

## Education and the Crisis of Democracy: Trump and the Rise of Right Wing Populism

### Educação e a Crise da Democracia: Trump e o surgimento do populismo de direita

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**Abstract:** This article explores the education policies, pronouncements, and activities of the Trump Administration and their aftermath, focusing especially on the culture war battle over Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a case study in the rise of right wing populism. School curricula was not a major emphasis until 2020 when Trump's activities and pronouncements, in part, led to the controversy over CRT. This work traces origins and development of the controversy, Trump's rhetoric and actions on racial sensitivity training, the 1619 Project and 1776 Commission, and CRT as a culture war issue. Concludes with discussion of the legacy of the Trump presidency and implications for democratic education.

**Keywords:** Education Policies; Donald Trump Administration; Critical Race

**Resumo:** Este artigo explora as políticas educacionais, pronunciamentos e atividades do governo Trump e suas consequências, focando especialmente na batalha da guerra cultural sobre a Teoria Crítica da Raça (TCR) como um estudo de caso na ascensão do populismo de direita. O currículo escolar não teve grande ênfase até 2020, quando as atividades e pronunciamentos de Trump, em parte, levaram à controvérsia sobre o TCR. Este trabalho

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traça as origens e o desenvolvimento da controvérsia, a retórica e as ações de Trump no treinamento da sensibilidade racial, o Projeto 1619 e a Comissão 1776 e a CRT como uma questão de guerra cultural. Conclui com a discussão do legado da presidência de Trump e implicações para a educação democrática.

**Palavras-chaves:** Políticas Educacionais; Governo Donald Trump; Teoria Crítica da Raça.

## Introdução

Most American's were horrified by the events of January 6, 2021. Nothing like this, an insurrection challenging the results of a presidential election, had happened in our lifetimes. It seemed unimaginable. Yet, for a significant segment of the American citizenry, the events of January 6 have become an episode via which patriotic Americans acted on behalf of a president they supported, for whom claims of a rigged, stolen election were convincing. President Donald Trump, through his policies and actions, and his speech on January 6, instigated the attack on the nation's capital, and did little to stop the violence that ensued. In hindsight, the events of January 6 represent a marker suggesting the fragility of our Democratic republic, highlighting the threat of autocratic leadership, and indicating the need to develop stronger habits of critical thinking among the American populace.

This paper will explore the education policies, pronouncements, and activities of the Trump Administration and their aftermath, focusing especially on the culture war battle over Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a case study in the rise of right wing populism. As we shall see, the school curriculum was not a major emphasis during most of Trump's presidency, until the final year of his term during which Trump's activities and pronouncements, in part, led to the controversy over CRT. The paper will trace the origins and development of the controversy, Trump's rhetoric and actions on racial sensitivity training, the 1619 Project and 1776 Commission, and CRT as a culture war issue. The paper will conclude with some discussion of the legacy of the Trump presidency and the implications for democratic education.

Trump, the rise of right wing populism, and the impact on education is of interest partly because the controversy over CRT is having a notable impact and threatens democratic education and academic freedom in schools. In important ways, the controversy mirrors the pattern of past curriculum controversies in its origins, media frenzy, and possible consequences.

## Trump and Right Wing Populism

The rise of right wing populism is a dangerous global phenomenon that mirrors the rise of dictatorship in the pre-WW II era. In this paper, the author will focus on US trends in politics and education, especially those impacting social studies and civic education, that provide evidence of the influence of right wing populism. The origins of right wing populism may be found partly in globalization, technological change,

immigration, slow economic growth, low productivity, and policies of government austerity. In the US a sharp decline in manufacturing jobs, the “hollowing out” of the middle class, the stagnation of family income, a steep rise in inequality, growing racial and social diversity, and a surge in undocumented residents fed the trend. These trends were perceived to have an impact on less-educated working class whites, especially men—who were angry at a system and establishment stacked against them. These socioeconomic forces, representing millions of “distressed people” proved economically harmful and psychologically threatening over decades, and led to the emergence of an electorate sharply divided. Government programs appeared weak and ineffective at addressing 21<sup>st</sup> century problems. Trump’s presidency was fueled by the anger, anxiety, and resentment left in the wake of ineffective government, in a way similar to the sentiments that fueled the rise of previous populist demagogues (HOWELL and MOE, 2020, p. 2-3).

The Trump presidency led to an immediate change in the tone and impact of presidential leadership in US culture. Trump tapped into Americans’ concerns with heated rhetoric, racism, and lies. He played upon racial and ethnic prejudices; trafficked in conspiracy theories; demonized immigrants, Muslims, and then President Obama. He blamed other countries for US economic problems; criticized the political and economic establishment as illegitimate; praised Putin and other autocrats; critiqued the media; and, demeaned the opposition (Obama birther controversy; Hillary Clinton a criminal – “lock her up”). Trump’s style was unusual among US presidents, but it follows a familiar formula among populist demagogues (Peron, Chavez, Berlusconi – in the US, Huey Long, George Wallace) with the nature of their appeal, and their demeaning, offensive, and threatening rhetoric. Unfortunately, it is a formula that works.

Conspiracy theories have had an especially important role in Trump’s rhetoric and influence. With just enough evidence to be plausible, conspiracy theories create fear and spread misinformation, often doing a good deal of harm. Conspiracy theories have a decades-old history, dating at least from the establishment of the John Birch Society by businessman Robert Welch in 1958. The Birch Society was an influential conservative group that spewed anti-government and anti-communist theories that furthered the paranoid style in American politics (EVANS, 2011). Conspiracy theories during the Trump era included the Obama birther controversy; the Q-anon conspiracy theory, that Democrats in the “Deep State” undermined Trump as a cover-up to their child-sex network; and the charge that Democrats fostered and supported a rigged election. As Miller observes, “all of us are stuck on the roller coaster of Robert Welch’s political imagination, and we can’t get off (MILLER, 2022).

Scholars, journalists, and others following the election and subsequent trends documented “the Trump effect” – loosened lips, a rise in hate crimes, the scapegoating of diverse communities, a rise in anti-govt sentiment and hate groups (Proud Boys, Oath Keepers – more power to undemocratic fringe groups via technology, social media) and instigated growth in blaming others, persons of color, and immigrants (COSTELLO, 2016). These trends and Trump’s lies about a rigged election led to an insurrection in the nation’s capital on January 6, 2021, and halted or disrupted progress on a wide range of culture war issues in society and in schools.

## **Trump Education Policies**

For most of his term, Trump policy on education was marked by deference to states, and a rollback of federal oversight in enforcement of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) on a range of policy fronts in education, including equity and funding. For the US Department of Education (DOE) and other federal agencies, Trump's rise to power was a "hostile takeover" that accelerated the shift to a dominant role for states, accompanied by a retreat from a strong federal role in equity for minorities, women, transgendered, and the disabled (THOMPSON, et al., 2020, p. 153). Most areas have continued the use of state testing as instrument of policy and as a shackle on schools and teachers, though efforts for school improvement have varied widely (WONG, 2020). Trump policies continued the movement toward privatization, choice, and schooling for development of human capital, supporting reforms traceable in part to the Powell memo and its call for conservative activism (POWELL, 1971). Trump education policies also continued support for charter schools and school choice – viewed by critics as dismantling public education for the common good – that could result in significant movement toward use of public funds for private and religious schools (SAVAGE, 2021).

Choice: Rhetoric and Reality. In recent decades, since at least the 1960s, we have witnessed growth in use of presidential executive, administrative, and political powers over educational policy. Though educational policy was never a high priority, Trump used a heavy reliance on executive and administrative tools to further his goals. Trump's election signaled a shift toward greater flexibility for states, diminished federal influence on civil rights and equity issues, expansion of choice to include more public and private schools, and a "highly deferential" approach to implementation of federal policy and administration of the ESSA. The Trump administration focused less on legislation and more on executive and administrative actions partly because they did not see many opportunities to score points with their base of supporters. Shortly after taking office, the Trump administration began its quest to reduce the federal role in k-12 education. The administration used executive and administrative orders to reverse Obama's policy positions on a wide range of areas including immigration, labor, the environment, and schools (WONG, 2020).

Executive Order 13791 sought to "protect and preserve state and local control over the curriculum, program of instruction, administration, and personnel," in schools (TRUMP, 2017, April 26). In April, 2017, Trump authorized Betsy DeVos, a choice advocate who Trump appointed Secretary of Education, to review federal regulations and administrative rules that "undermine state and local" authority. This meant a change in policy in at least three ways: rolling back federal policies on equity; weakening oversight from the federal level; and taking initiative to expand choice (WONG, 2020, p. 426). Betsy DeVos was known as a conservative education advocate, a businesswoman, philanthropist, and a strong supporter of choice.

Federal support for educational equity has a long history from the 1960s war on poverty and great society programs to Obama's administrative actions addressing the achievement gap, supporting civil rights, battling gender discrimination, advancing LGBT rights, and rights of the disabled. Starting in 2017, the Trump administration used the Congressional Review Act to reduce federal authority, reducing regulations requiring state accountability. In March, 2017, Secretary DeVos send a letter to the Council of Chief State School Officers stating that the federal government would require "only descriptions, information,

assurances and other materials that were absolutely necessary.” Subsequently, the DOE’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) stopped requiring states to report data on students in a wide range of areas related to civil rights equity including participation in high school equivalency exams, teacher certification for and student participation in computer science classes, Wi-Fi access in every classroom, investigations into civil rights violations, and non-discriminatory discipline (WONG, 2020, p. 428). The administration weakened federal oversight of ESSA. The Congressional Review Act was employed more than 15 times during the Trump years, and was used to support DeVos restraint in enforcement and implementation of ESSA. DeVos and DOE under Trump loosened compliance standards on Title I that were in place to ensure that services reached the intended pupils. Schools were allowed to allocate money without regard to Title I. Thus, implementation and compliance varied by state.

Trump and DeVos “pushed the envelope” by championing school choice, and created persistent advocacy for expansion of choice, especially in making federal aid available for religious schools (THOMPSON, et al., 2020, p. 151). Trump issued regular proclamations declaring “National School Choice Week,” and “National Charter Schools Week,” and increased allocations for programs to support school choice from \$440 to \$500 million (TRUMP, 2017). Trump used his State of the Union addresses to advocate for choice. Later, he issued executive orders calling for Congress to appropriate funds for the Education Freedom Scholarship and Opportunity Act (TRUMP, 2020, Dec. 28), and opening Federal dollars for private school vouchers during the pandemic (STRATFORD, 2020). Trump and DeVos kept up a steady drumbeat of rhetoric supporting choice, and created significant movement as evidenced by at least 23 documents in the Trump papers mentioning choice, spanning more than four years. The issue of choice, and the legality of a backdoor mechanism to create it through state tax credits for education scholarships, may be on the agenda of the US Supreme Court in the near future (SAVAGE, 2021).

Republicans promoted the Educational Freedom Scholarship and Opportunity Act which would create \$5 billion in tax credits to support states in using state funds for vouchers that could be used at private schools, including those with a religious affiliation. During the Trump years, more states (29) created vouchers allowing parents to receive tax credits for private school tuition, whittling away at the cause of private school choice, especially in Republican states. The public in general was supportive of choice (EDUCATION NEXT, 2018), and parents in minority communities had a preference for charter schools. However, educators, administrators, and state school leaders were generally not supportive of programs that would reduce funds for public schools.

Another plank in Trump policy was to give deference to states in development and execution of ESSA plans. In reviewing state plans, the DOE offered only minor suggestions and comments. Yet, state plans differed significantly in terms of accountability requirements, plans for evidence-based school improvement, and on their commitment to equity. Deference to states was supported by congressional leaders including Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), one of the main architects of ESSA, and Congressman Todd Rokita (R-IN). Prior to receiving approval, 16 states received feedback on their plans, and only 4 of 16 responded. Most simply ignored the comments, but still received approval. By September 2018, all 50 states and DC received approval of ESSA plans, strongly suggesting a high level of federal deference. In fact, two reviewers reported they were “struck by the blanket approval of all plans, even those that remained in conflict with some

objections of the law.” In essence, the policy of deference left the carrots and sticks behind and allowed states to construct their own plans for tracking accountability on a range of issues (WONG, 2020, p. 435). On equity, the policy allowed states to go their own way, and diminished incentives for states to actively address issues faced by low income students and racial and ethnic minorities. Implementation varied by state, as did reporting on school progress and improvement. Reports on student performance were uneven. 80% of states did not provide disaggregated data by at least one subgroup, and 40% did not disaggregate data by gender. The administration also took a more relaxed and deferential approach on school level financial information – only about one in four states reported data, meaning the goal of more equitable school finance was largely set aside.

Regarding efforts at evidence-based school improvement, states would now choose their own intervention strategies, with no national sense of urgency to turn-around low performing schools. The result was that “only a handful of states have launched evidence-based school turnaround interventions” (WONG, 2020, p. 439). This meant that instead of the “flood of innovation” heralded under ESSA, the level of innovation would turn to droplets. DeVos and DOE gave rhetorical support for innovation, but little in the way of policy guidance or technical assistance. States were on their own, and a few piloted innovations in student assessment. As one observer noted, the policy amounted to a retreat from previous goals of innovation and improvement (MCGUINN, 2019).

The Trump administration’s policy of deference and flexibility seemed to have “the effect of delaying state actions” especially regarding equity issues (WONG, 2020, p. 441). Pandemic waivers brought even greater flexibility. The CARES Act (Coronavirus aid and relief) included several trillion dollars in aid, and \$16 billion for emergency K-12 assistance. The act also included temporary waivers on ESSA requirements regarding testing, remote learning, graduation, etc. – all of which seems consistent with the administration’s support for choice. While the Obama administration used NCLB waivers and incentives to encourage states to adopt the Common Core State Standards (CCSS), teacher evaluation improvements, and other requirements, Trump moved educational policy in the opposite way, creating greater flexibility, diminished federal oversight, and support for public and private school choice via both rhetoric and “scholarships.” The net effect was to weaken both accountability and movement on equity issues (WEISS and MCGUINN, 2017). On the curriculum, policy deference to the states was nearly total, but with the administration supporting a shallow form of conservative patriotism, and as we shall see, offering rhetorical opposition to critical teaching and CRT during the 2020 election season.

### **Curriculum Policy and Influence – Stoking Controversy over Race**

Trump campaigned on his opposition to Common Core and his support for Choice. Though he issued an executive order ending support for Common Core (TRUMP, 2017, Apr. 26), it appeared to have little impact. Educational curriculum policy in most areas is controlled by the states. However, his most impactful influence on schools was likely his influence in stoking the controversy over CRT in schools – the most damaging and effective Trump legacy impacting states in 2021. Like many previous curriculum controversies, this was a controversy just waiting to happen, the result of pressures that built over many

years.

The school curriculum, and social studies in particular, is subject to struggles among competing groups with differing interpretations of the American way, and competing visions of the future. In a previous work, I called these battles the “social studies wars,” a subset of the culture wars focused on schools. Struggles over the curriculum are part of the landscape of schooling. At various times they have stirred controversy in local school districts across the nation, developed into nationwide controversies, and brought the end of educational innovations in what seems a never ending battle over what to teach our children (EVANS, 2004).

White House Conference. Trump’s White House Conference on the Teaching of American history, and subsequent *1776 Commission Report*, supported American exceptionalism, denounced multiculturalism, mirrored criticism of previous decades, and stoked the controversy over CRT. In his final months in office, Trump used school issues and the CRT controversy to further a wedge of fear and stoke controversy on racial issues. The White House Conference was called partly in an effort to counter the 1619 Project, an endeavor developed by journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones and writers from the *New York Times* and *NYT Magazine* that aimed “to reframe the country's history by placing the consequences of slavery and the contributions of Black Americans at the very center of the United States’ national narrative.” (PROJECT, 2019). The project sparked controversy and debate among historians and pundits and opposition from conservatives.

The White House conference focused on the “patriotic” teaching of American history. The essence of the conference was support for patriotic education, the teaching of American exceptionalism, and criticism of multicultural education (PRESIDENT’S COMMISSION, 2021). The conference and report were an unambiguous statement of the administration’s position in the growing battle over what kind of social studies should be taught in schools, and developed concurrently with the looming controversy over CRT. As noted by one observer, “It’s really about: How do people think about America, and how is that translated into our schools . . . It’s a proxy war” (UJIFUSA, 2020).

The Controversy Over Critical Race Theory. Though education, and especially the curriculum, was largely a back burner issue during most of Trump’s presidency, in his final year in office, during the election campaign, Trump issued an administrative edict halting government sponsored workshops focused on multicultural sensitivity training, issued tweets, and made statements condemning use of CRT in schools. All of this played to Trump’s base of supporters. Trump’s role was to amplify a controversy that was already brewing, and use it for partisan political purposes.

CRT is an academic concept with origins in legal scholarship of the late 1970s and early 1980s. It holds that race is a social construct embedded in the legal system and other societal institutions, often serving to limit efforts at equality and desegregation. Segregated housing patterns, influenced by redlining from the 1930s, is a prime example. The influence of CRT has spread through many academic disciplines including sociology, literary theory, the humanities, social sciences, and education (SAWCHUCK, 2021). Legal scholar Kimberle Crenshaw describes it as a theory that “explores how racial inequality was historically structured into the fabric of the republic, reinforced by law, insulated by the founding Constitution and embedded into the infrastructure of American society” (CRENSHAW, 2022). The exponential growth of CRT in educational writing and research, led by Gloria Ladson-Billings and others, has created an important strain of scholarship (LADSON-BILLINGS and TATE, 1995; DIXSON, et al., 2018). However, its influence

on the curriculum and classrooms is much harder to document and is subject to debate.

Origins. The recent controversy over CRT had its origins in the work of a few little known individuals. In the aftermath of George Floyd's death and subsequent protests in the Spring and Summer of 2020, Christopher Rufo of the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, wrote a series of articles critiquing required employee diversity trainings in federal agencies in Seattle. An employee of an agency receiving federal funds documented anti-bias training and sent a report to Rufo, who recognized a political opportunity. Through FOIA requests, Rufo obtained slideshows and curricula from the trainings. Employees were divided by racial groups for the sessions, which included titles like, "Welcome: Internalized Racial Superiority for White People," and "What Do We Do in White People Space." Rufo published a summary of his findings on the website of the Manhattan Institute and wrote, "Under the banner of 'anti-racism,' Seattle's Office of Civil Rights is now explicitly endorsing principles of segregation, group-based guilt, and race essentialism, ugly concepts that should have been left behind a century ago" (WALLACE-WELLS, 2021, p. 3).

Rufo's stories were read widely and inspired more leaks. In the initial article, he wrote:

In conceptual terms, the city frames the discussion around the idea that black Americans are reducible to the essential quality of 'blackness' and white Americans are reducible to the essential quality of 'whiteness'—that is, the new metaphysics of good and evil. It is part of a nationwide movement to make this kind of identity politics the foundation of our public discourse. It may be coming soon to a city or town near you. (HARRIS, 2021, p. 6).

Though his initial article did not include the phrase, "Critical Race Theory," a subsequent article began, "Critical race theory—the academic discourse centered on the concepts of 'whiteness,' 'white fragility,' and 'white privilege'—is spreading rapidly through the federal government" (RUFO, 2020). Informants sent additional documents to Rufo, who noticed that they often referenced anti-racism works by Ibram X. Kendi and Robin DiAngelo. Rufo read the footnotes and found the documents often cited CRT and specific scholars, notably Kimberle Crenshaw and Derrick Bell. CRT scholars argued that the white supremacy of the past lived on in the laws and societal norms of the present. The American dilemma of race was based not simply on prejudice, but rooted in "structured disadvantages that stretched across American society." Rufo's thesis was that government sponsored racial sensitivity trainings were an expression of a "distinct ideology," CRT, "with radical roots operating behind the curtain." Rufo found links in notes and documents to the seeds of CRT in "radical, often explicitly Marxist" critical theory texts. He found links to Angela Davis, a doctoral student of Herbert Marcuse, and cited Kendi's view that anti-racism "was not possible without anti-capitalism." Rufo was quoted in *The Atlantic* in late May, 2021, "Critical race theory is the perfect villain... It's the label that the critical theorists chose themselves" (WALLACE-WELLS, 2021, p. 4).



On September 2, 2020, Rufo appeared on conservative host Tucker Carlson's program on Fox News. During that appearance, Rufo argued that CRT was "spreading rapidly" in federal government training sessions, and was being "weaponized against Americans." Rufo suggested the trainings were blaming white people for racial issues. Many felt they were unjustly blamed or held accountable just for being white. It was, in their view, a form of "anti-white" racism. Rufo called on Trump to ban such trainings via executive order, asking him "to stamp out this destructive divisive, pseudoscientific ideology" (WALLACE-WELLS, 2021, p. 5). The next morning, Rufo received a call from Trump's chief of staff, Mark Meadows, who stated that the president saw his appearance and "he's instructed me to take action." Rufo flew to DC to help draft the executive order. On September 5, Trump issued numerous tweets and retweets condemning CRT and the spread of what tweets referred to as "unAmerican propaganda" in the nation's schools and colleges (TRUMP, 2020, Sept. 5).

Shortly thereafter, Trump issued "Executive Order 13950 – Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping," limiting how federal contractors could talk about race, and temporarily ending the diversity training sessions (TRUMP, 2020, Sept. 22). The order was challenged immediately in court by the nonprofits that provide the training, and by December, 2020, a Federal judge blocked the order. President Biden later rescinded the order on the day he took office (HARRIS, 2021). Earlier, Trump made comments critiquing "left wing indoctrination" in schools, arguing students were "fed lies about America being a wicked nation plagued by racism." He commented on CRT at the White House Conference on the Teaching of American History, issued tweets on the harm caused, and addressed the topic during a presidential debate (TRUMP, 2020). At the White House Conference, he made his most extensive remarks on CRT:

This is a Marxist doctrine holding that America is a wicked and racist nation... and that our entire society must be radically transformed. Teaching this horrible doctrine to our children is a form of child abuse...

There is no more powerful force than a parent's love for their children. And patriotic moms and dads are going to demand that their children are no longer fed hateful lies about this country...

Critical race theory, the 1619 Project, and the crusade against American history is toxic propaganda, ideological poison that, if not removed, will dissolve the civic bonds that tie us together. It will destroy our country (TRUMP, 2020, Sept. 17).

From Trump's perspective, this was an easy play in election season, another use of so-called "dog whistle politics" to rile up his base. Rufo wrote over two dozen document-based articles, assisted in Carlson's program titled, "Woke Education," and advised on the language used in more than 10 bills in state legislatures. Politicians, including Florida Governor Ron DeSantis and Tom Cotton (R-AR) tweeted comments on CRT, borrowing phrases from Rufo. By October, 2020, his work led to the creation of a "tip line" via which he received thousands of examples from anti-racism training sessions. Third graders in Cupertino, CA, were asked to "rank themselves and their classmates according to their privilege"; male executives at Lockheed Martin held a 3 day "whiteness retreat"; an initiative at Disney urged executives to "de-colonize their bookshelves"; a high profile parent's group, Parents Against Critical Theory, in Loudon County, Virginia, organized by a former Trump justice department official, reported "evidence of humiliation" and white guilt. Rufo

commented, “There’s very heavy psychological stuff happening here... (with) a Marxist strain running through it... the pairing of destruction and utopia (WALLACE-WELLS, 2021, p. 7).

Kimberle Crenshaw, a law professor at Columbia and UCLA who coined “CRT,” noticed a broader pattern that was “not new or surprising.” Reform itself creates its own backlash, which reconstitutes the problem in the first place.” She called it “post George Floyd backlash” but also noted that “the line of scrimmage has moved.” (WALLACE-WELLS, p. 8). For Rufo, the CRT debates offered a way for conservatives to challenge state agencies and a bureaucracy “dominated by liberals.” State bills and laws that Rufo helped draft “restricted how social studies teachers could describe current events to millions of public-school children.” For Rufo, it was “mission accomplished” (WALLACE-WELLS, 2021, p. 9). It seemed that CRT was a powder keg – a controversy waiting to happen, set fire by an astute conservative activist whose work captured the angst of the moment and inspired others.

On another track feeding the controversy, in the late Spring through the Fall of 2020, protest groups sprang up in a number of small cities, towns, and suburbs across the nation, fueled by the George Floyd protests, activism by Black Lives Matter, Rufo’s appearance, and Trump’s inflammatory rhetoric. Conservative protests generally did not occur in urban centers. Groups raised money locally, and some threatened violence against advocates of equity curricula, anti-racist groups, school board members, or administrators. Many installed security cameras in their homes. In Nevada and Missouri, school districts hired security guards to patrol two administrators’ homes. Crowds gathered at school board meetings in Texas, Virginia, and California, leading to online meetings to avert confrontations. The thinking was, “there’s a lot of fear right now... someone could take it too far.” There were more recall initiatives and petitions in the first half of 2021 than in any previous year for over two decades. A handful of administrators were ousted (GROSS, 2021, p. 7).

Republican figures rushed to support conservative activists. There were larger goals at play – an opportunity for another Tea Party like wave of activism, built on conservative frustration over the loss of the presidency to Biden in the 2020 election, a place to channel frustration and energy. Many Republicans also had a sense of ownership – it was “their school board, their district” and this was a way to get people involved at the local level and propel Republican candidates in the mid-term elections. Former Trump adviser Steve Bannon, on a podcast, said, “The path to save the nation is very simple. It’s going to go through the school boards” (GROSS, 2021, p. 11).

In June, 2020, a mother in a Philadelphia suburb, Elana Fishbein, noticed the “anti-racist” teaching activities planned for her children’s school, Gladwyne Elementary, in the wake of the George Floyd protests, and wrote a letter to the Superintendent, complaining that the school and its teachers “plan to indoctrinate the children into ‘woke’ culture.” She received no reply. Subsequently, she founded a parent group, No Left Turn in Education. She too appeared on the Tucker Carlson program. Following her appearance, membership in the group went from 200 to 30,000 in one day. Tyler Kingade, an investigative reporter for NBC news commented, Tucker Carlson started her movement, “He doesn’t know it, but he did.” (GROSS, 2021, p. 14).

Other small, grassroots organizations sprang up. A national group, Parents Defending Education, taught parents in various locations to be activists, to file records requests, to develop media toolkits, etc. The Heritage Foundation and Citizens Renewing America also issued toolkits. One small group, Southlake Families PAC, in the Dallas/Fort Worth area, raised \$215,000 as of April 21, 2021 (HARRIS, 2021). In Tennessee, Moms For Liberty sought to ban a children’s book, *Martin Luther King, Jr. and the March on Washington*, describing its descriptions of white racism as a form of neo-racism that would traumatize white children (CRENSHAW, 2022). There were many, many

others. The controversy was further inflamed by obsessive coverage of CRT on Fox News and other conservative media (Breitbart News, The Daily Wire, Washington Free Beacon, NewsMax, etc.). Tyler Kingade reported that CRT was addressed over 1,300 times on Fox News in the Spring of 2021 (GROSS, 2021). A professor at Colorado State University found as many as 750 articles per week on Fox News and Breitbart, and consistent discussion of the topic via social media such as GOP Facebook groups (HARRIS, 2021). Conservative media covered the activities of parent organizations against school boards, and leaked videos of classroom lessons demonstrating the influence of CRT in schools. In one of the most inflammatory comments, Michael Savage, of NewsMax, charged that CRT could do to white people what was done to Jews in Germany, calling it the road to death camps for white people via “anti-white racism” (GROSS, 2021, p. 15). All of this was happening during the COVID-19 pandemic, which added a sense of urgency, even desperation.

ALEC, Heritage, and a Growing Campaign. As the controversy grew and gained increasing attention, national conservative groups became involved including the Heritage Foundation, the American Enterprise Institute, the Federalist Society, the Goldwater Institute, the Heartland Institute, and the Manhattan Institute. Many of these conservative groups receive funding from the Koch Foundation. The American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC) crafted model legislation and began lobbying state lawmakers in conservative states to pass legislation against CRT in schools. It sponsored training webinars over the winter of 2020-2021, including one led by Rufo and Jonathan Butcher of the Heritage Foundation (ALEC, 2020). ALEC is a lobbying group providing model legislation and influencing state legislators, backed by the deep pockets of wealthy corporate benefactors and conservative groups (BARRETT, 1985; EVANS, 2015)

On the other side, a number of progressive groups also issued statements or offered support for meaningful teaching and discussion of race and other difficult topics in schools including the Organization of American Historians, the American Historical Association, the American Bar Association, Common Cause, MoveOn.org, Rethinking Schools, and the National Council for the Social Studies (GEORGE, 2021; NCSS, 2021).

Censoring Teachers and Schools. As of late January, 2022, at least 13 states had passed laws against teaching CRT in schools, or otherwise restricted how teachers and schools address racism, sexism, and other sensitive topics (LOLLER and CORONADO, 2021; POLLOCK and ROGERS, 2022). In other states, bureaucratic leaders such as state attorney generals and state boards of education issued executive or administrative orders to end use of CRT in schools.

According to *Chalkbeat*, by July, 2021, 28 states had made efforts to “restrict education on racism, bias, the contributions of specific racial groups to US history, or related topics” (STOUT and LEMEE, 2021). According to one study 36 states have made efforts to restrict education on racism, the contributions of specific racial groups to US history, or related topics (POLLOCK and ROGERS, 2022). Free speech advocates say the laws won’t stand. As one observer argued, “The real point is to scare off companies, schools, government agencies” and to “limit or end discussion of systemic racism” (HARRIS, 2021, p. 7).

The impact of state laws and administrative orders is highly context dependent, and more likely to be felt in conservative areas. For teachers and administrators in local schools, the result is sometimes puzzlement leaving many wondering, “What does this mean?” The controversy and spate of laws and administrative actions means that the CRT controversy sent a chill across the nation’s schools, the result being that many teachers, especially in conservative areas, will refrain from teaching topics on or related to race, gender, social class, or anything that might be seen as controversial. One report estimates that 35% of students in K-12 schools have been impacted

(POLLOCK and ROGERS, 2022). The controversy, and the events of January 6, are placing teachers “on the front lines of America’s culture war” with teachers taking a variety of actions in response to a context in which their livelihood could be put in jeopardy. After teachers reached out to the American Federation of Teachers, the union sued the state of New Hampshire over limits placed on discussion of racism and other topics (HOLLINGSWORTH, 2022, A2).

The influence of Trump’s foray into the culture wars on the teaching about race varied by state. In some states, efforts to teach about race and racism have increased, with 15 states seeking to expand curriculum treatment (STOUT & LEMEE, 2021). In California, for example, the state passed a mandate for an Ethnic Studies course to be required of all high school students (BLUME & GOMES, 2021). The CRT controversy and institution of laws and administrative orders impinging on teaching about race constrains academic freedom in schools and may resonate for years. It is already leading to challenges to state standards in states undergoing a revision process (SAWCHUK, 2022). Restrictive laws and administrative orders will likely lead to additional challenges and court cases. How the controversy will play out over time remains to be seen.

Historical Background and Comparisons. What’s behind the CRT controversy? The social studies curriculum in American schools is contested by various groups with differing world views, different ideological orientations, and competing visions of America’s future. As Kliebard observed, struggles over the school curriculum represent a continuing morality play (KLIEBARD, 1986). New trends during the Trump administration mirror old controversies — over the textbooks of Harold Rugg in the 1940s; over MACOS (Man: A Course of Study) and other innovative programs in the 1970s, and other similar struggles. The Rugg controversy led to the removal of a popular textbook series from the nation’s schools, and in effect, the censure of social studies (EVANS, 2007; FRANK and LAATS, 2021). 1970s controversies over new curricula may be more helpful for comparison because the context and groups involved are somewhat similar. The controversy over MACOS involved newly minted activist conservative foundations, conspiracy theories, and the John Birch Society, asserting that “secular humanism” was behind the new materials and receiving improper government support (EVANS, 2011). The Tucson controversy over Mexican American Studies (MAS), in 2010-2011, after which MAS was removed from Arizona schools, is also directly comparable and included a “hit list” of targeted books and materials populated by the works of Paulo Freire, Howard Zinn, *Rethinking Schools*, and others (EVANS, 2015). The rise of right wing populism is leading to similar controversies in Brazil and other nations.

From a birds-eye-view, the repeating pattern of the social studies wars is one of innovation, initiatives, and fresh “new” ideas followed by controversy, criticism and sometimes, censure. It is a pattern that seems unending – a part of the nature of education in a “democratic” society in which schools are subject to an ever changing political climate.

## **Is Democracy Endangered? The Challenge to Schools**

The insurrection on January 6 and the rise of a President with autocratic tendencies who, without significant credible evidence, challenged the results of the 2020 presidential electoral process, raises questions about the fragility of American democracy. To what extent is our democratic republic endangered? What is the challenge to schools regarding democratic education? What role should schools and teachers play during these tumultuous times?

Some analysts suggest that it is rare for a single event, such as a military coup, to end democracy. Levitsky and Zablatt, in *How Democracies Die* argue that democracies die from

normalizing authoritarianism and conspiracy theories and failing to hold leaders accountable (LEVITSKY and ZABLATT, 2018). The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance recently labeled the United States a “backsliding democracy” stating that the threat is “internal” and observing that the U.S. is “slowly imploding” (GRANDERSON, 2021). As Anne Applebaum suggests, “it is possible that we are already living through the twilight of democracy” (APPLEBAUM, 2020, p. 185).

The facts suggest that while the structure of American government and the electoral process survived an attempted coup on January 6, an assault on the democratic process, elections, and voting rights continues and may resonate for years. Similarly, while schools and teachers largely go about their business as usual, hampered by a global pandemic, the influence of right wing populism, as embodied in the CRT controversy, sent a chill across the land, a chill felt most strongly by social studies teachers. The message to teachers in conservative states and communities was simple and direct: If you teach about race or other potentially controversial issues of the past or present, you may face a backlash. You could even lose your job. This does not bode well for democratic education or for the future of democracy.

The Challenge to Schools. The influence of right wing populism threatens democratic norms, values, and processes. It threatens the electoral process and the free and open exchange of ideas necessary for democracy to flourish. The twin thrusts of Trump education policy, choice and privatization on the one hand, and curriculum retrenchment on the other, are a continuation of long-term trends from conservatives. However, the rhetoric and activities of this era have raised the threat to democratic norms to a new level. Laws passed restricting teaching about race and other potentially controversial topics, have sent a chill across the land, leading teachers in conservative communities and states to self-censor and restrict the discussion of a range of topics that might be seen as controversial.

In a longer historical view, the public image of school has shifted in recent years from panacea to scapegoat. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, schools were viewed as an institution of progress, bringing opportunity and educational advancement to the nation’s citizenry. During the era of accountability reform, from *A Nation at Risk* (1983) to the present, the perception of schools was built on a scapegoat mentality and the myth of “failing” public schools. Trump era policies and their aftermath reflect this shift, especially the CRT controversy and emphasis on choice, as a remedy for “failing” schools.

In the wake of the continuing controversy over CRT, the challenge to educators is to educate the critical and open mind by using the classroom and curriculum as a place for examining crucial issues of the past and present. This means openly examining persistent issues and questions, considering alternatives, gathering and studying relevant evidence, weighing consequences, and developing reasoned conclusions. It means drawing on history and the social sciences as important sources of evidence, and developing dialogical approaches to teaching that are relevant and meaningful. It means teachers asking their students to discuss the question: “What do you think?” (RUGG, 1956).

For a democratic educational process to thrive, academic freedom is a necessary condition. This means being ever vigilant in the cause of academic freedom, with support from organizations such as NCSS, the ACLU, the ABA, SPLC. It means regularly fact checking the rhetoric of right wing politicians and commentators. Lies, conspiracy theories, propaganda, mischaracterization, and innuendo must be challenged and countered with established facts.

The rise of right wing populism, the influence of conspiracy theories, the unchecked popularity

of a politician and former president who ignores facts and leads with autocratic tendencies are all troubling developments. The work of democratic educators over the years offers suggestions on the way forward (EVANS, 2021). From John Dewey and Harold Rugg to the work of more recent educators, teachers can learn to effectively implement an inquiry oriented and issues-centered form of deliberative democratic education in classrooms. It is important. The future of our democracy may hang in the balance.

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