

# Backlash over 'critical race theory' rattles NY schools' pursuit of equity

*The state Board of Regents urges districts to create "equity, diversity and inclusion" policies to help overcome historical injustices.*

**Gary Stern**

Rockland/Westchester Journal News

A national backlash against the "woke" teaching of anti-racism in schools is threatening to upend New York's emerging focus on equalizing opportunities for all students and weakening the impact of systemic racism.

Spurred by social media, critics of an arcane academic concept called "critical race theory" are accusing schools of dividing students by race, demonizing whites and labeling students of color as victims.

This movement is building only weeks after the New York State Board of Regents declared that schools face a "moral and economic imperative" to give students from all backgrounds an equitable shot at academic success. The board last month urged all school districts to create policies and practices to this end, "with fidelity and urgency."

"We recognize the role that race and racism plays and we recognize our obligation to remove barriers that have been obstacles for segments of New York State's population," Regents Chancellor Lester Young said.



He added: "By no means are we advocating a race-based education system in New York State."

But the push for school districts to review their entire operations — hiring, training, curriculum, classroom practices — for evidence of "implicit bias" against any group of students is facing vocal opposition from those who say their children are being indoctrinated with a leftist agenda.

Confusion over the meaning of the state's goals, as well as that of critical race theory, is a combustible combination at a time of political conflict fueled by social media. Even a small number of critics making wild claims can rile a community and put conflict-averse school administrators on the defensive.

In **Putnam County**, parent Tatiana Ibrahim became an overnight star of conservative TV and social media after berating the **Carmel** Board of Education on June 2 for committing "treason against our children" by teaching a "Black Panthers" curriculum.



"Why can't we let the public know that you are teaching our children to go out and murder our police officers?" Ibrahim said.

Newsmax TV's Greg Kelly showed a 10-minute video of Ibrahim's rant and compared her to Paul Revere. Ibrahim's Twitter account, started this month, has over 27,000 followers.

**Education:** What is critical race theory and why do Republicans oppose teaching it?

**Critical race theory:** States pass 'laws in search of problems that don't exist'

**History lessons:** 'Children deserve to be taught': Teachers in 22 cities are planning protests over laws restricting racism lessons in schools



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Across New York, school boards are facing questions and attacks about what their true aims are when adopting policies aimed at equity and defeating racism.

Fran Wills, who represents the Lower Hudson Valley on the Board of Regents, said superintendents are concerned about their vulnerability to inaccurate attacks. She said she's worried that schools will shy away from teaching elements of the nation's history and current affairs to avoid provoking rancor.

Wills pointed to the **Clarkstown** school district's recent shelving of a presentation by middle school students about Black Lives Matter.

"The facts are the facts," she told The Journal News/lohud. "For people of color, this country has been based since the beginning on a social caste system that was racist. But we don't have to be racist now. By acknowledging that we were, we can be better. That's the whole point.

"It's a very challenging time for teachers and schools," Wills said. "We've given them a set of standards and we have to protect them. To back down now would be very sad."

## 'You're the racist'

Distrust of school districts' goals is leading to raucous public meetings and accusatory notes and calls to educators. Many administrators are on edge, not wanting to inadvertently say something that could draw protests.

Oliver Robinson, the 16-year superintendent of the **Shenendehowa** school district in the Capital Region and co-chair of the state Superintendents Council's commission on equity and inclusion, said he has gotten calls, emails and survey responses in recent weeks telling him to back off critical race theory.

"It's hard to refute objections from people who don't know what these terms even mean," he said. "We're at a critical time in society, with the social,



political and economic engines all turning. People think that if we use the term equity, their child has to give something up so someone else can get more."

During Ibrahim's tirade at the Carmel school board, she hit on a theme popular with those who fear critical race theory: that schools are overemphasizing race and inflaming divisions at a time when racism is dissipating and many individuals are "colorblind."

"Children don't look at color," she snapped at the board. "You're the racist, not them, not us."



At another board meeting days later, Dylan Quattrucci, a 2015 graduate of Carmel High School, told the audience, "After this whole Black Lives Matter movement, where they're burning down cities, looting stores, all that stuff, critical race theory really crept into our schools and started to take over the curriculum."

Sudden resistance to critical race theory, an academic concept developed by legal scholars in the 1970s, is the latest manifestation of the nation's political and cultural wars.

The basic notion behind critical race theory is that racism is part of America's heritage and is braided through institutions like business, housing and schools, and that this institutional racism continues to benefit white people in myriad ways. But there is no consensus beyond this general concept, including on how the theory can be applied.

There's little evidence that schools have sought to base policies or practices on critical race theory. But five states have signed laws, and 17 more have bills, that would limit the ability of schools to teach lessons about race that allegedly cause division.

New York, with strong Democratic majorities in both legislative houses, is not among them.

And yet, in New York, the Board of Regents' push for school districts to adopt policies to foster "diversity, equity and inclusion," a process already underway in some districts, can leave many grasping to understand jargon-heavy approaches on race.

In Carmel, students lined up at a recent meeting to defend their schools and teachers, saying they are taught to respect the differences among classmates and others, and that allegations about anti-police and anti-white lessons are not true.

"It upset me that people believe what is being said when there is no proof," sophomore Kayla Medina said.

Days later, more than 100 parents and graduates signed a letter to the school board supporting its work and the "continuation of a multicultural curriculum that promotes social justice and equity."

Carmel Superintendent Mary-Margaret Zehr, who arrived in February, told The Journal News/lohud that critical race theory is not part of the district's curriculum and that the district does not teach anti-police sentiment. She said every district in New York is studying the Regents' decrees for advancing



equity and that "it's important for us to engage our community, which we will do."



Assistant Superintendent Lizzette Ruiz-Giovinazzi said it's a mistake to think that the equity push is only about race.

"It's about coming up with strategies to reach all diverse learners," she said.

## **New York is called to act**

Change began in New York with little fanfare.

During the mid-2010s, a scattering of mostly diverse school districts around the state began assessing their day-to-day practices for biases that could alienate any particular group of students — by race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability and more.



These initiatives were driven, in part, by longstanding angst over the "achievement gap" separating white students and students of color, and growing calls for schools to provide equity, meaning different supports for students according to their circumstances.

In addition, universities and businesses had started to promote the adoption of "diversity, equity and inclusion" policies as a way for institutions to clarify their goals.

The Nyack school district, for one, set out several years ago to change outcomes for Black students, who had higher suspension rates and lower graduation rates. Instead of focusing on remediation, the district sought to root out practices that unintentionally marginalized Black students. Staff were trained on the effects of institutional racism.





"We challenged ourselves openly to find solutions, since so much was tied to race and affluence," Nyack Superintendent James Montesano said. "It's not about racism on the part of an individual, but social racism and how it evolved. If you listen to kids, they have very different experiences."

In Albany, meanwhile, New York's education leadership began developing a new statewide vision for removing obstacles to success for students of color.

In 2019, the Board of Regents released a 64-page document stating that structural inequities have long harmed students "based on linguistic background, gender, skin color, and other characteristics." The board called on school communities to affirm students' identities and "elevate historically marginalized voices."

The Regents took a major step last month by adopting a "call to action" on promoting diversity, equity and inclusion in New York's schools. They asserted that a series of national tragedies — police killings of people of color, violence directed at Asian-Americans and others, and the uneven toll of COVID-19 — would now "propel us beyond the systemic racism that has come to define America's institutions."

The board called on school districts to adopt policies that would, among other things, acknowledge the role of racism in America's story, diversify their staffs, and reflect all student cultures in curriculum, classroom practices and assessments.

Some districts are well into this work. But many others are just beginning, setting the stage for more local debates during the coming school year.

The Board of Regents this month highlighted model school systems, including **Dutchess BOCES**. Cora Stempel, deputy superintendent of Dutchess BOCES, described several countywide projects, including having first-graders audit library books "to determine who is represented" and how.

Amya West, a senior at **Poughkeepsie** High School, told the Regents about taking part in a student summit about designing equitable schools.

"As I'm becoming an activist, I should use my own voice to help out not only other students who have similar issues to me, but to help students who have different issues," she said. "And to not just speak for them, but to speak with them."

David Kirkland, an academic and activist at NYU who has played a key role in the Regents' work, said that schools must come to terms with why students of color achieve less when "our babies ain't broken."

"We have to have the courage to talk about what is going on," he said. "Structural racism is not just a legacy of our education system; we see racial disparity across every system."

Kirkland is executive director of the NYU Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and The Transformation of Schools, which advises school districts on creating equity policies. He said that if schools back down because of community criticism, "we are saying to these students we would rather be comfortable than courageous when it comes to creating a system of education that works for everyone."

The state Education Department, in a statement to The Journal News/lohud, said the Board of Regents maintains that school districts must move forward to "remove the inequities that stand in the way of success for whole segments of New York's student population." Adopting an equity policy is a local decision, the statement said, but the Regents expect school districts and colleges to do so. There is no timetable.

Such policies, "empower students from all backgrounds to visualize successful futures for themselves and provide them with a sense of belonging and self-worth."



Charles Fain Lehman, a fellow at the Manhattan Institute, a conservative think tank, expected the Regents to accept lower standards as a way to equalize outcomes for students.

"Do I think there is a real desire for high expectations and standards? No, not at all," he said. "High expectations are seen as racist and bigoted."

The Manhattan Institute just released a toolkit for parents about "woke schooling."

## **Grassroots conflict**


The pursuit of equity will play out differently according to each district's history and demographics, with the potential for twists and turns.

In the **Clarkstown** school district, a class presentation by eighth-graders about the Black Lives Matter movement was pulled by district administrators last month because of supposed concerns in the community that the students' work was anti-police.

The presentation was part of a program designed by the Anti-Defamation League, called "No Place to Hate" and used by some 1,600 schools across the country. Community members spoke out for and against the presentation at a school board meeting. Then the district had the students give a Zoom presentation to community leaders and discussed having them do a second for police, who weren't interested.

## Key Points:

- **What is Black Lives Matter**
  - ◆ Black Lives Matter is a movement that brings awareness to black lives and the injustice and discrimination many black communities face.
- **What does BLM *not* Mean**
  - ◆ BLM doesn't mean that other lives don't matter but is meant to draw attention to black lives that are in danger.
- **Black Lives Matter on Social Media**
  - ◆ On many social media platforms, individuals bring awareness to the BLM movement by posting about the topic and speaking about what they believe in.
- **Black Lives Matter Protests**
  - ◆ BLM protests are a crucial part of the BLM movement. Millions of people across the nation have taken part in these protests, possibly making the BLM movement the largest movement in U.S. history.



Clarkstown Superintendent Martin Cox told The Journal News/lohud that schools "have to get comfortable with topics that appear to be uncomfortable" but must also ensure that all viewpoints "can have voice and be understood in a safe environment."

On Tuesday, Cox sent a note to the community saying that the presentation was postponed indefinitely after consultation with all involved. He wrote that the district's new diversity, equity and inclusion committee would continue "charting our course forward as we lead in creating a more equal and just school community."

Nicole Hines, president of the Nyack NAACP, said the district's decision to stop a student presentation was a clear lesson for students.

"What it showed to them is their work is not valued," she said. "That it doesn't matter."

The diverse **Bedford** school district adopted an "Anti-Racism Value Statement" in 2020 that said "racism in our schools is real and must be



addressed." The district has continued to talk about race and equity, in line with state directives.

But a backlash against critical race theory came up in the recent school board election and led to contentious debate at a board meeting this month. A Bedford Facebook group inspected a district document for language indicative of critical race theory.

"We do not need to segment children by the color of their skin," the group's post reads.

Chris Kramer, a Bedford parent concerned about the district's direction, said his family, which includes two adopted children from Ethiopia, chose Bedford in part because of its diversity.

"I have never seen any explicit racism directed towards them nor have I concluded there was implicit racism," he said. "Their time at the district has been phenomenal. Everyone has treated them equally and with kindness. Now, all of a sudden, the community comes to understand that there is racism in the district?"

Kramer said parents are on guard against the district adopting a radical agenda that puts anti-racism at the forefront.

"These are children, not oppressors," he said. "We should be looking to uplift our community."

Bedford Superintendent Joel Adelberg released a letter affirming the district's commitment to providing an equitable and inclusive education for all students, while stating that Bedford is not teaching critical race theory.

"Every student, regardless of race, ethnicity, learning needs, gender, gender identification, home language or socio-economic status, should be embraced as a future...valedictorian," he wrote.

Attacks can come from outside a district, too. Several national groups are supporting local activists who want to organize against school district policies. One group, Parents Defending Education, went after the **Irvington** school district on its "IndoctriNation Map" for contracting with a consultant, Kirkland's NYU group, that it said pledged to "undo whiteness."

Irvington Superintendent Kristopher Harrison said the group's website is inaccurate.

"There is no critical race theory here in Irvington," he said. "The myth that critical race theory is a synonym for culturally responsive education is an absolute falsity. We're proud of the work we're doing and will forge ahead."

## **Better messaging**

Since race and equity are likely to remain on school districts' agendas for some time, schools may have to improve their communication about what they teach and why — and what they don't teach.

"People are paying attention, which is what we want," said Robinson, from the state Superintendents Council. "But we schools have to be more thoughtful and diligent about defining concepts in plain ways. Or people will make assumptions."

He said school officials often play "not to lose" by trying to avoid conflict.





"You have to have confidence in what you're doing," he said. "I tell people I'm not going to apologize that my job is to ensure that every student has the best opportunity for success."

School boards often face aggressive questioning during the "public comment" section of meetings, when board members generally listen but don't respond. They need to create separate forums to discuss equity plans in "conversational" ways, said Jay Worona, deputy executive director for the New York State School Boards Association.

"I don't believe there is a school district intending to inculcate kids with a particular ideology," he said. "They have to make sure the public is informed; a lot of strong feelings are predicated on false premises."

People need to understand that the true goal of schools and teachers is to meet the needs of all students, said Tanya Wiggins, an assistant professor in Pace University's School of Education.

"We want teachers to be mindful of all the students in the room, to think about any biases they may have in terms of gender, sexual identity, cultural identity,"

she said. "Plan lessons that take into account any disabilities. If we're not mindful of all the students in the room, we're not doing the job."

*Staff Writers Nancy Cutler and Katelyn Cordero contributed to this report.*