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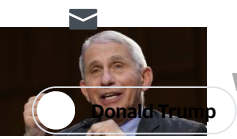
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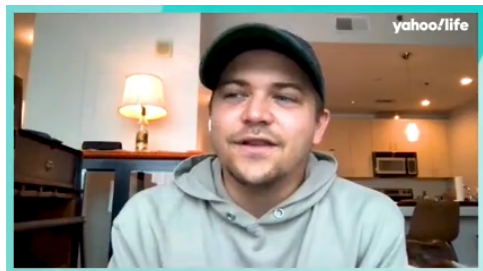
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NBC NEWS

GOP insists 'critical race theory' has no place in schools. What does that actually mean?



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Twelfth grade English teacher Kaari Aubrey said



Donald Trump

Louisiana is one of many states where legislators have proposed bills to bar educators from teaching “divisive” concepts like white privilege and racial equity. The bill has faced heavy opposition in the state, but Aubrey said she and her students are still concerned.

“A lot of students expressed really wanting to feel like their teachers care about them as people, not just as students. I believe you can’t really care about a person unless you take their full identity into account,” she said, noting that most of her students are Black. “We’re basically saying that students are not allowed to learn in the context of themselves. It’s very disturbing.”

A cluster of bills that aim to prohibit teaching critical race theory in K-12 schools have popped up in the last year. [Lawmakers behind an Idaho bill](#) said critical race theory “tries to make kids feel bad,” and [in Tennessee, legislators accused](#) such practices of “promoting division.” Meanwhile, a [Rhode Island bill bans](#) teaching the idea that “the United States of America is fundamentally racist or sexist.”

Conservative leaders [have been accused](#) of using the decades-old academic term — initially intended to recognize the systemic racism inherent in American life — as a catchall for anti-racism and diversity efforts.

The proposed policies mimic former President Donald Trump’s [September memo](#) ordering the Office of Management and Budget to stop funding training on critical race theory for federal employees, calling it a “propaganda effort.”

Around the same time, he condemned the #1C19

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The Root



A Welcome Backlash against Critical Race

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brought to the colonies. Educators embraced this message and began utilizing the project and looking for resources to [teach a more holistic history](#) of the country.

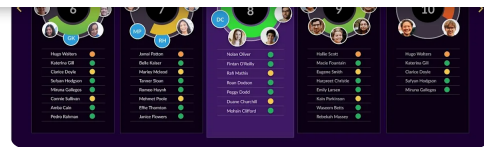
Trump [rebuked the project](#) as a "warped, distorted" portrayal of American history. Both the memo and this attack sparked the commission of the "[1776 Report](#)," meant to combat the contents of the "1619 Project." The countrywide uprisings in the wake of [George Floyd's death](#) only fueled the matter, with pundits debating the nation's fraught history of racism. Thus, although President Joe Biden [reversed Trump's initial ban](#) in January, the seed had been planted.

Related: [Trump's parting shot at diversity education gets panned by historians, as Biden prepares to disband the commission behind the report.](#)

Jonathan Chism, assistant professor of history at University of Houston–Downtown and co-editor of "[Critical Race Studies Across Disciplines](#)," said the sudden prevalence of these bills is "alarming."

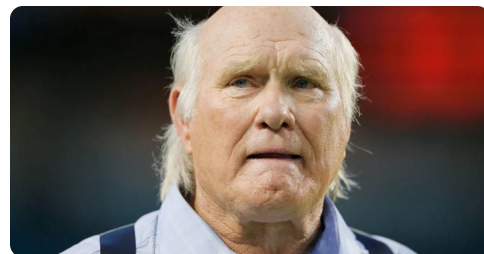
"Any anti-racist effort is being labeled as critical race theory," Chism said. "Many that are condemning critical race theory haven't read it or studied it intensely. This is largely predicated on fear: the fear of losing power and influence and privilege. The larger issue that this is all stemming from is a desire to deny the truth about America, about racism."

Critical race theory was born when lawyers, activists and legal scholars joined in the 1970s and '80s to come up with theories and strategies to combat subtler forms of racism, according to "[Critical Race Theory: An Introduction](#)." The



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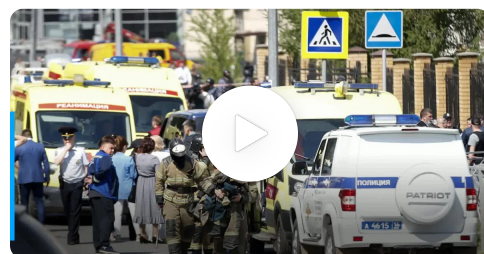
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Donald Trump

founded by academics including Derrick Bell, Alan Freeman, Richard Delgado, Kimberlé Crenshaw and others — builds on critical legal studies and radical feminism.

"Critical race theory is a practice," Crenshaw, a scholar and law professor at UCLA and Columbia University, [told CNN](#). "It's an approach to grappling with a history of white supremacy that rejects the belief that what's in the past is in the

past and that the laws and systems that grow from that past are detached from it."

Critics of the theory have declared it a "harmful and divisive ideology" that "places group identity above individualism and creates a binary conflict between 'oppressor' and 'oppressed' in relation to race," as one [Foundation for Economic Education article](#) put it.

Last week, [Tennessee Republicans advanced a bill](#) to oppose teaching about critical race theory in schools. The bill doesn't name the concept but combats its tenets by prohibiting educators from teaching about white privilege. Before that, Idaho Gov. Brad Little signed into law a [bill accusing critical race theory](#) of inflaming divisions and undermining the "unity of the nation."

Many bills use similar language without explicitly naming critical race theory. Bills in [Oklahoma](#) and Louisiana say educators can't teach concepts like "an individual ... bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex."

The tension can be felt on the city level, too. In Southlake, Texas, a slate of school board and City



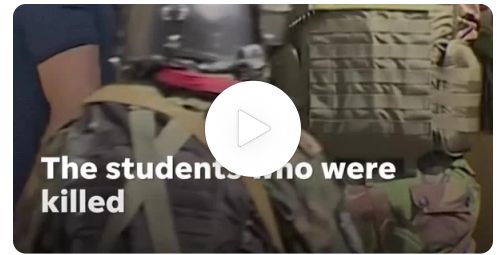
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City Council seats and mayor won their races just months after the affluent, mostly white district

introduced a [proposal to combat racial and cultural intolerance](#) in schools.

Related: [Southlake is known for its top-ranked public schools. But a heated fight over a diversity plan has some parents questioning their future in the city.](#)

"The voters have come together in record-breaking numbers to restore unity," Hannah Smith, one of the newly elected school board officials, previously told NBC News. "By a landslide vote, they don't want racially divisive critical race theory taught to their children or forced on their teachers. Voters agreed with my positive vision of our community and its future."

However, critics of the bills say banning educators from teaching about the nation's history regarding racism does a disservice to students. The [Tulsa Race Massacre Centennial Commission](#) has asked Oklahoma Gov. Kevin Stitt to [strike down a pending bill](#) that would effectively prohibit teaching about the massacre in schools. The [Organization of American Historians](#) voiced a similar concern after Trump's memo last year.

Even students are weighing in on the matter. One Boise High School sophomore urged the Idaho Senate Education Committee to reconsider the bill.

"As a student, I learn best when I'm allowed to teach myself," Shiva Rajbhandari said during committee testimony, [KIVI-TV reported](#). "I love

research projects and individual learning where I

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Donald Trump

Idaho state Rep. Steve Berch, a Democrat and critic of the bills, [has said there's no widespread evidence](#) that teachers are even pushing the school of thought in classrooms.

Darius Benton, a communications studies assistant professor at University of Houston-Downtown and a contributor to the book Chism co-edited, called ban efforts disingenuous because critical race theory is not usually taught in K-12 public schools to begin with.

“It’s not really even in the curriculum. People don’t really engage critical race theory until graduate school and some undergraduate programs,” Benton, who used to teach in high schools, said. “Every time a particular group wants to maintain control, they restrict education. I hope that doesn’t become the case.”

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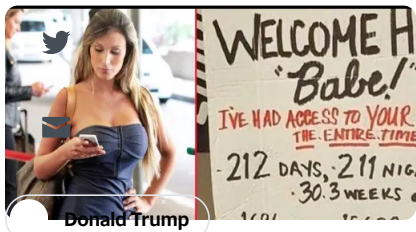
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