

What do Americans think about controversial topics in schools?

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Like many, Anna Saavedra and Morgan Polikoff saw the viral videos of fiery school board meetings over curriculum topics. They also read reports of policymakers pushing legislation to incorporate—or

remove—certain material from classrooms and articles describing parents pulling their children out of lessons concerning issues like race, sex and gender identity.

"We wondered whether the loud voices and limiting legislation were representative of people's views throughout the country," says Saavedra, a behavioral scientist at the Center for Economic and Social Research (CESR), based at the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences.

So, Saavedra and Polikoff, associate professor of education at the USC Rossier School of Education and a CESR Fellow, co-authored "A House Divided? What Americans Really Think About Controversial Topics in Schools." It includes findings from a nationally representative survey of nearly 3,800 U.S. adults, conducted in August and September, regarding Americans' feelings about potentially contentious content entering the nation's classrooms.

"There's a lot of bluster about these issues but not much data on how people think about them," says Polikoff. "We wanted to provide a baseline understanding of American sentiment."

Among the report's notable findings:

■ **Americans support some controversial topics in high school classrooms**

There is consensus among American adults that U.S. high schools should teach multiple sides of controversial topics and make books featuring such content accessible. For example, three out of four adults say high school students should learn about pro-choice and pro-life positions.

"This is a strong indicator the American public want the next generation to be educated and informed on complex issues," says Saavedra.

This desire to present some controversial topics holds true in the elementary school setting, with widespread support for teaching [younger children](#) how to think critically and introducing material related to slavery, [racial inequality](#) and the contributions of marginalized groups.

But when it comes to sharing information about sex and sexuality with younger students, parents are less enthused. Only 21% say pro-choice or pro-life content should appear in elementary schools.

Adults particularly frowned on the LGBTQ-themed books and books containing profanity for elementary and high school students. About 60% felt high school students should not be assigned books on LGBTQ topics, and more than 75% said the same for elementary students. Just over 60% felt books with profanity should not be assigned to [high school students](#) and a whopping 91% indicated younger students should not be exposed to profanity in books.

■ **Regardless of political affiliation, few understand critical race theory and confusion abounds regarding its place in U.S. classrooms**

While critical race theory, or CRT, has captured headlines, few Americans understand the technical academic theory. Only 4%, in fact, say they know enough to explain it to others.

Though 36 states have introduced 138 bills designed to restrict education about racism, inequity, bias and structural injustices this year alone, the lack of knowledge about CRT and its central tenets leaves most Americans unsure about its place in school curriculums.

"Despite being a hot-button political issue in some communities and the focus of tremendous media coverage, there is widespread confusion about CRT and what it actually is," says Saavedra. "Almost half the Republicans and half the Democrats indicated they had little or no knowledge of the topic."

Despite being equally ill informed, Democrats and Republicans differ sharply on whether or not CRT should be taught in K-12 schools; 40% of Democrats support it and 55% of Republicans oppose it. A large number from both parties are much more ambivalent; 50% of Republicans and 40% of Democrats neither support nor oppose teaching CRT.

Notably on the topic of race, Americans agree that society's goal should be equal treatment of people without regard for race. The majority of respondents also support students learning about the experiences of people of color, slavery and civil rights.

"Recognizing the U.S. as a diverse, multicultural society, there's an understanding across party lines that students need to learn about racial issues," Polikoff says.

■ Most Americans think teachers and parents should drive curriculum

Many Americans are unsure what topics are taught in K-12 schools—approximately half don't know if the hot-button topics of gender identity and racial inequality are discussed in high school classrooms. Even so, most favored teachers and parents holding more control over curriculum than they currently do.

Almost 70% of respondents perceive school boards or school and district leaders to have the greatest influence over curriculum, with parents

(27%) slotting in behind teachers (34%) and state leaders (38%). But nearly half of respondents would prefer for parents and teachers to exert the most influence.

Opinions regarding parental influence differed sharply, however, by party affiliation. Less than a third of Democrats want parents to exert the most control over curriculum while 63% of Republicans ranked parents as their first or second choice to control what's taught in schools. Who wants teachers to decide on [school](#) curriculum? More than half of Democrats ranked them as their first or second choice, compared to just 43% of Republicans.

A majority of Americans from all racial/ethnic, income and education groups support parents' ability to opt their children out of lessons featuring content with which they disagree.

Moving ahead

Given the significant role public schools play in American society, Polikoff and Saavedra hope the survey's results serve as a launch pad for additional studies about perceptions and opinions regarding education.

"Though there are some lingering sharp divides, there are also some significant areas of agreement that haven't been highlighted before and that offer hope for more productive conversations ahead," Saavedra says.

Polikoff, meanwhile, sees opportunity for the report's findings to inform policy and cultivate more responsive schools.

More information: A House Divided? What Americans Really Think About Controversial Topics in Schools. [www.ednc.org/wp-content/uploads/... 10/House_Divided.pdf](http://www.ednc.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/House_Divided.pdf)

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