

# Understanding the Difference Between Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Educational Equity.

## What You Need to Know

School Committees throughout Massachusetts are becoming aware of the emergence of Critical Race Theory (CRT) as a matter of controversy. Public meetings have become a forum for critics of and advocates for the inclusion of race as an element of curriculum and instruction, but many educators, parents, and students have not had a thorough explanation of the issue. Some School Committee meetings have included public comments and even demonstrations related to CRT, creating for some stakeholders and members of the public confusion about what CRT is, what it isn't, and how our pursuits of educational equity, diversity in public education, and inclusion of people, issues, and philosophies are impacted.

First, let's consider what critical race theory is and what it is not:

### What it is

Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework and/or analytical tool primarily used in university-level courses. Originating in the 1970s, CRT was first used as a way to help law students think critically about the impact of historical and present-day racism on the legal system. In the 1990s, some colleges of education also started incorporating CRT into their coursework to help aspiring school administrators and teachers better understand inequities in the context of education.

### What it isn't

Critical race theory (CRT) is not part of social studies curriculum and has never been part of social studies curriculum frameworks in Massachusetts.

Massachusetts has a comprehensive curriculum framework for social studies that has been widely praised for its breadth and balance. Anyone can access the frameworks at the web site of the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education. Of course, teaching social studies and history will at times require discussion about historic instances of racism or scenarios where race was an important factor. This, in turn, often prompts students' questions and requests for additional discussion on how some elements of history continue to play out in our communities. Massachusetts teachers, as do their colleagues across the country, have experience and expertise in managing these conversations.

**And finally**, as media channels and members of the public are confusing some key terms, it's important to note that the terms **critical race theory and educational equity are not the same and shouldn't be used interchangeably.**

Unlike CRT, which is a tool primarily used in institutions of higher education, **educational equity** is a **K-12 term referring to federal and state policies and requirements.** Specifically, the term is closely associated with "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) legislation that was led by former President George W. Bush and signed into law in 2002. This watershed moment in US education policy established clear requirements for school districts to disaggregate achievement data by student groups as a way to address and close achievement gaps.

Additionally, in recent years, the terms **equity work** or **diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)** have become

commonplace in K-12 education as many districts revisit and renew their local efforts to close achievement gaps as required by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA further advanced equity in US education policy by upholding important protections outlined in NCLB. At the same time, it granted flexibility to states in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans designed to close achievement gaps, increase equity, improve the quality of instruction, and increase outcomes for all students.

**MASC established a new division for DEI (Division X) which is open to all members interested in working on diversity, equity and inclusion. We have held, and will continue to hold division meetings, Friday Learning Lunches, and state conference sessions on DEI. We hope you find this information helpful as questions arise about this topic.**

## Engaging in an open dialog on critical issues in turbulent times

Across the country, school committees (called school boards in most states) have started to address both Diversity, Equity and Inclusion and Critical Race Theory. CRT, in particular, has become a controversial matter in these highly politicized times.

As is the case with most public policy and educational issues that are controversial, discussions attract the thoughtful, passionate, or even outraged constituencies.

In the past several years in Massachusetts, we have seen in-person and virtual meetings overwhelmed by demonstrations, public commenters, chat room writers, bloggers, and other social media users over several issues. For example:

- Collective bargaining disputes that draw people to meetings and, in at least one case, forced a public meeting to adjourn.
- Student safety or alleged abuse.
- Expediting the return to in-person learning or, conversely, for more remote options.
- Disputes over the continued mandate to wear masks in school.
- Vaccinating students and staff.
- Opposition to critical race theory by those who believe that CRT is embedded in the curricula and pose a threat to the education of their children.

School Committees wrestle with the best strategies for maintaining civility, open dialog, and order to help them pursue the best way to do their work promoting student achievement.

*We will all continue to explore the best ways to keep thoughtful discussions going, promote principled dissent, and disagreement that informs public debate.*

## School committees leading the discussion on critical issues

MASC and our federation colleagues in the National School Boards Association have urged school committees to be “the place with the table” on matters of public education and community engagement. Some of the most effective strategies include:

- Leadership of an **engaged chair** and collaborating board colleagues to personify civility and respect and to keep a meeting from getting out of control.
- Establish as a school committee your **mission and vision statement** that commits to the democratic process, thoughtful discussion, and the safety and security of students and families.
- Using **public meetings as forums** for dialog and inviting dissent and discussion in doing so.
- Explaining the **importance of fact-based**, respectful, and ongoing discussions that permit all perspectives.
- Utilizing **well tested strategies and expert staff** to resolve conflict. These strategies often involve different sides of the arguments to be present at the same time.
- Securing the **safety** of places for discussion to ensure that no one is harmed in the process.
- Protecting the privacy rights of faculty, students and families.
- Allowing even the **unpopular ideas** to be expressed in the interest of preserving the democratic process.
- **Inviting experts** to represent the factual background of the issues at hand.
- **Engage civic leaders** to participate in supporting the public schools and their mission.

*MASC is grateful for the assistance of our school board association colleagues across the country for providing information and guidance for this document.*