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CURRICULUM, CONFLICT, AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY

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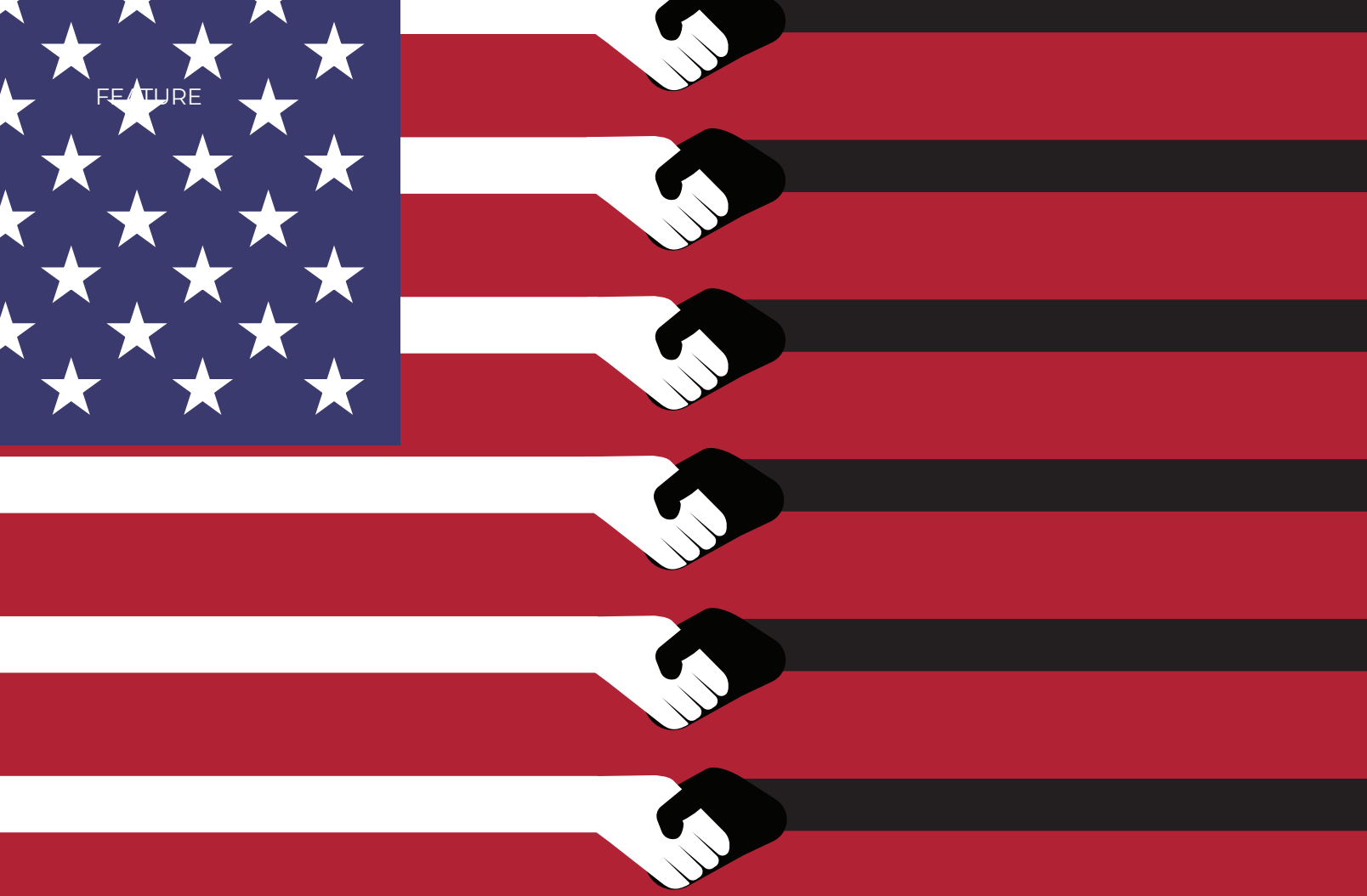
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FEATURE

# CURRICULUM, CONFLICT, AND CRITICAL RACE THEORY

The K-12 curriculum has always been a political battlefield, but recent attacks on critical race theory have brought hostilities to an entirely new level.

**By Kenneth Teitelbaum**

**As the recent and ongoing uproar** over the teaching of critical race theory (CRT) makes clear, we Americans are bitterly divided over how we should think about our racial history and its continuing influence on our lives. Clearly, the subject of race

remains, as ever, a national lightning rod, especially when it comes to deciding what our children should be taught about the country's past.

It may be comforting to imagine that when school leaders and teachers consider what to include in

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### Curriculum conflicts are not just *about* our politics; they *are* our politics.

the curriculum, they tend to rely on a consensual, evidence-based process, in which diverse perspectives are considered and those involved are committed to reaching a sensible agreement on the essential question: What content, skills, and dispositions should young people learn? In reality, though, the curriculum has always been a battlefield, and the current dispute over CRT is just the latest in a long history of disputes about what students ought to be taught.

However, and as I explain in the following pages, while it's important to remind ourselves just how contentious these discussions have been in past decades, we must also recognize what is new and distinct about today's curriculum battles. Much is at stake in the current attacks on CRT, and it's far from clear how educators should respond to those attacks, given that the combatants are not necessarily guided by the norms of civil discourse.

#### Conflicts are inevitable

Most curriculum debates occur on the local level, and they rarely become as heated as today's conflicts over critical race theory. Still, plenty of conflicts have garnered intense national interest over the years, which is hardly surprising given how much we have at stake in the education of our children (and the efficient use of our tax and tuition dollars). Consider a few prominent examples from the past century: In the late 1930s and early 1940s, the country saw a wave of angry, organized opposition to a formerly popular series of elementary and junior high social studies textbooks authored by Harold Rugg, a progressive educator at Teachers College, Columbia University (Evans, 2007). In the early 1970s, a national controversy erupted over the *Man: A Course of Study* (MACOS) humanities program for upper elementary students, funded by the National Science Foundation and based in part on the "spiral curriculum" theories of Harvard psychologist Jerome Bruner (Evans, 2011). And in recent years, a similar controversy erupted over the Common Core State Standards Initiative, which defined a new set of national standards for English language arts and mathematics. Developed by David Coleman and others in 2009, the Common Core was immediately endorsed by the National Governors Association,

the Council of Chief State School Officers, U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, and other prominent national figures, but since then, it has been strongly opposed and protested by many teachers, parent groups, and advocacy organizations across the country (Schneider, 2015; Tampio, 2018).

Or consider the wide range of curriculum conflicts that have made headlines over the last 20 years (and this is just a tiny selection of the examples I could provide; see Teitelbaum, 2020):

- California parents object to new sex ed program in public schools
- Experts sound alarm as more schools put PhysEd on back burner
- Can less equal more? Proposal to teach math students fewer concepts in greater depth has divided Maryland educators
- Collier School Board, parents debate evolution content in science textbooks; An education of misinformation: Old misleading info among perils of teaching climate change
- Runaway-slave games, sanitized textbooks. Schools do a terrible job teaching about slavery
- 'This is not what happened.' Native Americans criticize schools' teaching of their history
- Debate erupts in California over curriculum on India's history; Parents sue Massachusetts school over reading of gay book
- A conservative Christian group is pushing Bible classes in public schools nationwide — and it's working.

The point should be clear: Curriculum conflicts arise constantly, they touch on all sorts of content, and they draw in a varied list of participants from across the ideological spectrum, including professional educators, parents, elected officials, and a growing number of political, religious, and economic interest groups. Some of these groups operate behind the scenes and some openly, often employing powerful media outlets and political stages that are intent on spreading the views of like-minded players

(Apple, 2006). Of course, it is students, teachers, administrators, and school board members who tend to bear the brunt of the damage these battles inflict.

While we might yearn for a more harmonious approach to deciding what is included in the curriculum, such conflicts won't go away any time soon. And perhaps this is as it has to be. At a fundamental level, what we teach in our schools embodies our values and priorities, our interpretations and understandings, our expectations and hopes. In essence, the curriculum consists of, as Fred Inglis (1985) puts it, "stories we tell ourselves about ourselves" (p. 31). Some of us prefer stories that emphasize, for example, critical inquiry, a valuing of scientific evidence, an expansive view of intelligence, compassion and caring, diversity and inclusion, and democratic and equitable policies and practices. Others would rather emphasize stories about religious faith; the need for strict adherence to rules; competitive individualism, free market economics; and monocultural histories, traditions, and values. Clearly, it matters which stories we choose, and the differing stories are not easily reconciled.

Equally clear is that our country consists of no single "our." As Inglis writes, Americans are fond of using the pronoun "we" because it serves to "smooth over the deep corrugations and ruptures" that divide us. Ironically, though, those divisions are "caused precisely by struggle over how that authoritative and editorial 'we' is going to be used" (p. 23). The country holds together, somewhat, by a sense of national culture (and the U.S. Constitution), but it is also divided among many and varied populations, each of which wants its own stories — which it views as most truthful and most in keeping with educational and social needs — to be told in school.

Not infrequently, educators and educational researchers themselves become sharply divided over what children ought to learn and how. Underlying many of these debates are significant issues regarding, for example, the nature of learners and learning, the nature of subject matter, the role of teachers in the classroom, and the very purposes of public education. Past groups of educators advocated from very different and often incompatible worldviews, emphasizing, for instance, classical humanism, developmentalism, social efficiency, or social meliorism (Kliebard, 2004).

If nothing else, then, the controversy over CRT points to the need to be clear-headed about what is involved in making decisions about what should be taught and learned in our schools. The curriculum has long been a battleground, a contested terrain, where Americans quarrel over their competing ideas of who we were in the past, who we are now,

and who we should become in the future. In short, curriculum conflicts are not just *about* our politics; they *are* our politics. They are one of the ways in which we wrestle with each other over not just what is "good" in life and what is not, but also *who* is good and who is not (Inglis, 1985). When it comes to the K-12 curriculum, choices must be made about student learning, and those choices have to do with our most fundamental interests and principles, such as freedom, opportunity, justice, morality, citizenship, security, and so on.

### Critical race theory in the crosshairs

The furor over CRT is both real and unreal. It is real in the sense that scholars, political figures, media personalities, business leaders, and others are making serious, impassioned arguments for and against it; some state legislatures have banned the teaching of it; some parents are up in arms about the threat they think it poses to their children or are insistent that it be included in the curriculum; and in some places, teachers and administrators have been threatened or even lost their jobs over it.

But the debate has an unreal quality as well, in that very few people seem to know what CRT is or how, why, and when it originated. (Tucker Carlson of Fox News, for example, after months of railing against it, casually mentioned on air that in fact he had "never figured out what critical race theory is.") Even fewer people, including those well-versed in research on race in America, had ever heard of CRT before this recent brouhaha. Further, there is scant evidence that CRT, per se, is being taught extensively in schools.

Some observers (e.g., Pitts, 2021) have described CRT as just the latest in a long series of made-up



*"At school we don't call this finger painting. It's digital art."*

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cultural conflicts, invented by conservative activists to whip up support among Republican base voters (much as they did with previous pseudo-conflicts over Dr. Seuss books, gay wedding cakes, Sharia law, and the war on Christmas). Indeed, Christopher Rufo, the activist who initiated the recent surge of attacks on CRT, has admitted that his strategy was to make absurdly distorted claims about CRT in order to “steadily driv[e] up negative perceptions... [and] eventually turn it toxic” (Cobb, 2021, p. 21).

To the legal scholar Patricia Williams, Rufo and others have committed nothing less than “definitional theft” by suggesting that CRT has something to do with theories of Black supremacy, false claims about history, and out-of-control wokeness (Cobb, 2021, p. 21). Similarly, as one school superintendent notes: “What has happened is individuals have chosen to put everything into Critical Race Theory and call it a name. It’s not Critical Race Theory. . . [W]e have no idea what they’re talking about” (Hoover, 2021, p. 3A).

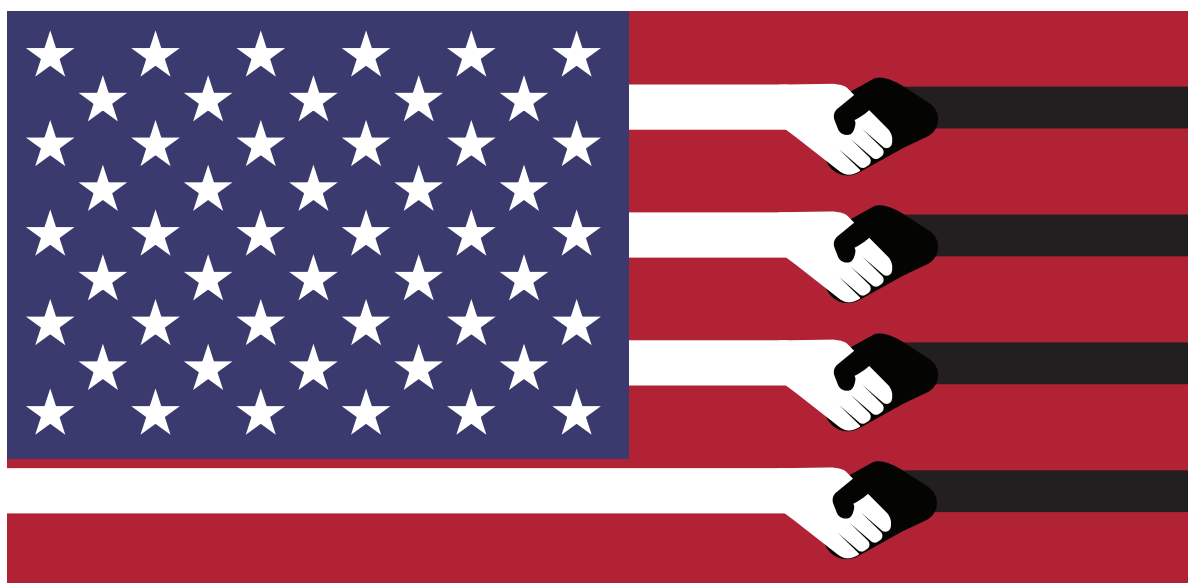
To these and many other scholars and educators, it’s important to give an accurate description of CRT, not just to defuse cynical efforts to sow division and whip up outrage but, more important, because CRT has real value in and of itself. To its advocates, it offers tools that can help students make better sense of racism in America — not just to understand the actions and comments of racist individuals, but to understand that racism has been baked into many aspects of American life (including our legal systems, school policy decisions, bank lending practices, and so on) for a very long time, really since the introduction of enslaved people into the colonies (Hannah-Jones et al., 2021). In other words, the

challenge of racism is not just cultural and linguistic but, primarily, structural and material (Bouie, 2021).

According to some, racism has been so thoroughly woven into the fabric of our nation that efforts to root it out are unlikely to succeed. For instance, Derrick Bell (1992), one of the originators of CRT, argued that the goal of attaining “full acceptance in this country, for all black people — as opposed to some black individuals — is virtually impossible in the society as we know it” (p. xi). Perhaps racial progress, he speculated, is only achievable to the extent that it is aligned with white interests. More recently, sociologist Ted Thornhill (2021) has described the U.S. as:

a nation that pretends [to be] the quintessence of a post-racial democracy, while simultaneously maintaining a structure that keeps Black, Indigenous, People of Color disproportionately economically disadvantaged, politically precarious, educationally deprived, violently policed, residentially ghettoized, medically disserved and subject to the ever-present disapproving gaze of whites.

These are tough and discomfiting claims for many to consider, especially those who believe that racism has diminished significantly in recent decades, as evidenced by civil rights legislation, school desegregation, affirmative action, expanded political and media representation, multicultural curricula, and the elections of Barack Obama and Kamala Harris. Moreover, they might point out, it is not just “minorities” who suffer from food insecurity, lack of affordable housing, costly health care, low-wage jobs, drug usage, crime, lack of affordable



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childcare, vanishing neighborhoods, and the like. Indeed, poor and marginalized white people have “good reason to be scared and angry,” acknowledges novelist and playwright Ayad Akhtar (2020, p. 242). It’s no surprise, he adds, that such people feel “betrayed and want to destroy something,” and that they would be unreceptive to the claim that people of color continue to suffer from systemic racism. Nor is it a surprise that some people would be more vociferously hostile to CRT, denouncing its supposedly “Marxist” underpinnings and divisiveness and accusing it of being, as Ben Carson (2021), former secretary of housing and human development in the Trump administration puts it, “founded on racist, conspiratorial drivel.”

Yet, a voluminous literature supports the argument that racism has been and continues to be a widespread and potent force in many aspects of American life. Year after year, researchers continue to gather new evidence showing that people of color have suffered disproportionate harm from policy decisions and common practices in a wide range of sectors (criminal justice, education, employment, environment, health care, housing, law, sports and entertainment, transportation, voting rights, and so on). While racism may have been more blatant and explicit during and immediately after the Jim Crow years, mountains of empirical and anecdotal data suggest that our country continues to be plagued by racial bias and that the racist ideas, laws, and practices of the past continue to inflict harm in the present (e.g., Hannah-Jones et al., 2021; Kendi, 2017; Rothstein, 2018).

The current debate — pitting those who seek to straightforwardly address the history and currency of American racism and those who think such an approach is unnecessarily divisive and even anti-American — reminds me of a comment by writer Gore Vidal (2014). Observing that our country too often suffers from a kind of collective amnesia, he suggested that “We learn nothing because we remember nothing.” With Vidal, I would argue that if we are to achieve any kind of national reconciliation on matters of race, then we must insist on truthful remembering, refusing to accept a sanitization (Wineburg, 2021) or “rigging” of our past (Loewen, 1995). What we require today is thorough and honest study of how racism has shaped our history and continues to influence us in significant ways. We need open and respectful conversation about these issues, followed by more inquiry and more reasonable discussion, both in and out of schools.

Far from the way it has been demonized by Rufo, Carlson, and other conservative ideologues, CRT is an effort to encourage such exchanges, asking people

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to learn about and make sense of our country’s historical wrongs, and perhaps find ways to right them. As high school teacher Antony Farag (2021) explains, CRT isn’t an ideology; rather, it emanates from the work of a loose collection of scholars who have chosen to study the complexities of racism in our country. To read the research that falls under CRT’s umbrella isn’t to adopt a specific political agenda but, rather, to be willing to confront our nation’s racial history, so that we can “unpack and rethink the social construct of race that divides so much of U.S. society” (p. 23). The point, Farag adds, is to engage in a rigorous and candid critique of what we strive for as a nation, what we have accomplished, and what still needs to be done.

### Courage and collaboration

And yet, these are particularly dangerous and divisive times, and educators need to be especially careful when they address a topic as emotionally fraught as racism in America. Legislators in at least 11 Republican-led states have passed bills to stop teachers from even talking about racism in their classrooms and have sought to remove offending books from library shelves. Parents have attended school board meetings to push back loudly, emotionally, and sometimes abusively against any school activities that remotely hint of CRT. Teachers have been reprimanded, suspended, and even fired for discussing white privilege and related topics in social studies classes. Principals and superintendents have been sent nasty messages that include threats of violence, and some have been forced to resign, if they seem in any way to support the imagined enemy of CRT, including, for example, conducting “equity audits.” The vitriol of some of these attacks by CRT opponents has sometimes bristled with outright racism.

While I do not want to overstate the case, we have to acknowledge that our nation seems to be in considerable peril with regard to its democratic ideals. In the current atmosphere, educators are facing heightened threats to their professional autonomy and, in some cases, to their continued employment and even personal safety. Increasing numbers report a

## Pragmatism doesn't have to mean self-censorship or giving up on the pursuit of truth telling.

“chilling” atmosphere at work and feeling “petrified.” In short, this appears to be a curriculum conflict that *cannot* be easily managed or contained — which raises the question: How, then, should educators respond? In this case, I would argue, it makes sense to engage in a kind of “strategic compliance,” avoiding public statements and classroom assignments that would further inflame tensions.

I do not mean that educators should be dishonest or deceptive, teach watered-down fantasies about American history, or give up on preparing students to take active roles as citizens in a strong democracy. But, as Robert Bullough Jr. and Andrew Gitlin (1995) put it, “Sometimes the ideals are set aside, perhaps painfully, and accommodation takes place; one becomes what the context demands” (p. 50). Critical educator Ira Shor (1980) makes a similar point, arguing that teaching should be:

adapted, amended, re-invented, used or discarded, depending on the requirements of the specific teaching situation . . . In each school or college, teachers need to assess what level of liberatory learning they can assert, given student consciousness and institutional politics. (pp. 113, 123)

As I have written elsewhere (Teitelbaum, 2020), one must essentially “work with what you’ve got” in pursuing one’s goals. This might mean refusing to be baited by over-the-top criticisms and attacks that seem to be borne out of insensitivity or outright hostility.

In short, educators may need to choose their words, instructional materials, and lesson activities more carefully for now, being mindful of those that could seriously threaten their continued work in schools. For example, while I think the YouTube video “White Privilege” by Kyla Jenée Lacey is a powerful poetry performance, it’s evident that using it in certain high schools in certain communities can contribute to being fired (Natanson, 2021). Maybe something else, less provocative but also informative, can be used to raise the same questions for classroom discussion. One would like to think that educators can rely on their colleagues, students, school board members, and others from their community to help reassert the basic norms of democratic discourse, so that all parties can hear

each other out, learn what has elicited such anger, and find ways to deal with disagreements in reasonable ways. Amid the growing furor over critical race theory, however, that is not something one can count on.

But pragmatism doesn’t have to mean self-censorship or giving up on the pursuit of truth telling. Courage in the face of conflict means refusing to be silenced or to succumb to a paralyzing “culture of fear” (Parker, 1998). As Bullough and Gitlin (1995) suggest, one can work to “resist pressures to conform and work, instead, to alter the context to make it more hospitable to one’s ideal” (p. 50). One starts with the recognition that the concerns raised by CRT and other anti-racist scholars are well worth addressing. Teachers should then make reasonable efforts to create a safe classroom environment, teach in ways that invite respectful dialogue and debate, provide evidence-based materials for students to review, and adapt their lessons to fit the students in their classrooms. They should also be careful to avoid a kind of reckless blaming of individuals for past racism or any suggestion that students should be judged, favorably or unfavorably, by the color of their skin. Rather than making broad generalizations about particular racial or ethnic groups, teachers should help students understand that, within any population, individuals vary in their political and religious views, talents, values, and achievements. The goals to keep in mind are to develop informed and thoughtful positions on racism as a broad social problem that erodes our democracy and diminishes our social fabric and to encourage more inclusive and equitable policies and practices.

At a time when teaching a Toni Morrison novel can cost you your job, it is wise also to build stronger, more active alliances with like-minded colleagues, parents, other community members, and teacher educators; reconnect with professional associations and unions; join local and national advocacy groups involved with related social issues (e.g., immigrant rights, voting rights, environmental justice); and, to the extent possible, actively engage students, parents, and community members in serious, respectful conversations about race in America, including those who, as H. Richard Milner notes, might initially “shy away from and [be] very uncomfortable talking about race” (Milner, 2010; Nadworny, 2015). After all, although the current wave of book-banning and anti-CRT legislation is extreme, it is not the first, and surely won’t be the last, major conflict over what to teach in our public schools.

Earlier, I quoted Derrick Bell’s statement about his belief in the permanence of racism. I conclude here

with the words he added immediately following the excerpted sentence:

The obligation to try and improve the lot of blacks and other victims of injustice (including whites) does not end because final victory over racism is unlikely, even impossible. The essence of a life fulfilled — a succession of actions undertaken in righteous causes — is a victory in itself. (Bell, 1992, p. xi)

All victims of social injustice can be a focus; doing work for righteous causes can be a goal. ■

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