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FEATURED

Fight to keep critical race theory out of schools comes to Berks

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Jul 12, 2021



From the Pennsylvania Capitol down to school district boardrooms, critical race theory has become a hot topic. But it's really equity policies that are the hot-button issues, experts say.

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Critical race theory has become a hot topic across the nation.



From former President Donald Trump banning its inclusion in federal training programs to community members railing against it at school board meetings, the once obscure academic theory has received a lot of attention over the last year.

And Pennsylvania has not been immune to controversy.

Critical race theory — which acknowledges that racism exists in the United States, looks at the impacts that has and searches for solutions — has recently been brought up at the state, county and local levels, mostly by those looking to ban it.

At the state level

In Harrisburg, 18 Republican members in the House of Representatives introduced legislation last month that would place restrictions on the teaching of concepts such as racial equity and white privilege.

The bill would ban Pennsylvania school districts, public postsecondary institutions and local governments from teaching any of the following concepts deemed "racist or sexist" by the bill:

- One race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex.
- An individual, by virtue of race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously.
- An individual should be discriminated against or receive adverse treatment due to the individual's race or sex.
- An individual should receive favorable treatment due to the individual's race or sex.
- An individual or institution cannot or should not treat individuals without regard to race or sex.
- An individual's moral character is determined by the individual's race or sex.
- An individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by members of the individual's race or sex.
- Meritocracy or merit-based systems are either racist or sexist.
- The United States of America or the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania is fundamentally racist or sexist.

The legislation says these concepts cannot be taught or encouraged by an instructor, teacher or professor, and that public institutions cannot host speakers who espouse or promote these concepts.

The legislation gives any resident the ability to file a complaint with the state, which would be investigated by the attorney general. Punishment for violating the restrictions would be the loss of state funds for the remainder of that fiscal year and the following fiscal year.



The bill, which is called the Teaching Racial and Universal Equality Act, was crafted by Republican Reps. Russ Diamond of Lebanon County and Barb Gleim of Cumberland County.

"The manner in which important concepts such as racial and gender equality are taught in our schools could not be more important in defining the type of society we have," Diamond said in a statement. "Teaching our children they are inferior or inherently bad based on immutable characteristics such as race and sex can be extremely damaging to their emotional and mental well-being."

Gleim agreed, saying these concepts do not belong in the classroom.

"It's time to get back to concentrating on teaching the basic educational foundations of reading, writing, math and social studies rather than attempting to indoctrinate our students with a theory or belief system that is divisive and not curriculum based," she said in a statement.

There are 16 other representatives who have backed the bill including Rep. Jim Cox of Spring Township. Cox did not respond to several requests from the *Reading Eagle* for comment about his support of the legislation.

The bill has been sent to the House Education Committee for consideration.

At the county level

Discussion regarding the teaching of critical race theory emerged at a June Berks County commissioners meeting when a Lower Heidelberg Township resident asked if the board includes the concept in its employee training programs.

At a June 17 meeting, Dwight Wegman called critical race theory a destructive and divisive concept and warned that many on the left are trying to implement it into school curriculums and government procedures.

"Critical race theory divides people into groups and defines these groups as victims and perpetrators and purposely pits one group against another," he said during the public comment period of the meeting. "This destructive ideology must not be allowed to infect our institutions."

Wegman then asked the commissioners whether there are any elements of critical race theory in county government training materials or procedures.



Commissioners Chairman Christian Y. Leinbach said that since he was first elected to serve on the board the training material and procedures have remained the same and that they do not incorporate critical race theory teaching.

He added that he opposes critical race theory.

Leinbach said that when it comes to issues of race he is reminded of the words of Martin Luther King Jr. In particular, the vision King laid out in his famous 1963 "I Have a Dream" speech, in which he called for civil rights and an end to racism in the United States.

"That ought to be the objective," he said. "And that's where my focus continues to be as a county commissioner and that is the message of the declaration that all people are endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights. All people, period."

Local school boards

Critical race theory has been brought up in at least two local school districts, both times in response to equity policies.


A June 7 meeting of the Kutztown School Board featured nearly three hours of public comment and resulted in the board voting to continue a suspension of the district's equity policy.

The vote came after a tense meeting in which opponents of the policy booed and jeered speakers and board members. So much so that board President Karl H. Nolte III called a 15-minute timeout to cool down the crowd.

The board adopted the policy in September and suspended it in May.

The policy's goal is to promote educational equity and allocate resources to each student on the basis of their needs, according to district officials. The policy set up an equity team in the district to implement it.

Twenty members of the public spoke during the June 7 meeting, with half in support of the policy and half against.

Then attention the policy drew was partly due to a morning announcement made to students at the Greenwich Middle School, which opponents of the policy said had their children return 

home and telling their parents that they were told in school that they are racist.

The announcement wasn't not discussed in detail on June 7. Nolte did acknowledge that there have been problems in implementing the equity policy, but not necessarily with its goal.

Many who opposed the policy tied it to critical race theory, saying the theory is a form of indoctrination that teaches kids that Black people are victims and white people are racist.

The policy makes no mention of critical race theory. Those who spoke in favor of the policy said critics don't understand what critical race theory is.

Board members said they will continue to discuss the policy.

Like in Kutztown, an equity policy sparked attacks on critical race theory at a Wilson School Board meeting in June. Also like in Kutztown, the Wilson equity policy makes no mention of the theory.

Tammy Keener spoke out against Wilson's proposed equity policy and linked it to critical race theory.

"I am also upset with the fact that the board wants to allow critical race theory or equity, as you call it," she said, according to a transcript of the meeting. "We the people are very opposed to that. Your job is to educate our children, not indoctrinate them."

According to the transcript, Rick Krump said that school boards across the state are "becoming dangerous weapons to their communities." He claimed the district's equity policy, despite not at all referring to critical race theory, nonetheless would force the theory onto young students.

"The fact that critical race theory is even up for discussion and a vote show the leftist agenda that is being pushed," he said. "And you don't even deny that it is critical race theory. You want to call it something else, but you don't deny it is critical race theory, and you don't even have the guts to own your own decisions when you do these things."

Several other members of the public shared similar thoughts.

Prior to the public discussion, board Vice President Stephanie Kocher spoke on behalf of th

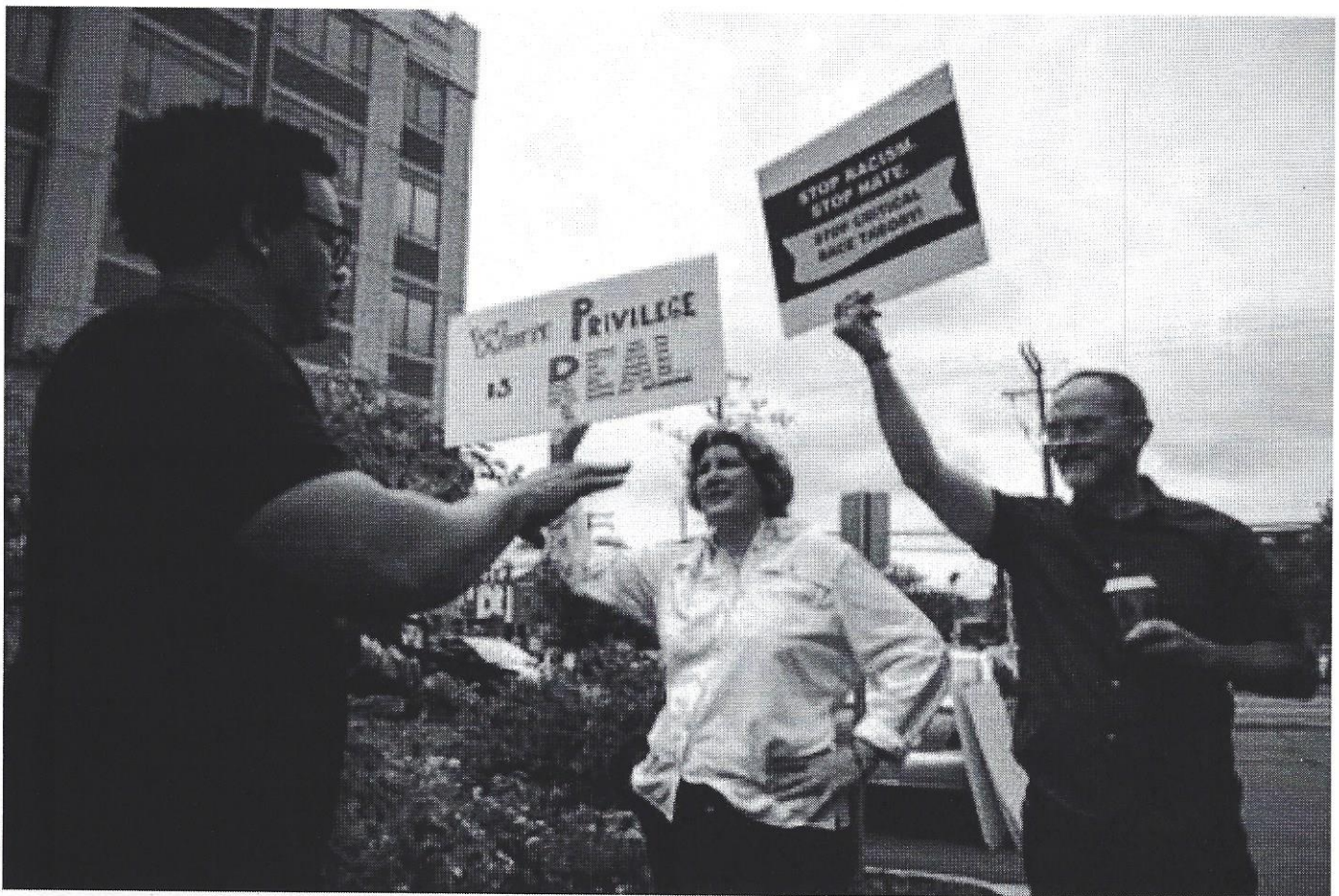


district, explaining that the equity policy is not about indoctrinating students with critical race theory, but about ensuring an equitable experience for all students.

"As a district, we define educational equity as when educational policies, processes, interactions and resources are representative of, constructed by and responsive to all people, so that each individual has access to meaningful, meaningfully participates in and has positive outcomes from high quality learning experiences regardless of individual characteristics and group memberships," she said, according to the transcript. "This policy affirms that the Wilson School District is committed to teaching the Pennsylvania state standards for social studies as well as providing equitable opportunities for all students."

Kocher said the board will discuss the policy further at an ad hoc committee meeting that will be held this fall.

MORE INFORMATION



What is critical race theory? Berks scholars explain



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