

SB 5024, to establish a parents Bill of Rights to protect children from harmful ideologies in public school classrooms

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Key Findings

1. In May 2021 Governor Inslee signed legislation requiring that divisive Critical Race Theory (CRT) be introduced in all K-12 public schools in Washington state.
2. Yet some officials deny that CRT is being taught in Washington public schools.
3. SB 5024 is a response to parents seeking to protect their children from harmful CRT concepts.
4. The bill would require districts to post curricula, textbooks and other instructional materials online.
5. The bill would require school boards to allow parents to participate in public meetings.
6. The bill would require the recording of school board meetings, and the posting of these recordings online.
7. The bill could be improved by giving parents the option of receiving direct funding assistance if the local school is failing to serve their children.

Introduction

In May 2021 Governor Inslee signed legislation requiring that divisive Critical Race Theory (CRT) be introduced in all K-12 public schools in Washington state.¹ This harmful ideology teaches that white children are oppressors and black and brown children are

oppressed, falsely characterizing our society as systemically racist. Other radical ideas have also been introduced in public schools, causing painful divisions among students and eroding the academic quality of classroom learning.

Parents are naturally concerned about the detrimental impact of these hurtful ideologies on impressionable school children. In response to SB 5044, parents in the school districts of Chehalis, Peninsula, Kennewick and Richland elected new school board members who in turn assured the public that CRT would not be taught in local classrooms.

These enlightened civil rights policies provide that in these districts no teacher will tell students that skin color determines ability to succeed, that their race determines their moral character, or that they are responsible for negative events in the nation's history.

In the current session lawmakers have introduced SB 5024 in response to parental concerns about protecting children in public schools.² This Legislative Memo provides a brief analysis of SB 5024 and how it would benefit parents and children if enacted.

Text of SB 5024

The text of SB 5024 says that in addition to existing legal rights, parents and legal guardians with a child in public education have certain other rights. These include:

- To have access to the content of classroom and school sponsored activities in which

1 Senate Bill 5044, Concerning professional learning, equity, cultural competency, and dismantling institutional racism in the public school system, signed by Governor Inslee May 5, 2021, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=5044&Initiative=false&Year=2021>.

2 Senate Bill 5024, Establishing parents' bill of rights related to their child's public education, introduced December 6, 2022, sponsored by Senators Dozier (R-Waitsburg), Boehnke (R-Kennewick), Braun (R-Centralia), Holy (R-Cheney), McCune (R-Graham), Schoesler (R-Ritzville), Short (R-Addy), Warnick (R-Moses Lake), J. Wilson (R-Longview) and L. Wilson (R-Vancouver), at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billssummary?BillNumber=5024&Initiative=false&Year=2023>

their child is required to participate (per RCW 28A.605.020);

- To have access to curricula and instructional materials used in class;
- To have information about who is teaching their child, including guest speakers and presenters who are not employed by the public school;
- To have access to the name, organization, and affiliation of individuals and entities that provide curriculum-related materials to public school districts;
- To have the ability to participate in the business meetings of school board in accordance with the Open Public Meetings Act (per RCW 42.30),
- To receive regular communications about their child's education and school activities based on a parent or legal guardian's contact preferences.
- To require audio or video recordings of all school board meetings, and that these recordings be posted online.

Policy Analysis

Some local and state-level school officials deny that CRT is being taught in Washington public schools, despite the bill the governor signed in 2021.³ SB 5024 would help parents learn the facts and clear up any confusion about what teachers are telling children during the school day.

By requiring districts to post curricula, textbooks and other instructional materials online parents, the media, policymakers and the general public would be able to learn for themselves what is actually being taught in public schools.

In addition, some school officials are seeking to restrict the comments of parents objecting to CRT materials or other racist ideas during public school board meetings, in

spite of Washington's Open Public Meetings Act and core civil rights protections enjoyed by all citizens.

SB 5024 would help correct these problems and reduce conflict. Accountability and open communication in public education depends on parent involvement and broad community support. The bill would promote honest communication and enhance democracy by informing voters about decisions made by elected school board members.

The primary weakness of SB 5024 is that it lacks an enforcement mechanism. There are no consequences under the bill for violations of parental rights. Parents would have no effective recourse when districts refuse to be open about classroom material or when a parent's right to speak at a public meeting is denied.

The bill could be improved by giving parents the option of receiving direct funding assistance if the local school is failing to serve their children.⁴ Currently 32 states and the District of Columbia provide families with school choice when the traditional system fails or denies basic rights. The very existence of alternative choices would encourage school officials to treat parents with respect and to listen honestly to their concerns, to the benefit of all families in public education.

Conclusion

In today's divisive world parents are right to be concerned about Critical Race Theory and similar extremist ideas in their local school's curriculum. SB 5024 would help ease these concerns by providing greater transparency about what children see and hear in the classroom. It would also confirm the right of parents and members of the public to participate in school board discussions about what is taught in school.

3 "Kennewick School Board passes new CRT policy. Did they actually teach it?" by Eric Rosane, The Tri-City Herald, August 30, 2022, at <https://www.tri-cityherald.com/news/local/education/article264889949.html>.

4 See for example HB 1093, providing more parents and their children with more choices for a quality elementary and secondary education through the family empowerment scholarship program, introduced December 29, 2022, Representatives Walsh, McEntire, Jacobsen and Graham, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billsummary?BillNumber=1093&Initiative=false&Year=2023>.

The bill could be strengthened by including an enforcement mechanism and providing consequences for school officials who openly and willfully violate the rights of parents. Overall, however, the bill represents a significant step in the right direction. Even in its current form the bill would serve the public interest by showing that lawmakers are listening, and that they share the concerns of parents about protecting children in the school system.

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