

Study: Educators say Iowa's divisive concepts law complicates teaching

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Teachers and administrators in Iowa schools interviewed for a new study said that their state's 2021 law banning instruction on "divisive" concepts of race and gender stifles efforts to promote just and inclusive schools

and creates hostile work environments for educators engaged in this work. Participants also expressed concern that the law, House File 802, hampers students' learning about injustice and the social world.

The findings are [published](#) in the journal *Educational Policy*.

Whether they worked in rural, urban or suburban schools, the 11 teachers and five administrators in the study—who were predominantly white and female—described workplace cultures that were resistant to equity and [social justice](#) discussions, causing them to feel isolated from their colleagues and unsupported by their schools' leadership, said first author Gabriel Rodriguez, a professor of education policy, organization and leadership at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

House File 802, posted on the Iowa Legislature's website, prohibits teaching or advocating that Iowa and the U.S. are fundamentally or systemically racist, and likewise prohibits instructing that anyone should feel guilt, shame or other psychological discomfort about that, or that individuals bear responsibility for past misdeeds committed by those of the same race or sex.

The researchers wrote that "the perceived lack of clarity and guidance on this law fueled (participants') concerns about their ability to be effective justice-oriented administrators and classroom teachers."

"All of those we spoke to felt like H.F. 802 was making their jobs a lot more difficult," Rodriguez said. "The terrain for equity work was already difficult, but with the passage of this legislation people felt more constrained, as if they could be punished. Participants felt like they worked in communities that—by and large—had ambivalent or shallow commitments toward educational equity and social justice. And they felt very targeted or more spotlighted, especially in [rural communities](#)."

Iowa is among 18 states that passed laws banning or limiting the teaching of concepts labeled as divisive, including critical race theory and diversity, equity and inclusion. According to a survey of 8,000 [public school teachers](#) in 17 states cited in the study, one-third of those surveyed were affected by these restrictions in 2022.

Prior studies found that policies banning critical race theory instruction have been mitigating factors in "the policing and 'systematic pushout of teachers'" who are committed to justice-oriented work, according to the study. The educators in the current study described feelings of being under scrutiny because of their views, activism or the subjects they taught.

A white male, identified by the pseudonym Jacob in the study, described feeling surveilled at the suburban school where he taught because his [political beliefs](#) were more liberal than those of his school's administration and the surrounding community.

"It's not necessarily adversarial," Jacob said. "It's definitely you're walking on tiptoes around the hallways."

Jacob's belief that he needed to be careful in how he presented himself at school suggests that his work "might be siloed to the spaces he operates at his school and does not speak to a potentially vibrant space for social justice work to flourish through teaching, learning or activism," Rodriguez and his team wrote.

"Particularly in states that are politically controlled by conservative elected officials, teachers said they felt really isolated, especially in the rural context where they felt that there were many colleagues who were in support of equity and justice in their work but struggled to understand it," Rodriguez said. "For them to do the work in the classroom, for them to raise questions or to seek professional development, they felt like they

had to be really careful of how they went about it."

Another teacher, who taught Spanish at a rural school, reported similar feelings of isolation, and that some of the activities routinely performed by teachers were perceived differently when she did them.

"I feel as if they might think I'm trying to indoctrinate the students, even though the entire point of the program is to speak Spanish and teach the students Spanish," the teacher said. "But even small things like putting stuff up in the hallways. I feel like I am restricted ... I'm going to be judged just by doing that."

A Latina teacher in a rural district told the researchers that she chose not to navigate her school in a manner that she thought might compromise her commitment to her justice-oriented beliefs, and resisted "playing nice" with the other teachers.

A unique factor explored in the study was the impact of "Iowa nice or Midwest nice"—labels that described passive-aggressive behaviors that colleagues used to shut down discussions of controversial or unwanted topics without appearing confrontational. These behaviors advance inequality "by reinforcing dominant cultural norms that counter equity and justice-based efforts in schools," the researchers wrote.

Those interviewed for the study said that colleagues responded in "Iowa nice or Midwest nice" ways to avoid discussing inclusivity and social justice issues or undermined these initiatives by paying lip service until action was required by them. A white suburban school administrator who worked in a more politically liberal area of the state told Rodriguez and his team that while "everybody says they want equity ... they don't want their world to be disrupted ..." and they don't want to be inconvenienced.

The study sheds light on how partisan politics complicate educators' practicing their profession, their relationships with colleagues in the workplace and with people in the broader community who may have differing political leanings and opinions about the need for equity and inclusion.

"People tend to shy away from acknowledging that education is inherently a political profession," Rodriguez said. "It's a political field. But in saying that, I think it's important to distinguish between the political nature of education and partisanship, where in our conversations with the administrators and educators they were not seeking to impose an agenda. They weren't seeking to indoctrinate students to embrace the viewpoints of the adults. We want to create space where students feel like they can talk about these issues, where we can work on developing students' critical thought and promote civic engagement within our student community."

School administrators need to think about the types of support given to staff members who engage in equity and inclusivity work and how these activities can be presented to parents and the broader community who may be skeptical about the need for them, Rodriguez said.

"If I am seeing the community and family who are opposed to issues of equity and justice, that's okay, they're certainly entitled to those views," Rodriguez said. "But then how do I as a school leader, how do I as a classroom teacher work alongside students, community members and families who are in support of this to make the case as to why there's a need for this, even though there is a constituency that has some questions or concerns. It's important for school leaders to be strategic in how they build coalitions to get this work off the ground."

More information: Gabriel Rodriguez et al, "Divisive" Education Legislation in the Midwest: A Critical Epistemic Policy Analysis,

Educational Policy (2024). [DOI: 10.1177/08959048241263844](https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048241263844)

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