

Civics Education For Montana Students Must Reject Fringe Thinking

<https://elsie-arntzen.medium.com/civics-education-for-montana-students-must-reject-fringe-thinking-8ae6e4bb5ddd>



Today's students are tomorrow's citizens. We need all Montanans to understand, and care about, the future of our state and nation. We need them to study our founding documents, and understand what makes the United States so exceptional. And we need them to comprehend when our country has fallen short of its lofty goals, and how ordinary citizens and leaders alike have come together to enact change to guarantee we learn from our history and that the same mistakes are not repeated.

In order for that to happen, we must ensure that our civics education and social studies standards are honest, candid, and most importantly, accurate. I recently brought over 100 diverse Montanans to the table to help modernize and update our state's social studies content standards for the first time since the early 2000's. We strongly agreed that our children must know their history, understand their government, and use original, primary source documents to achieve that knowledge. We also strongly agreed that Montanans should celebrate our diverse heritage, and proudly embrace our state's unique Constitution, which commits to the continued education and preservation of Indigenous culture.

Our schools should not be teaching debunked theories that twist and distort our history, and fringe philosophies that Americans have consistently rejected.

I have heard from countless families statewide in recent weeks specifically about what one of those fringe ideologies — critical race theory — would mean for

Montana, and what it would mean for their children. They are rightfully concerned that this kind of thinking could be coming to their schools' classrooms, and they want their voices to be heard.

Perhaps no one has summed up what critical race theory really entails better than South Carolina Senator Tim Scott in his [response](#) to President Biden's recent address to Congress. "A hundred years ago," Scott said, "kids in classrooms were taught the color of their skin was their most important characteristic — and if they looked a certain way, they were inferior. Today, kids again are being taught that the color of their skin defines them — and if they look a certain way, they're an oppressor....It's backwards to fight discrimination with different discrimination."

What do critical race theory and similar radical propaganda look like in practice, and what do these teachings mean for our students? Among the many real-life examples to choose from are the following:

- In Cupertino, California, an elementary school forced first-graders to deconstruct their racial and sexual identities and rank themselves according to their 'power and privilege.'
- In New York, some curriculum documents call for "disrupting the Western-prescribed nuclear family" while bemoaning "cis-gender privilege."
- In Oregon, the state education department advertised an "anti-racist math" workshop hosted by an organization that claims "white supremacy shows up in math classrooms" because students are required to find the "right" answer.
- And in Springfield, Missouri, a middle school forced teachers to locate themselves on an oppression matrix based on the idea that straight, white, English-speaking, Christian males are members of the oppressor class and must atone for their privilege and "covert white supremacy."

These are not isolated cases, and they are not exaggerated. This kind of mis-education and rewriting of our nation's history has no place in Montana's classrooms. It's also discrimination, plain and simple, and it's un-American.

In another stark example, the U.S. Department of Education recently issued a pair

of “proposed priorities” for American History and Civics Education. In the document, the Biden Administration says it is seeking “to support the development of culturally responsive teaching and learning.” This will be accomplished through the incorporation of so-called “anti-racist practices” in curricula, as well as the creation of “identity-safe” learning environments. The proposal specifically cites the work of the discredited “1619 Project” and authors like Ibram X. Kendi as models to be followed and incorporated into classroom instruction.

This outlandish succotash of woke phrases and vague terms clearly reflects an effort to hide the more extensive agenda behind the proposal: financially incentivizing school districts across the country to teach our children fringe thinking like critical race theory. This is an effort, led by the highest office in the nation, to replace neutrality in teaching with slanted propaganda. Our students should learn and appreciate the history of this country, flaws and all. But this isn’t education, it’s indoctrination.

I thank Senator Steve Daines for joining 38 of his U.S. Senate colleagues in calling on the department to withdraw this misguided proposal. In their [letter](#), the Senators write, “our nation’s youth do not need activist indoctrination that fixates solely on past flaws and splits our nation into divided camps. Taxpayer-supported programs should emphasize the shared civic virtues that bring us together, not push radical agendas that tear us apart.” I could not agree more. The last thing we need is Washington, D.C. reinventing Montana’s content standards.

As a result of my examination of these current trends, and in response to the concerns of parents statewide, I have [sent a letter](#) to Montana Attorney General Austin Knudsen requesting a written legal opinion on the legality of such teaching in our state’s education system. I remain concerned that this type of instruction would not only be divisive, but could violate Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Equal Protection Clause of the Fourteenth Amendment, Article II, Section 4 of the Montana Constitution, or other applicable nondiscrimination laws.

This is a call to action for families and educators across Montana. This kind of social engineering may seem foreign and distant, but if we remain complacent,

the slow creep of these teachings and ideologies will take root and overwhelm our traditional educational system.

What can you do? Be active. Be attentive. Be mindful of examples of this radical indoctrination in your communities. Be engaged in your child's schoolwork. Pay attention to local school board meetings and school curricula, and speak up if you are concerned. Write letters to the editor in your local newspapers. And, if you are so inclined, join me responding to the U.S. Department of Education and telling them to withdraw their "Proposed Priorities." Comments are due by May 19th, and information on how to respond can be found by searching "Docket ID ED-2021-OESE-0033" on FederalRegister.gov, or click [here](#) to read the proposal and submit comments.