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### **Context Paper**

In a deciding boardroom meeting, Florida Governor Ron DeSantis found himself at the center of a heated debate surrounding Critical Race Theory (CRT) in public education. Against a backdrop of national discourse and local concerns, the meeting gathered stakeholders from diverse backgrounds, each with their perspectives on the controversial issue. DeSantis, known for his firm stance on educational policy, faced the daunting task of balancing the demands of constituents while navigating the complexities of the educational curriculum. Governor DeSantis, known for his unwavering conservative principles, articulated his concerns about CRT's potential impact on young minds, emphasizing the need to preserve traditional educational values and avoid what he termed as "indoctrination." The boardroom meeting served as a microcosm of the broader national conversation, with voices advocating for and against the incorporation of CRT into Florida's public educational system. Advocates emphasized the importance of acknowledging historical truths and equipping students with the tools to confront present-day inequalities. Conversely, critics cautioned against what they perceived as ideological indoctrination and urged for a curriculum centered on unity and American exceptionalism.

For Governor DeSantis, the challenge was double-sided, maintaining commitment to his hardcore conservative principles while addressing the legitimate concerns of educators, parents, and students. Aware of the polarizing nature of the issue, he sought common ground, emphasizing the importance of a balanced approach to curriculum development. Proposing

alternatives that emphasized civic education and the celebration of American values, in a way that hides some historical truths. The boardroom meeting served as a platform for DeSantis to outline his vision for education in the state, emphasizing a curriculum that emphasizes traditional American values and history. The deliberations in this meeting captured the larger national discourse on the role of education in shaping societal narratives and values, reflecting the ongoing struggle to strike a balance between acknowledging historical injustices and fostering a unified national identity.

Critical Race Theory (CRT) emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s as a framework within legal studies to examine the intersection of race, law, and power dynamics in American society and has since expanded into various disciplines, particularly public education. Initially developed primarily by scholars of color such as Derrick Bell, Kimberlé Crenshaw, and Alan Freeman, CRT aimed to focus on racial consciousness to address the question of “color” in American law (Minda 167). The roots of CRT can be traced back to critical legal studies and civil rights movements, which highlighted the inadequacy of formal legal equality in addressing racial injustice. In short, “CRT argues that disparity resources in black societies are sustained by white hegemony (Brooks 90). CRT scholars challenged the notion of color-blindness and argue that racism is ingrained in social structures and institutions, shaping law and policy in ways that perpetuate racial hierarchy and oppression. Critical race theory argues that this way of thinking has the ideological consequence of convincing minorities that racial discrimination can only be eradicated through the implementation of color-blind meritocratic standards, which accord whites and blacks the same formal rights and process (Minda 168). One key tenet of CRT is the recognition that racism is not just individual prejudice or bias, but rather embedded within the fabric of society through laws, policies, and institutions. The embedded principles create

“disparate resources are sustained by society’s structures—economic, educational, political, and so on”(Brooks 90). Central to CRT is the concept of "interest convergence," which suggests that advances in civil rights are only made when they align with the interests of those in power. This idea underscores the strategic nature of racial progress and the ongoing struggle for racial justice. Furthermore, CRT emphasizes the intersectionality of race with other social identities such as gender, class, and sexuality, recognizing that individuals experience multiple forms of oppression simultaneously. By examining these intersecting axes of identity, CRT provides a more nuanced understanding of how systems of power operate and intersect to shape people's lives. One of the central concepts in CRT is the 'interest-convergence principle'; put simply, this view argues that advances in race equality only come about when White elites see the changes as in their own interests (Bell, 1980). CRT's insights can also be directly applied to education in terms of the application of standards and disciplinary measures in the school setting. Although still rarely used in educational paradigms, and banned in others, “CRT provides space in which to observe the workings of racism through close attention to stories” (Stovall 201). Critics of CRT argue that it promotes divisiveness and perpetuates a victim mentality by focusing too much on race. Lynn argues that urban schools are not "created with the intent of being spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually emancipating" (Lynn 1999, p. 607). Instead, they are promoted and utilized as a system of order and control” ( Stovall 209).

However, proponents argue that CRT offers a valuable framework for understanding and addressing the enduring legacy of racism in society. By centering the experiences of marginalized groups and interrogating the ways in which power operates along racial lines, CRT encourages a more comprehensive analysis of social phenomena. Moreover, CRT provides a toolkit for challenging and dismantling systems of oppression, advocating for transformative

change at both the individual and institutional levels. In recent years, CRT has sparked heated debates on various platforms, including education, politics, and media. Some states have sought to ban its teaching in schools, some have successfully banned its teaching in schools, while others have embraced it as a necessary tool for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion. These debates reflect broader systemic tensions around issues of race, power, and representation in our society. As CRT continues to influence scholarly discourse and social activism, its impact on public policy and social justice movements remains a subject of ongoing debate and exploration. Regardless of anyone's stance on these debates, CRT serves as a provoking and illuminating lens through which to examine the complexities of race and racism in contemporary society.

Public education in the United States has a rich and complex history that reflects the evolving values, needs, and challenges of the nation. The roots of public education can be traced back to colonial times when education was primarily provided by private tutors or religious institutions. However, widespread public education did not become a reality until the 19th century with the rise of the common school movement. Spearheaded by reformers such as Horace Mann, Massachusetts secretary of board of education, the common school movement aimed to provide free, non-sectarian education to all children regardless of their background. This period saw the establishment of state-funded public schools and the adoption of compulsory attendance laws, laying the foundation for the modern public education system.

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, public education underwent significant expansion and reform. The Progressive Era brought about further reforms in education, including efforts to standardize curriculum, improve teacher training, and expand access to secondary education. The mid-20th century witnessed landmark Supreme Court decisions that reshaped the landscape of public education. The *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling in 1954 declared racial

segregation in public schools unconstitutional, marking a pivotal moment in the struggle for civil rights. Despite this legal victory, achieving desegregation remained a contentious and often protracted process, highlighting the deep-seated racial inequalities within the education system.

More recently, public education in the United States has faced numerous challenges, including funding disparities, standardized testing controversies, CRT bans, and debates over school choice and privatization. Efforts to address these issues have led to initiatives such as the No Child Left Behind Act and the Every Student Succeeds Act, which aim to hold schools accountable for student performance and promote equity in education. However, persistent achievement gaps along racial, socioeconomic, and geographic lines underscore the ongoing need for reform and investment in public education.

Born on September 14, 1978, in Jacksonville, Florida, DeSantis is a Republican known for his strong conservative stances on various issues, specifically critical race theory. Ron DeSantis, the Governor of Florida since 2019, emerged as a prominent figure in American politics, gaining national attention for his policies, controversies, leadership style, and ban of CRT in the public education system. DeSantis has also been a vocal critic of what he perceives as government overreach, particularly from the federal government. He has clashed with the Biden administration on issues such as immigration, vaccine mandates, and environmental regulations. His combative stance has endeared him to many conservatives but has also fueled controversy and political divides. In addition to his policy decisions, DeSantis's political future has been the subject of much speculation. He is widely seen as a potential candidate for higher office, including president, which he has previously run for. His polarizing style and controversial positions could pose challenges in a national campaign. However, his close alignment with

Trump and his ability to mobilize conservative voters makes him a significant figure within the Republican Party and boosted his views on CRT.

Donald Trump's political career has been marked by his unorthodox approach to governance, populist rhetoric, and ability to formulate a loyal base. As the 45th President of the United States, Trump disrupted traditional norms and reshaped the Republican Party in his image. His four year presidency was characterized by a mix of economic nationalism, conservative judicial appointments, and a confrontational style in both domestic and foreign policy. Throughout his presidency, Trump garnered significant support from conservative voters who felt disenfranchised by what they perceived as liberal elitism dominating cultural and academic institutions, with issues like CRT. Trump's approach to governance often involved blunt rhetoric and a confrontational style, which resonated strongly with his base. Trump relied heavily on cultivating personal relationships with key political figures, both within his own party and across the political spectrum. One of the people to emerge alongside Trump during his presidency was Ron DeSantis, the Governor of Florida. DeSantis, a former U.S. Representative, aligned himself closely with Trump's brand of politics and enjoyed Trump's vocal support during his gubernatorial campaign in 2018. The alignment between Trump and DeSantis can be traced back to their shared political ideology, which prioritizes issues such as immigration restriction, tax cuts, deregulation, tough-on-crime stance and the removal of CRT. DeSantis embraced Trump's agenda wholeheartedly, echoing his language on issues like border security and the economy.

Once in office, DeSantis continued to align himself with Trump's policies and governing style. Trump's opposition to CRT was evident during his presidency, as his administration took steps to restrict federal funding for programs deemed to promote CRT ideologies. Trump framed

his stance as a defense of American values and an effort to combat what he characterized as "radical indoctrination" in schools and government agencies. Similarly, Ron DeSantis has positioned himself as an antagonist of CRT within Florida. DeSantis has taken executive action to ban the teaching of CRT in public schools and has supported legislation to prohibit its implementation in state-sponsored programs. Like Trump, DeSantis has framed his opposition to CRT as a defense of academic integrity and a rejection of alienating identity politics. The alignment between Trump and DeSantis on CRT reflects their broader strategy of appealing to conservative ideologies by upholding traditional values and pushing back against racial progress in cultural and educational institutions. By taking a strong stand against CRT, both Trump and DeSantis aim to solidify their support among grassroots conservatives while positioning themselves as defenders of American values and unity. This alignment strengthens their political partnership and highlights their shared vision for the future of the Republican Party.

The roots of the African American experience trace back to the transatlantic slave trade, a brutal and dehumanizing system that forcibly displaced millions of Africans from their homeland to labor under oppressive conditions in the U.S.. Stripped of their freedom, identity, and dignity, enslaved Africans endured unimaginable suffering, but also displayed remarkable strength and resilience in the face of adversity. Through resistance, rebellion, and the preservation of cultural traditions, they asserted their humanity and laid the foundation for the struggle for freedom and equality that would follow. The African American experience in the United States is deeply intertwined with the history of education, reflecting a complex narrative of struggle, resilience, and progress. From the earliest days of slavery to the Civil Rights Movement and beyond, education has been both a tool of oppression and a pathway to success for African Americans. During the slavery era, access to education for African Americans was severely restricted, as

slave owners feared that education would instill a sense of freedom and autonomy among their enslaved labor force. The philosophy was “the negro needs to be taught that labor is his salvation, not books” (Liwack 102). Despite these barriers, some enslaved individuals sought out clandestine means of education, risking severe punishment to learn to read and write. Education thus became a symbol of resistance and resilience, as African Americans recognized its potential to challenge the status quo and advocate for their rights.

The end of the Civil War brought about significant changes to the trajectory of education for African Americans with the establishment of Freedmen's Bureau schools and the emergence of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs). These institutions provided specific educational opportunities for newly freed individuals, laying the foundation for generations of African American scholars, educators, and leaders. However, the promise of educational equality remained in question as segregation laws and systemic racism continued to shape the educational landscape. The Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 marked a pivotal moment in the fight for educational equality, declaring segregation in public schools unconstitutional. This decision paved the way for the Civil Rights Movement, during which African Americans, alongside allies of all races, mobilized to dismantle institutionalized racism, desegregate, and demand equal access to quality education.

Despite these political victories, the struggle for educational equality continued, as African American students continue to face systemic barriers to academic success. Persistent achievement gaps, and unequal funding, disproportionately affect African American communities, perpetuating cycles of inequality and injustice. However, grassroots movements and advocacy efforts continue to push for systemic change, demanding reforms that address the root causes of educational inequity and promote inclusive, culturally responsive learning



environments. CRT is one of the ways to address the reasons for inequality but there has been ongoing debates on its relevance in schools. By acknowledging the legacy of the past and actively working towards a more inclusive future, we can strive to create educational systems that empower all individuals to thrive and succeed, regardless of race or background.

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