



Advancing Anti-Racist Education

How School Leaders Can Navigate the Moral Panic about “Critical Race Theory”

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DECEMBER 2022





About FrameWorks

The FrameWorks Institute is a nonprofit think tank that advances the mission-driven sector's capacity to frame the public discourse about social and scientific issues. The organization's signature approach, Strategic Frame Analysis[®], offers empirical guidance on what to say, how to say it, and what to leave unsaid. FrameWorks designs, conducts, and publishes multi-method, multidisciplinary framing research to prepare experts and advocates to expand their constituencies, to build public will, and to further public understanding. To make sure this research drives social change, FrameWorks supports partners in reframing, through strategic consultation, campaign design, FrameChecks[®], toolkits, online courses, and in-depth learning engagements known as FrameLabs. In 2015, FrameWorks was named one of nine organizations worldwide to receive the MacArthur Award for Creative and Effective Institutions.

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Introduction

For educators and students, the summer of 2021 was filled with thoughts of returning to school buildings after a long stretch of virtual instruction. For political strategists and pundits, it marked a new season in electoral politics—the time to start defining the issues that will shape midterm elections. And so, right-wing journalists and think tanks were busy manufacturing a moral panic, knowing that stoking public fear is a reliable strategy for bringing conservative constituents to the polls.

Building on the themes that had helped them to undermine support for the Black Lives Matter movement, “moral entrepreneurs”¹ began to raise unfounded concerns about the supposed extreme positions of anti-racist education, notably claiming that white children were being taught to feel shame because of their race. To better define this amorphous—and indeed, nonexistent—threat, conservative activists appropriated the name of a once-obscure school of legal scholarship as a catchall label for concepts related to racism, social history, and culturally affirming instruction: “critical race theory” (CRT).²

Some mass media outlets began to not only repeat the term, but to add exaggerated and distorted claims about its prevalence, intent, and impact. Throughout 2021, Fox News mentioned the phrase “critical race theory” over 2,000 times—a tenfold increase over 2020—and used the term in ways that suggested it was nefarious, dangerous, and ubiquitous in K–12 schools.³ Hundreds of local groups were organized to “stop critical race theory” in schools, with many of them drawing from the Citizens for Renewing America playbook⁴ of tactics like disrupting school board meetings and mounting recalls of elected board members. At the time of this writing, at least 17 states have passed laws or other regulations restricting schools from teaching race-related concepts deemed to be harmful to children—and an additional 25 have introduced or are planning to introduce similar legislation.⁵

In this context, school system, district, and school leaders have several communications challenges to address:

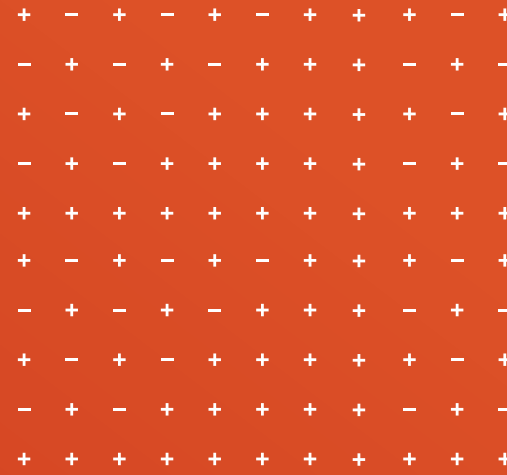
- How can school leaders reassure parents that their curriculum and instruction is truthful, age-appropriate, and designed to prepare students for a multicultural society?
- How can school leaders resist or reverse the “chilling effect” of censorship regulations, in which educators avoid teaching certain topics because they fear legal repercussions?
- How can school boards maintain members who share the mainstream view that because racism is part of America’s past and present, it is a worthy topic for curriculum and instruction?
- How can people who work within the educational system participate in this conversation in ways that fuel momentum toward equity in schools?

Whether or not a particular school district is currently under siege from would-be censors, school leaders are already grappling with these questions. Since the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act in 2015, school systems have invested considerable resources in becoming more inclusive and equitable. To protect the results of these efforts, it is critical that school leaders use framing strategies that cut through the chaos and redirect attention to much-needed changes that serve all students.

These framing strategies may—and in some instances, must—differ from those used by progressive activists and commentators who share the goal of advancing equity and anti-racism. As public-sector employees, school leaders need strategies that foster productive conversations in which concerns are heard, ideas are exchanged, and sound decisions are understood and supported. And, given the diversity of America's school systems, leaders need to talk and write about a complex, nuanced topic in ways that are accessible and effective with many different types of people: younger and older; urban and rural; politically conservative and liberal; and with varying racial, gender, and class identities.

This brief offers guidance for fostering productive dialogue in the face of manufactured dissent—and for reclaiming space, in both rhetoric and reality, for equity-focused efforts, anti-racist history education, and culturally affirming instruction. It is designed for system, district, and school leaders who are doing important equity-focused work and looking for ways to communicate more effectively on these issues.

This guide is based in empirical evidence from the FrameWorks Institute's body of social science communications research. It includes insights drawn from existing studies on framing **education**, **equity** and **history**. It also presents research and recommendations from a study designed to explore public thinking about how school curricula should and could incorporate and address issues related to race and racism. (For more detail on these studies, see the Appendix.)



Findings

To calm the moral panic around so-called critical race theory, communicators must reassure families that children are not under threat, build a deeper understanding of the realities and challenges of talking about race and racism in the classroom, and connect to the developmental needs of students.



Framing Strategically

There is no such thing as an unframed communication; every interaction represents choices about what to emphasize and how to phrase it. It makes sense, then, for every school communicator to think strategically about framing that will lead to more productive interactions with families, school system staff, school boards, and other community members.

Why Framing?

Framing is the process of making choices about what we say, how we say it, what we emphasize, and what we leave unsaid. Framing matters because these choices shape how people think, feel, and act. Frames affect whether we think an issue is important; whether we think of it as a private, personal problem or a shared social concern; and the kinds of solutions we support.

Empirical research can uncover effective frames. Advocates can and should use framing strategies that have been rigorously tested and designed to move people's understanding, attitudes, and support for effective policies. A proven framing strategy, shared and disseminated by voices across a field, will spark changes in discourse and shift mindsets in more productive directions.

Strategies to Avoid

Before turning to recommendations for what to say and how to say it, the next section cautions against strategies that will likely fall flat or do more harm than good.

- **Don't avoid communicating. Hoping the issue will go away—or hoping to avoid the fray—won't help.** Staying silent cedes the discussion to the opposition, which makes it more likely that uninvolved people hear their views but not yours. Stay visible and vocal. There may be moments when you choose not to respond to a particular comment, news story, or other event, but these should be strategic decisions, not a default position.
- **Don't expect that it will help to deny that schools are teaching “critical race theory.”** Denying an unfounded accusation lets the opposition set the parameters of the discussion. What's more, the denial is likely to encourage activists to dig deeper for evidence, as many are working from the assumption that so-called CRT has permeated curriculum so completely that it has become invisible to school leaders.

- **Don't confuse rebutting with reframing.** It's tempting to refute inaccuracies or logical fallacies with facts and evidence point by point. Don't assume that myth-busting will work, or even that it is the best approach. Restating misinformation, even to debunk it, often has the unintended effect of reinforcing it. Fact-check sparingly, and only after you've advanced your main messages and ideas.
- **Don't rely on "politicians" as messengers.** People—regardless of their own political affiliation—assume that elected officials and political appointees are saying what's needed to retain their own position and power. Look for spokespeople who are seen as credible when they say they want what's best for kids.
- **Steer clear of anything that smacks of "us versus them."** Activists who want to censor race-related content benefit from the perception of a genuine conflict between two equally valid points of view. Don't help reinforce that view of things. Avoid pronouns or labels that suggest two parties in conflict. Don't make accusations or use an accusatory tone. Stay away from partisan or political vocabulary.

Key Framing Strategies

To calm the moral panic around so-called critical race theory, communicators must reassure families that children are not under threat, build a deeper understanding of the realities and challenges of talking about race and racism in the classroom, and connect to the developmental needs of students. The six recommendations below offer ways to do this.

1. Activate and organize your allies.

The manufactured debate about so-called critical race theory is asymmetrical, with opponents pursuing a planned, coordinated strategy against institutions that operate independently and were caught unawares. To rebalance a conversation about how and why the history of race and racism should be taught, we recommend that school leaders activate people who may not be currently participating in this conversation and organize folks who are disposed to support you but don't know how to engage. That is, school leaders should enlist the active support of people who can be powerful messengers—and who come from different backgrounds, life experiences, and perspectives.

Call on teachers and parents to speak credibly about what is happening in classrooms. Ask them to share what is happening—and what is working—at the classroom level. Elicit and amplify authentic stories about how school lessons and events promote cross-racial friendships; build student appreciation of cultural diversity; and allow students to learn, explore, and discuss multiple aspects of American history.

Connect with advocates and organized groups that are aligned with the values of inclusion and equity or share the goal of anti-racist education. Ask for their support. Let them know about the settings where you find yourself outnumbered by vocal opponents. Look for opportunities to include them in your meetings and work together to create settings where thoughtful exchange can take place. Share your observations about rhetorical strategies that resonate broadly versus those that tend to escalate conflicts.

2. Emphasize that you're on the side of kids.

Care and concern for children should be the main, recurring theme in any communication about the teaching of race and racism. Use language that humanizes your connection to students and your aspirations for them.

The “moral entrepreneurs” who are stoking the moral panic are relying heavily on the dubious claim that curriculum about race and racism is causing white children to feel ashamed of being white. Assume that vocal parents have heard this claim and believe it. Take steps to ensure that if uninvolved parents hear it, they have already heard an authentic, believable message that school leaders and teachers care about the social and emotional wellbeing of every student, of every racial background.

When strong emotions enter conversations, come back again and again to the theme of looking to do what's best for kids. Remind agitated audiences that everyone shares the goal of ensuring that students are well-prepared for the world they will inherit.

Ways to Connect Anti-Racist Education to Children's Needs

FrameWorks researchers asked research participants to respond to several different reasons for teaching students about race and racism. In general, people rejected reasons that they perceived as far from children's direct and immediate needs—such as the need for a healthy democracy. On the other hand, people readily agreed that students need to be prepared for the future.

Consider building on the theme of preparation to be clear that you are on the side of children:

Preparing students for the future. “For students to understand our country and prepare for their future as members of our community, they need to learn accurate information about race and the history of race in America. Our curriculum needs to be honest about the past and the present if we want students to build a better future. Updated history, civics, and literature lessons that include this information are part of modern, high-quality education.”

3. Position yourself as a reasonable partner in an important, inclusive conversation.

Adopt a stance that suggests you consider your message to be for everyone—not just those who already share your point of view or those who oppose it. Signal that you are inviting people to engage in a discussion, not a dispute. Don't engage in a debate about what CRT is and isn't. Seek to educate, not argue.

When facing vocal opponents with strident views, remember that your audience is not the immovable opponent, but the quiet supporters, the undecided, and people who have not yet been engaged in the conversation. Your stance should remind the quiet supporters that it is possible to speak up without engaging in vitriol. It should also show the undecided that you are the more reasonable party in the discussion.

There are other ways to project a reasonable stance while holding true to your principles:

- Emphasize the idea that we need to understand the past so we can do better in the future—a belief that is widely accepted and hard to argue against.
- Use normalizing terms like “long-standing,” “well-established,” “commonplace,” “standard,” and “mainstream” to describe your history, civics, or social-emotional curricula. Help people see that support for teaching the history and effects of racism is the norm, not an outlier opinion.

- Take care with the word “truth.” Public-sector communicators should avoid this term, which may sound extreme to people who have not yet committed to an opinion. It also invites debate: Whose truth? Use synonyms like “trustworthiness,” “credibility,” “accuracy,” or “honesty.” Even “truthful,” which is relative rather than absolute, is better. (In small-group research settings, people gravitated toward the words “accurate” and “honest” to describe the type of curriculum they want to see.)

Instead of playing in their frame

“We don’t teach critical race theory. In fact, I had to look it up to find out what it is when all this started. It is a branch of scholarship primarily taught in law school.”

Try telling your own story

“Our history, civics, and current events curricula are clear, well-established, and historically accurate. In all of them, we encourage students to explore different points of view.”

4. Make the conversation about pedagogy, not politics or society.

Maintain your focus on doing what’s best for kids by focusing your communications on the learning experiences that students have and need. Talk about what’s happening in ways that make it easy to visualize, with plenty of carefully chosen, concrete examples and without educational jargon. For instance, illustrate what students learn about American history in the primary, middle, and secondary grades, offering genuine examples of how students have opportunities to explore different perspectives on our past. Reassure parents that teachers are not asking students to grapple with ideas they are not ready for by talking about developmentally appropriate activities for younger students, like reflecting on the first time they had a friend of a different race. Talk about anti-racist curricular content as ways to connect schoolwork to students’ lives and the world around them, which makes lessons come alive.

Steer clear, however, from associating what happens in classrooms with what’s happening in politics. Conversations can quickly derail once they head into the topics of government or politics. In research settings, mentioning the term “democracy” prompted people to talk about “Democrats,” which quickly led to unhelpful thinking about political divisions in America. Research participants, regardless of political affiliation, were unequivocally opposed to “politicians” deciding what children learn.

5. Make the case for “anti-racist education.”

Activists are advancing the notion that so-called CRT harms children, especially white children, and often say that it is a racist approach. Counter this narrative by focusing on positive development, growth, and learning.

In most cases, “anti-racist education” it is a good term to use to set the terms of the conversation. In research conducted in summer 2021, most research participants were not familiar with the term “anti-

racist education” but responded favorably to it. If you are in a jurisdiction where the term “anti-racist” has been prohibited, consider when it may be wiser to adopt alternatives. Otherwise, FrameWorks recommends using the term “anti-racist education” rather than related terms such as “multicultural education” or “culturally responsive education.” In testing, these terms led people to steer the conversation to the relatively comfortable terrain of celebrating cultural diversity, rather than engage in a less comfortable conversation about racism.

Whatever label you choose, center the issue of racism, and explain how anti-racist school experiences are important to develop children’s abilities for the future. (Research participants gravitated toward critical thinking and the ability to engage in open dialogue.) Prioritize the positive impacts on children of color, but be clear that all students benefit.

Help people visualize what anti-racist lessons or practices look like in classrooms. Lead with attention to social studies, history, and civics curriculum, as most people readily agree that if we are going to address racism today, we must understand the past. (This strategy was particularly effective with people who identify themselves as Republican.) In research settings, participants were consistently open to the idea that children should learn about the history and continuing impacts of racism. The contested space was the how and why. Fill in these blanks by talking about the need for a modern, high-quality, accurate education. Explain the skills that children develop when they have access to an accurate and honest education, such as wrestling with tough questions, considering different points of view, and analyzing the motivations and mindsets that shape history and current events.

If the question turns to anti-racist trainings for staff, describe them as ways to build on educators’ existing desire to reach all students and to fulfill the district’s commitment to serving every student fairly.

6. Expand people’s mental models of racism.

As conversations about anti-racist education continue, they offer an opportunity to accelerate an ongoing cultural shift toward more systemic views of racism.⁶ Common thinking holds that racism is a personal belief system characterized by harsh, hostile, bigoted attitudes toward people of a different race, and that some people express these beliefs through words or actions. This mental model isn’t “wrong,” but it is problematically incomplete. It obscures the ways in which systems and institutions enact racism through unjust and unfair practices, policies, and norms. It makes it easy to diminish or dismiss subtle acts of prejudice, privilege, or exclusion as “not really racist,” as people reason that to label a person or action fairly and accurately as “racist,” there must be explicit evidence of hostile, bigoted beliefs.

To redirect these ways of thinking, consistently use language that expands the public’s mental model of racism. Consistently modify the term “racism” by using phrases like “structural, cultural, and interpersonal racism.” (See potentially useful definitions in the sidebar, Language That Expands Thinking about What ‘Racism’ Means.) Talk about “the many ways racism shows up in society—in personal interactions, cultural representations, and systems.” Explain systemic racism as an effect of institutions that families of color interact with every day.

Outside moments of conflict, continue to work to educate school constituents about cultural racism (stereotypes and social norms) and systemic racism (institutional practices and policies that reinforce and perpetuate racial inequality). Elaborate on the definitions with examples of how our institutions, social norms, systems, and policies create unequal and unjust differences in the environments where students are developing. Explain in clear, specific ways how teaching an anti-racist curriculum is part of the larger task of dismantling systemic racism by building awareness that we all have a role and responsibility to root out policies and practices that perpetuate racial disparities.

Language That Expands Thinking about What ‘Racism’ Means

It is important to talk explicitly about systemic or structural racism. It is also critical to explain what you mean by the term. Plain language can be a helpful way to ensure that the ideas are clear to everyone, not just those who are already familiar with these terms.

Using simple definitions for different manifestations of racism can be effective:

Structural racism. When society’s systems and institutions work in ways that give an advantage to some racial/ethnic groups or put other racial/ethnic groups at a disadvantage, this is structural racism. Structural racism works through public policies, institutional practices, and social norms. It shapes the ways our political, economic, and social sectors work.

Cultural racism. When publicly available language or images associate whiteness with positive traits—or associate people of color with negative traits—this is cultural racism. Cultural racism works through the media, advertising, and other things we all see and hear in public.

Interpersonal racism. When individuals speak or act in biased, discriminatory ways—or when people of color experience or witness these interactions—this is interpersonal racism. Interpersonal racism takes place in everyday social interactions. Sometimes it is explicit and sometimes it is implicit, meaning people are acting on biased assumptions without realizing it. Interpersonal racism can be obvious, or it can be subtle, but it is common and harmful.

Concluding Thoughts

Talking candidly about a problem, its causes, and its consequences can help cut a path toward viable solutions. When the issue is one that has been deliberately politicized, such conversations are more difficult, but the first step to solving a social problem is dialogue. The strategies recommended make it easier for communicators to have productive conversations with all kinds of audiences: younger and older; across different gender identities, racial backgrounds, and political affiliations; and from urban or rural locales. As school communicators use framing that invites quiet supporters into the conversation and reassures bystanders that there is nothing to fear, they can prevent or de-escalate unproductive, heated conflict while advancing the values of inclusion, dignity, and respect for all people.

Appendix: Research Methods

To identify effective ways of talking about anti-racist education and offer advice for navigating the manufactured debate about critical race theory, FrameWorks researchers deployed several research methods:

Discovery and Development

FrameWorks researchers reviewed findings from our previous studies on framing **racial equity**, **education**, and **history**. Researchers also scanned national media and advocacy organization materials to identify the frames being used in public discourse in the spring and summer of 2021. Working from observations about how the debate was being framed and what framing had worked on adjacent issues in the past, researchers developed a set of framing strategies to test with members of the US public. These frames are provided in Table 1.

Qualitative Data Collection

In July 2021, researchers conducted four peer discourse sessions in a small-group research setting. These sessions used role-playing activities and discussion prompts to spark participant talk, allowing researchers to observe how frames work in conversational settings.

Participants were recruited to represent variation in terms of race/ethnicity, gender, and age. Participants were asked to identify their political stance as Republican, Lean Republican, Independent/Other/Neither, Lean Democrat, or Democrat. Two sessions included a mix of participants with different political affiliations. One session was composed entirely of participants who identified as Republican or Lean Republican, and one session was composed entirely of participants identifying as Democrat or Lean Democrat.

Each session included six participants, for a total of 24 participants. Sessions were approximately two hours long and were conducted virtually via Zoom. Sessions were video recorded, with written consent from all participants.

Analysis and Interpretation

Researchers used cognitive analysis to analyze the video data, evaluating which frames were most easily understood by participants and generated productive, positive talk about teaching the history of racism. Researchers and communications strategists then worked together to refine the most effective framing strategies, yielding the actionable recommendations provided in this report. Main findings are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Frames introduced in small-group research settings and their effects.

| Instead of playing in their frame | Try telling your own story |
|--|---|
| <p>Modern education system. “The education system in America is outdated, and so is our curriculum about race. We live in a diverse, multiracial country, but our education system hasn’t kept up. We need to create a curriculum that accurately and honestly teaches students about race in America to prepare them for the future.”</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — This frame led people to support the idea of anti-racist education as part of modernizing schooling. — The language of “accuracy” and “honesty” was sticky; participants repeated these terms and used them to describe the kinds of changes they wanted to see. — Participants’ talk indicated people envisioned the proposed solution as teaching children not to be racist. |
| <p>Preparing for the future. “For students to understand our country and prepare for their future as members of our community, they need to learn accurate information about race and the history of race in America. Our curriculum needs to be honest about the past and the present if we want students to build a better future.”</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — This frame led people to support the idea of students learning about the history of race. — Participants’ talk focused on what society can gain from young people understanding our past. — The language of “accuracy” and “honesty” was sticky and compelling; participants repeated these terms and emphasized their importance. |
| <p>Student benefit. “When schools teach about race in America, students benefit. Students of color who see positive representations of themselves in their curriculum do better in school. And white students do better, too, when the curriculum is more inclusive. They have better relationships with their classmates, the classroom environment is calmer, and the school climate as a whole is improved.”</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — Although this frame explicitly mentioned benefits to children of different races, this tended to get lost in conversation. Group conversations gravitated toward focusing exclusively on students of color. This led many participants to zero-sum thinking; they concluded that giving more attention to the needs of students of color meant less attention to white students, which was interpreted as unfair. |
| <p>Progress toward justice. “If we want to move forward as a country, we need to understand our past. Learning about the history of race in America helps us address past injustices and move forward as a society.”</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> — The idea of progress was a central part of people’s thinking about how to address racism. Before exploring messages, participants spontaneously raised the idea of moving beyond the problematic ideas and practices of the past. They readily returned to this theme when primed with a message about progress. — Some participants reacted negatively to the word “injustices,” describing it as divisive. This tendency was stronger among Republicans. |

Democracy. “Democracy depends on the free and open discussion of ideas, not censorship. Our education system prepares students to become citizens by teaching them about our society and our history, and that includes teaching about race. We need a curriculum that reflects our democratic ideals.”

- The term “democracy” led many participants to talk about politics and partisanship rather than race and racism. At times, people confused the term “democracy” with “Democrat,” leading to unhelpful discussions of political divisions in America.
- When this frame led the conversation to politics, participants raised and strongly resisted the idea that “the government” should dictate what children learn.
- When people did focus on the idea of democracy, they struggled to grasp the connection to race and racism. Many did not view democratic ideals as an important goal for schools.

Interdependence and unity. “All of us want to live in communities where everyone knows they can depend on each other. Learning about the history of race in America helps us build connections across difference and help our country become more unified.”

- The ideals of unity and connection appealed to some participants; many expressed a desire for a more deeply connected society, but few gravitated toward it as the primary goal for teaching about the history of race and racism.
- Participants’ talk suggested that interdependence is not seen as a shared social norm, as some participants expressed concern that others might not value connection with people outside their families or smaller communities.

Pragmatism. “It makes sense that we would want students to learn about the history of race in America, because knowing our past is a practical way to address the challenges we face as a country.”

- Participants’ talk indicated that this frame is more likely to spark fatalism rather than efficacy. Republicans rejected the assertion of practicality, saying there is nothing easy about addressing race.
 - Some participants repeated the idea that in the end, we need practical solutions to move forward, connecting the ideals of progress and pragmatism.
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Endnotes

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