2,957 articles from NewsBank, 1,240 from Factiva, and 5,827 from Google). The vast majority of these 10,024 articles are text-based news stories published by news outlets. A small number are transcripts of TV news shows and web-based text versions of stories covered by other media such as news radio.

## Processing Google News Articles

The main text of Google articles was retrieved separately, following the initial retrieval of headlines (and links), because Google does not publicly share the main text of news articles. The main text of articles archived by Google were retrieved using a custom web-scraping tool written in Python 3.8.6, built with news-please (Hamborg et al., 2017), BeautifulSoup 4.9.3 (Richardson, 2020), and Selenium 3.141.0 (Stewart et al., 2021). Automated web retrieval extracted the main text of 98.2% of articles archived by Google. Among the remaining 1.8%, 0.3% were retrieved manually, and 1.5% were inaccessible and subsequently removed from analyses (0.7% were behind paywalls, and 0.8% were broken links).

Approximately half of the news articles retrieved from Google were unrelated to school districts and CRT. This may be because of the way Google’s news crawler operates, e.g., extracting advertisements and other news headlines within the html files. After cleaning titles and the main text of articles, we re-searched text for the news search terms enumerated above and subsequently removed unrelated articles.

## Removing Duplicate Articles

Having combined articles from NewsBank, Factiva, and Google, we identified and removed 8.0% as duplicates. The process of identifying duplicate articles involved standardizing formats of article title and news source. Articles that shared their news source and title with another article were identified as potential duplicates. For all potential duplicates, we compared the main text of the articles using the SequenceMatcher algorithm in the difflib Python library, which finds “longest contiguous matching subsequence that contains no ‘junk’ elements” in a recursive fashion (Contributors, 2021). Articles in which 50% of the main text was identical with another article were removed. The earliest printed article was retained and, in the case of identical dates of publication, NewsBank and Factiva articles were given preference over articles from Google.

## News Sources Variables

From the article dataset, we generated a list of 2,125 unique news sources. These sources were manually cleaned and standardized across news archives. After cleaning, we manually coded news sources for two variables: *Level* and *Ideology*.

Level included 4 categories based on the primary audience of the news source: International, National, State, or Local. Ideology included three categories based on the partisan leaning of the news source: Liberal, Conservative, or Neither.

We employed multiple steps to code the ideology of the news sources, and used two independent non-partisan organizations for confirmation. In order to avoid ambiguity, we focused our coding efforts on identifying news sources that had a clear ideological stance (left or right) and refrained from coding sources that leaned only slightly to the left or slightly to the right. After making initial designations based on news sources' own descriptions, we referenced Ad Fontes' Media Bias Chart (Ad Fontes Media, 2021). We considered bias scores of less than -10 or greater than 10 to indicate either Liberal or Conservative ideology. Sources with scores between -9.9 and 9.9 were coded as neither liberal or conservative. For further clarification, we examined the source's rating on All Sides (All Sides, 2021). In those cases where sources were newswires (i.e. sources which forward press releases, such as CE Think Tank Newswire), we coded the ideological stance of the institutions that created the original press releases.

## Identifying School Districts Touched or Impacted by the Campaign

Using a combination of auto-coding and manual cleaning, we generated a list of local education authorities (LEAs), i.e. school districts, that were mentioned in the dataset of 10,024 articles. In order to automate the identification of LEAs, we wrote a Python script to capture all capitalized words preceding common phrases that refer to districts, such as "School District," "School Board," "Administrative District," "Regional Schools," "Public Schools," and "USD." The script was refined iteratively to remove erroneous capitalized words, such as "Elementary," "Californian," "Any," etc. For articles focused at the local or state level, we also automated the identification of the state which was most likely to be associated with the school district(s) mentioned in the article.

Combining school district names with state affiliation was often sufficient to find a unique match in the 2019–2020 LEA Universe Survey Data (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020a). After matching school districts named in articles to NCES' official school district names, we reviewed the matches, cleaned mismatches, and manually matched districts that our auto-coder was unable to identify.

As a final quality check, we manually reviewed instances in which districts were mentioned by only 1–2 articles in our dataset. For such occurrences, we considered whether the articles discussed issues of "critical race theory" in relation to the particular named district(s). In a few cases, a district was mentioned as an historic reference (for example, in relation to a court case) or as a point of comparison with the district that was the primary focus of an article. When we could not establish that issues related to "critical race theory" were addressed in a particular district, we excluded that district from our list. Of the 674 districts reviewed during this process, 184 were removed.

After filtering out such cases, 1,014 unique school districts remained in our list. We considered these districts to be "touched" by the CRT issue. We then assessed whether districts had been impacted by the "CRT" conflict campaign. School districts were defined as "impacted" if articles about the district contained an "action" term related to attacks on "CRT" (e.g., "FOIA" or "censor") or if articles contained descriptions of divisive school board meetings (that is, if the article included the term "board" *and* a divisive term, such as "contention"). Of the 1,014 school districts touched by "CRT," 894 were impacted.

## Preparing U.S. Public School Districts Data

The National Center for Education Statistics annually collects data from all public schools and LEAs in the United States. Variables were derived primarily from 2019–2020, as this was the latest year for which data were available (National Center for Education Statistics, 2020b). Because one of our variables, *Partisan Leaning*, depended on the location of individual schools, we opted to aggregate school-level variables to the LEA level. Aggregating from the school level allowed further refinement in how data were cleaned. Specifically, prior to aggregating to the district level, we excluded schools that were “closed,” “inactive,” or slated to open at a “future” date. We also excluded schools with no student enrollment, and schools located in U.S. territories. Because some school-level data were missing, we supplemented missing values with data from the prior academic year (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Where data were still unavailable, we imputed missing values using the mice package in R (Groothuis-Oudshoorn & Van Buuren, 2011). After cleaning, our final population included 17,918 public school districts in the U.S. from 2019–2020. A similar procedure was used to prepare LEA data from 1999–2000 (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999; National Center for Education Statistics, 2000).

### School District Variables

*Region of the U.S.* is a four-category nominal variable based on the four major geographic divisions of the U.S. as delineated by the U.S. Census Bureau (Perry, 2021). These regions are: West, Midwest, Northeast, and South.

*Locale* (i.e. urbanicity) was derived from the National Center for Education Statistics’ Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE) Program (Gevert, 2018). Based on the proximity and size of the nearest urban center(s), districts were categorized as being in one of 4 broad categories: Rural, Town, Suburb, and City. Some districts included schools belonging to different geographic locales; in these cases, districts were classified by the locale that applied to most students in that district.

Racial demographics and enrollment variables were derived from NCES (see above). For *racial composition* of school districts, we divided school districts into three categories approximately corresponding to the terciles of all NCES districts. School districts enrolling 0–49.9% White students were defined as “Majority Students of Color School Districts,” districts with 50–84.9% White students were defined as “Racially Mixed and Majority White School Districts,” and districts with 85–100% White students were defined as “Predominately White School Districts.”

*Rate of demographic change* for districts was calculated by subtracting the percentage of White student enrollment in 1999–2000 from the percentage of White student enrollment in 2019–2020. School districts with an 18% or greater drop in White enrollment over this 20-year span were defined as experiencing a “Rapid” change in racial demographics. School districts with a 10–17.9% drop in White enrollment were defined as experiencing “Substantial” change; school districts with a 5–9.9% drop were defined as experiencing a “Moderate” change, and other school districts were defined as experiencing a “Minimal” change. These categories correspond approximately to population quartiles of percentage change in racial demographics.

School districts with total enrollment of 1–999 students were defined as “Tiny,” 1,000–4,999 were defined as “Small,” 5,000–14,999 as “Mid-size,” and greater than 15,000 as “Large.”

*Partisan Leaning* is based on the percentage of vote for Trump in 2020 at the Congressional District level. Data on Congressional District presidential vote were drawn from figures provided publicly by Daily Kos (Nir, 2020). School districts were defined as “Liberal” if 0–39.9% of the surrounding Congressional District voted for Trump, “Liberal leaning” if 40–44.9% of the Congressional District voted for Trump, “Contested” if 45–54.9% of the Congressional District voted for Trump, “Conservative leaning” if 55–59.9% of the Congressional District voted for Trump, and “Conservative” if 60–100% voted for Trump.

While most school districts are located in only one Congressional District, some larger school districts span multiple Congressional Districts. In these cases, we determined school district vote by locating each school within a unique Congressional District (Geverdt, 2018), and subsequently calculating an aggregate school district vote as a weighted mean, weighted by the number of students enrolled in each of the schools in the district.

### **Limitations of Media Analysis**

While data collection was systematic and thorough, it is possible that our dataset is incomplete. Some articles may not have been archived by NewsBank, Factiva, or Google. Further, Google News search results are not consistent with respect to time and location. We searched through the UCLA VPN in early September 2021, but searching in other parts of the country at different times would have yielded different lists of top news results. Given that Google sells advertisements to outlets, it is additionally possible that the search process favored certain news sources over others. As such, the number of districts that we identified as being touched by “CRT” or impacted by the “CRT” conflict campaign should be viewed as a lower bound; in other words, there were an indeterminate number of districts that we were not able to identify.

Our media analyses focus on text-based news, in contrast to social media where a great deal of conflict played out. While there is overlap between these two spaces, it is possible that some social media conflicts received no coverage in newspapers and other text-based news services, in which case our search would not have discovered them. Outside of social media, there may have been school districts that encountered pressure from parent groups or activists but such contention was not reported. It is possible that journalists or news outlets may have chosen not to report on certain stories, which may reflect biases in media organizations.

For districts that were impacted by the “CRT” conflict campaign, we did not determine the magnitude or nature of the impact. From our reading of news articles, there was a great deal of variation in the amount and type of conflict, which is not reflected in our quantitative analyses. There may be some districts in our dataset that were only marginally impacted by the CRT conflict campaign.

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## About the Authors

**MICA POLLOCK** is Professor of Education Studies at the University of California, San Diego. An anthropologist, she has long studied how educators and young people talk about race and diversity—and how education communities can improve opportunity collectively.

**JOHN ROGERS** is a Professor of Education at UCLA's School of Education and Information Studies and Director of UCLA's Institute for Democracy, Education, and Access (IDEA). He has written widely on the relationship of education and democracy, as well as the role of civic participation and community organizing as strategies for advancing educational equity and democratic renewal.

**ALEXANDER KWAKO** is a graduate student in the Social Research Methodology division of UCLA's School of Education and Information Studies. With an emphasis in Advanced Quantitative Methods, Kwako applies statistical and computational techniques to study student agency and barriers to educational equity.

**ANDREW MATSCHINER** is a doctoral candidate in Education Studies at the University of California, San Diego. He is a former high school teacher and instructional coach.

**REED KENDALL** is a Ph.D. student in Education Studies at UC San Diego.

**CICELY BINGENER**, M.Ed. is a veteran TK–12 classroom teacher based in Inglewood, CA. Also a current Ph.D. student in UCLA's Urban Schooling division, her research looks at the intersection of urban teacher preparation, teacher persistence, and teacher unionism.

**ERIKA REECE** is a fourth-year Ph.D. student in the Department of Education Studies at UC San Diego. Her research focuses on teacher education and social justice teaching. Prior to the Ph.D. program, Erika taught fourth grade in Detroit, Michigan.

**BENJAMIN C. KENNEDY**, M.Ed. (he/him) is a transgender author, educator, and activist who grew up in rural Maryland, attended The University of Vermont, and is now a Ph.D. student in Education Studies at UC San Diego. His work focuses on equity policy, investigating and supporting gender identity development in early childhood, and helping educators and administrators create trans affirming curriculum and classrooms.

**JALEEL R. HOWARD**, M.Ed. is a doctoral student at UCLA in the School of Education and Information Studies. Jaleel's research interests center around urban contexts and social forces that affect the educational experiences and outcomes for chronically underserved students.

