



Talking About the Attacks on Critical Race Theory

Narrative Principles for Promoting Truth in Education & How to Tell the Story about our Country

July 2021

Our nation has been forced to reckon with its history of racial oppression, particularly after the tragic and senseless circumstances surrounding the deaths of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmed Arbery, and many others. Millions have protested in the streets, on a global scale, to demand the elimination of racially biased policing and the respect for Black lives. Corporations, school districts, nonprofits, institutions of faith, and others have declared their commitment to recognizing that “Black Lives Matter.”

In the wake of what has been considered by many a national racial reckoning, there has been opposition against efforts to educate the public, including our children in schools, about this country’s legacy of racial inequality. The most prominent of this opposition includes efforts to ban and demonize “critical race theory,” a legal theory that emerged in the 1980s by scholars in legal academic literature. Simply put, critical race theory is a theory about the law that recognizes that racism has been a core feature of American history. As a theory, it is primarily discussed within legal scholarship. However, conservatives have labeled any approach to education that recognizes this nation’s history as “critical race theory,” distorting its definition and concurrently distracting the public from efforts to undermine inclusive participation in our democracy through limits on voting and other aspects of civic participation (e.g., undermining the U.S. Census and efforts to consider racial factors in redistricting), as well as the promotion of false narratives about the so-called, “fairness and accuracy of” the 2020 election.

This memorandum provides recommendations for addressing the attacks on critical race theory and the misinformation being promoted around it. As is the case in the majority of our recommendations, The Opportunity Agenda believes that social justice communicators must tell an affirmative and aspirational story about the importance of education that reflects our diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, which includes aspects of our history that are tough or challenging to discuss, but nonetheless important to touch on with honesty about our country’s legacy of racial injustice. This advice is informed by our past experience and research on communicating effectively about racial and social justice.

General Advice

1. **Acknowledge that most audiences don’t know what critical race theory is.** Critical race theory was developed by legal scholars in the late 1970s and 1980s, and it examines how the law reproduces racism. While critical race theory includes a diverse array of perspectives, some of its core tenets include (1) an acknowledgement that race is a socially-constructed phenomenon rather than a biological fact; and (2) racism is a core feature that permeates American legal and social structures rather than an aberration. As a legal theory, it is most commonly debated within legal and academic circles, and most audiences are not very familiar with its principles. Nevertheless, critical race theory has become a symbol for conservatives, and this body of legal theory is being redefined through divisive rhetoric. Those who decry critical race theory are particularly concerned

about education on our nation's factual history of colonialism, slavery, and racial segregation. The concern is less about "critical race theory" per se than a truthful retelling of history that acknowledges this country's shortcomings, or, as some put it, greatest sins.

We advise that communicators briefly explain what critical race theory is (e.g., critical race theory is a legal theory that recognizes that racism has been a core feature of American history, which has shaped American laws and society) but spend most of your time emphasizing the need for a truthful recounting of our history in order for us to get to racial healing. The Opportunity Agenda agrees with the basic reminder that in order to heal, one must first diagnose and discuss the malady.

2. **Focus on how the refusal to tell the full truth about our history undermines our shared values.** It's important to find ways to engage on a level that can connect with audiences who are unfamiliar with critical race theory, and a great way to do this is to focus on values. While most audiences are probably unfamiliar with the history and content of critical race theory, they are generally familiar with our country's legacy of slavery and racial inequality. They know that slavery existed and that there was a reconstruction, and a continuing Civil Rights Movement that began by contesting Jim Crow laws. Most Americans know that these events occurred.

Remind audiences that banning education about our racial history, which these bans on "critical race theory" seek to do, undermine our efforts to promote shared values like equal justice, honesty, opportunity, and basic compassion. For example, remind people of the kind of country we want to be and draw on how our best ideals mean that we be truthful about our past. We have come a long way, and we can only continue to move forward by confronting our past shortcomings. Discuss how these attacks undermine these shared values and others including: Free Speech, Education, Fairness, and Opportunity.

3. **Tell an affirmative story about the importance of inclusive education that allows us to confront our history as a nation.** Explaining the details of how K-12 schools don't teach "critical race theory" is not as powerful as affirmatively stating what type of education we should be striving for and what our opponents are really trying to do: eliminate a truthful recounting of history, which is necessary for us to finally overcome our country's legacy of racial inequity. Remember that engaging the opposition arguments and myth busting on critical race theory also serves to feed into the conversation that opponents have started and are shaping. Talk about our goals instead: we should aim for an education system that is inclusive, reflects diverse perspectives, and facilitates an equitable future. Spending too much time "myth busting" or telling audiences that schools don't teach critical race theory, only repeats the phrase and strengthens it in audiences' minds.
4. **Connect the attacks on critical race theory to the attacks on racial and social justice more broadly.** Right now, there is a coordinated effort to undermine this country's democracy as conservatives launch a cultural war on critical race theory, among other imagined "woke" threats. These provide a useful distraction from the



current unprecedented threat to democracy. Racial and social justice advocates should connect the attacks on critical race theory to the attacks on participation in our democracy and on how they amount to attempts to concentrate power in voting blocks that are white while limiting the power of new citizens or people of color. They are attempts to undermine social justice and progress, and they share a collective goal to uproot democracy. The cultural attacks on “critical race theory” are a distraction from the social and political attacks on our democracy. Be explicit about this.

5. **Discuss the importance of the values of Honesty, Truth, and Free Speech.** As the population of children in this country becomes increasingly diverse, efforts to ban a full and truthful accounting of our country’s history ensures that children will not learn about their peoples’ own histories. Efforts to equip children to thrive in a diverse society will be undermined if these bans persist. Attempts to ban racially inclusive education also violate the free speech rights of educators who want to talk about the truth; they encourage a dishonest accounting of our nation’s history; and they promote disinformation and dishonesty. We can’t work together if we can’t even be honest about where we’ve been. We must ensure that the history that is taught celebrates ethnic diversity and acknowledges that slavery was a part of this country’s legacy so we can learn from the past rather than hide from it.
6. **Pivot to solutions and action.** The early reporting on this issue was lackluster to the extent that it reflects a lack of knowledge about critical race theory and general confusion about how to respond to the attacks. There has been little focus on the solutions for this issue or the path forward. It is therefore important to discuss the constitutional values that are threatened by these attacks (Free Speech and First Amendment protections) and how they are inconsistent with our Constitution and the spirit and values of our democracy. Advocates should provide ways for ensuring that education becomes inclusive and emphasize that despite the rhetoric about critical race theory, we still have a way to go to make education more inclusive. Promote your solutions for providing an education that promotes an equitable society.

Values to Lead With

1. **Honesty and Truth:** *In order for this country to achieve racial healing, we must be honest about what has ailed our nation and how far we have come, and how far we still have to go. Being truthful about where we have been as a country can be challenging, but it is also rewarding if we consider how far we have come. While we still have a long way to go, discussing this history provides guidance on how we can continue to make progress toward racial justice.*
2. **Inclusivity:** *Equal justice is a founding principle for this country, and it requires that we strive to create an inclusive environment where everyone can learn about their and other cultures and histories at school.*



- 3. Education:** *Our schools should be places where young people learn the skills to thrive in our increasingly diverse society. They should learn about each other's culture and should leave schools equipped to thrive with these teachings so that we can ensure that our modern society is forward-thinking and learns from the past.*

The Opportunity Agenda is a social justice communication lab. We collaborate with social justice leaders to move hearts and minds, driving lasting policy and culture change. We bring the inspirational voices of opportunity and possibility to social justice issues through communication expertise, and creative engagement.

For more messaging advice and to sign up for our newsletter, please visit www.opportunityagenda.org.