

Banning critical race theory harms minority students, panel of educators says

By Ashley Fredde

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SALT LAKE CITY — A group of Utah educators say attempts to ban critical race theory stem from the discomfort of talking about racism and such attempts harm many students' sense of belonging.

Heated debates centered on critical race theory have swept through the nation in recent months, including in Utah, where the [Legislature passed a resolution](#) last month against "harmful" critical race theory topics and the State School Board issued a rule in response to that resolution.

Preventing those topics and instruction in public schools harms racially and ethnically diverse students, argued the panel of speakers from education institutions in Utah on Thursday during an event supported by a group of organizations including the NAACP, ACLU of Utah and Better Utah Institute.

"We know that as Utah's becoming again more racially, ethnically diverse, students of all ages do their best learning when they are in schools and classes that cultivate a sense of belonging," said Tamara Stevenson, Westminster College's chief diversity officer and interim vice president for diversity, equity and inclusion.

Research from the Kem C. Gardner Institute at the University of Utah shows the state's makeup is becoming more diverse in terms of its racial and ethnic makeup. As these numbers grow, one researcher says it should be used to bridge racial gaps and disparities.

[The rule passed by the State School Board](#) on June 4 dictates what concepts of diversity, equity and inclusion cannot be taught in public schools. The board also established protocols on how those concepts could be taught by teachers in public schools. The rule prohibits teaching "that promotes or endorses that a student or educator's sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or membership in any other protected class is inherently superior or inferior to another sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or any other protected class."

Additionally, the rule prevents instruction indicating that "a student or educator bears responsibility for the past actions of individuals from the same sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or any other protected class as the student or educator."

But addressing racial gaps and disparities in systems such as schools is centered in critical race theory, the panelists said.

"Critical race theory is not a curriculum. It is not a program. It is a tool that informs us of where inequities exist, then we look at the data. To address this and equities, to ensure that in our schools, all students have the opportunity for educational equity and excellence regardless of race, religion, language, socioeconomic stability and gender," said Jackie Thompson, former director of educational equity for Davis School District. The panelists said they believe some critics — including the Utah State School Board of Education, the Legislature and some parents — are misinformed about the intentions of discussions regarding diversity, equity and inclusion.

"I believe that it is our diversity that enriches us and our commonalities that bring us closer together. I feel that it is important that we teach a truthful approach to history. We do not want to see any one race feeling superior or inferior, or if we were to look historically, that's exactly what has happened, and we want to address that so that it does not happen again," Thompson said.

The panelists urged parents not to feel uncomfortable when discussing topics like race or inequities.

Eric Bybee, an assistant professor in Brigham Young University's Department of Teacher Education, said he believes that a segment of the U.S. population is uncomfortable with the rising discussion about racial justice amid high-profile police killings. He argues that banning critical race theory has become a way for some to put a finger on that discomfort. But he urges a different response.

"I would invite you to get beyond the misinformation and learn the truth, and create spaces where not just you, but also your children can put down the discomfort, put down the shame and get to a place where we can work with each other to build a better society," said Bybee.

Thompson echoed Bybee's sentiment, adding that a lot of people recently began to wake up and as groups came together in 2020, former President Donald Trump issued a divisive executive order that became a partisan wedge issue and made critical race theory a topic of contention.

Some scholars argue that the theory came into the partisan spotlight with Trump's 2020 order banning federal contractors from conducting training regarding certain topics such as racial sensitivity.

"A lot of people woke up — especially our youth, a lot of white youth marching in the streets with Black youth and youth of all races — and we were coming together. And as we were coming together shortly afterward, here comes that executive order — something that was very divisive, that keeps us separated," Thompson said.

She continued, "We must talk about racism. We must address racism so that we can grow, that we can heal, that we can grow forward and learn from it, but we cannot avoid it."

Bybee argued that the culture war regarding critical race theory became a really successful wedge issue that motivated people to get to the polls.

The executive order was later followed by the Trump administration's "1776 Report," issued on Martin Luther King Jr. Day this year, which promoted "patriotic education" regarding race and the creation of the nation. Some view the report as a response to the New York Times Magazine's "1619 Project," which aims to reframe the nation's history with the consequences of slavery and experiences of Black Americans at the center of the narrative.

"We're still feeling the effects of those legalities of slavery, taking us back to Juneteenth today. So this is a full circle in so many ways. So why is there so much talk banning on CRT as well? There's this ongoing effort to control these narratives," Stevenson said.

To view the panel's discussion, visit [Better Utah Institute's YouTube page](#).