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Schools teach history, empathy, not critical race theory, officials say

August 5, 2021 by Anne Berleant on Education, News

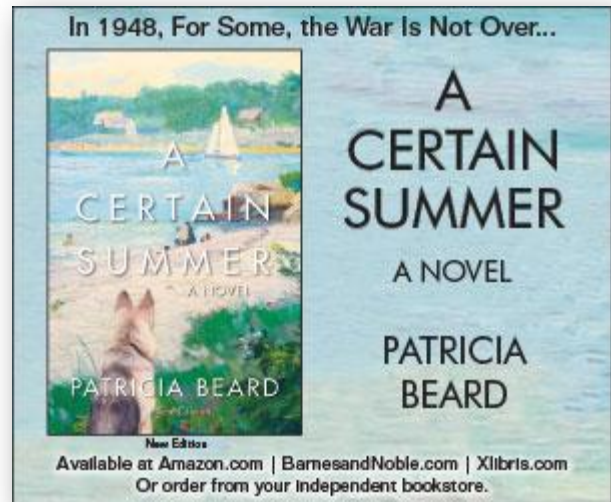


ELLSWORTH — Resident Gwen Clark had three questions for the Ellsworth School Board on July 27. The final two concerned critical race theory.

“When was CRT, critical race theory, approved to be taught in our school system?” she asked. “Were parents ever notified that this was going to happen, that this kind of curriculum was going to be coming into our schools?”

The questions echoed those heard in school board meetings across the U.S. in the past year, with the nation's focus already on race and education under the pandemic.

In Ellsworth, the answer was clear.



"We've never, ever taken on critical race theory," said School Board Vice Chairwoman Abigail Miller. "Ever."

Critical race theory comes out of the legal field and was originally solely concerned with inequality in the judicial system. CRT is primarily used in graduate level studies, which Miller pointed out.

"People attribute things to us that just aren't what we do," Superintendent Dan Higgins said. "CRT isn't part of our curriculum, and it isn't what we do."

But in light of the Black Lives Matter movement and protests against racial and other inequities in the past 14 months, CRT discussions have spread from academia into the public discourse.

"There's kind of a presumption we know a lot about this," Ellsworth School Department Curriculum Coordinator Rachel Kohrman-Ramos told The American. "CRT is an academic legal and social sciences upper-level theory. It is not a K-12 practice. It doesn't apply to anything we do here."

Maine has no state-mandated curriculum, but schools must teach to standards found in Maine's Learning Results and Guiding Principles, "a broad framework of concepts for each of the content areas to which schools are required to align their curriculum and instruction," according to Department of Education Communications Director Kelli Deveaux.

"[CRT] is a political construct, not an education one. It is not a curriculum or a program of study," Deveaux continued. "The recent use of the term seems to expand its scope and meaning to include anything to do with diversity of ideas, experiences or mention of race."

Clark also asked the Ellsworth School Board if CRT was being taught under another name, such as social and emotional learning. She also filed a wide-ranging public records request on

June 13 with the School Department, for documents relating to board discussions and curriculum, and said she was told the superintendent's office needed more time to fill her request.

The Department of Education defines social emotion learning as "the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships and make responsible and caring decisions."

Kohrman-Ramos said the School Department is pushing social emotional learning to help students with post-COVID trauma.

But Clark said she wasn't satisfied with their answer.

"[CRT] is in the schools," she said. "It was in the schools last year."

So how do local schools teach the history of people who have a history of being oppressed?

Ellsworth High School social studies teacher Heidi Omlor teaches world history, covering everything from Mesopotamia to 9/11 in one school year, along with a year-long elective on the Holocaust and genocide for upperclassmen.

"I use primary sources," she said.

When covering the civil rights era of the 1960s, speeches and documents form those sources.

"I provide the background for all these things," Omlor said. "It's kind of a big puzzle."

Melanie Brown teaches civil rights to her seventh-grade civics class.

"Basically, we look at, what is civil rights?" she said. "What did Martin Luther King stand for? I brought in a few of his speeches from when he was in Birmingham Jail, those kinds of things."

Brown said when students raise issues and current events, she keeps things to "a very neutral discourse."

"That's really important," she said. "Teachers need to keep their opinions completely out of it and let kids have a discussion."

The educator's role is to provide information, tools and skills so students can make their own interpretations, Superintendent Higgins said.

The state standards for social studies in the Maine Learning Results speak of major enduring themes, that is, general topics or issues that have been relevant over a long period of time, such as freedom and justice, conflict and compromise, unity and diversity and continuity and change over time.

University of Maine professor Rebecca Buchanan teaches a required multicultural education course for future teachers. She has her students think about how cultural identities "relate to

power across class, sexual identity and race” and “how they think of their own identities in a broader socioeconomic climate. And how they will teach [this] to their students.”

“We’re not teaching CRT,” she said. “But we’re discussing issues of power and how that relates to these aspects of identity differences and multiculturalism. But there are certainly connections between this approach. CRT examines how power and institutional power relates to race.”

Jason Malbon is head of the social studies department at Ellsworth High School and teaches freshman civics and government. He said social justice questions rarely come up in class.

“We talk about how certain provisions of the Constitution would apply to people,” he said. “We deal with Supreme Court cases to illustrate to how some of the constitutional rights have been tested.”

In Regional School Unit 25 (RSU 25), which covers Bucksport, Verona Island, Prospect and Orland, Superintendent Jim Boothby said CRT is not taught.

“I can say our curriculum is aligned to the Maine Learning Results, and we do not teach CRT,” he said. “There are units in the social studies discipline that do address civil rights.”

The Mount Desert Island school system created an Anti-Racism Task Force a year ago after supporters flooded the board with letters and a petition with over 600 signatures in support. The School Board unanimously endorsed the measure last July, and the task force recommendations to the board last month. They are directed at lessening racism in the island schools.

Diversity, equity and inclusion is a phrase “that gets tossed around,” Kohrman-Ramos said. “We need to prepare our kids to live in a diverse society. Some of this is teaching our kids how to look through different lenses.”

What is Critical Race Theory?

Critical Race Theory (CRT) is just that, a theory, dating back to the 1970s and ‘80s. It is not a curriculum, but it can inform curriculums. It is taught at the graduate school level as an academic framework. CRT scholarship traces racism in America through the nation’s legacy of slavery, the civil rights movement and recent events.

The term has been ascribed a wide range of meanings and been propelled from the halls of academia to the forefront of a national conversation about race and racism in the U.S.

“Critical Race Theory (CRT) makes race the prism through which its proponents analyze all aspects of American life — and do so with a degree of persistence that has helped CRT impact all of American life,” conservative think tank The Heritage Foundation stated in an December 2020 article titled [“Critical Race Theory, the New Intolerance, and Its Grip on America.”](#)

CRT sees racism as institutional and systemic, while its critics believe people may be racist but American institutions are not.

And for critics of CRT like The Heritage Foundation, CRT is blamed for bringing a host of social ills into play across a wide spectrum of American life. The Heritage Foundation includes “identity politics” and “a worldview that describes only oppressors and the oppressed.”

Meanwhile, the American Bar Association, in [A Lesson in Critical Race Theory](#), outlines how CRT grew out of Critical Legal Studies (CLS), “which argued that the law was not objective or apolitical. CLS was a significant departure from earlier conceptions of the law (and other fields of scholarship) as objective, neutral, principled and dissociated from social or political considerations.” CLS officially started in 1977 but its roots lie in the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War.

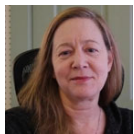
The ABA also states, “CRT recognizes that racism is not a bygone relic of the past. Instead, it acknowledges that the legacy of slavery, segregation, and the imposition of second-class citizenship on Black Americans and other people of color continue to permeate the social fabric of this nation.”

Critical Race Theory broadened the scope of CLS to other academic fields, including education. The term itself is credited to UCLA and Columbia law professor Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, who defined CRT recently for the New York Times as “a way of seeing, attending to, accounting for, tracing and analyzing the ways that race is produced, the ways that racial inequality is facilitated, and the ways that our history has created these inequalities that now can be almost effortlessly reproduced unless we attend to the existence of these inequalities.”

Then-President Donald Trump warned against CRT as divisive in a 2020 memo to federal agencies. He subsequently issued an executive order barring training for federal employees that held any suggestions that the U.S. was fundamentally racist. The order was rescinded by President Joe Biden but the debate on CRT continues on.

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