

POLICY BRIEF

Washington public school officials lower academic standards as they implement Critical Race Theory

Liv Finne, Director, Center for Education

September 2021

Key Findings

1. On or about September 1, 2021, the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) was expected to announce new learning standards in English language arts, history, social studies, math and science.
2. These new standards will lower the quality of Washington's existing standards.
3. Disguised by the label "Ethnic Studies," the new standards will replace Washington's academic learning standards with controversial Critical Race Theory (CRT) content.
4. The new standards will present academic material according to four CRT domains: "Identity," "Power and Oppression," "History of Resistance and Liberation," and "Reflection and Action."
5. For example, in English, instead of teaching grammar, the new standards will teach the concepts of "White supremacy," "Institutional racism," "Structural racism," and "White privilege."
6. In math, the new standards will teach math is used to oppress communities of color.
7. These standards will encourage students to take "Action" according to the requirements of CRT and social justice.
8. School officials are now using the CRT rationale of "equity" to deny students of all races access to advanced study and gifted programs and to replace tests previously required for entry to college with lower, race-based criteria.
9. State lawmakers should discard these new "Ethnic Studies" learning standards and require that state officials maintain high learning standards for students.
10. State lawmakers should also repeal regressive legislation passed in 2021 that mandates the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in K-12 public schools, at public colleges and universities, and at medical schools.



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Introduction

The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI) is expected to announce it is lowering academic standards in Washington’s K-12 public school system as it implements Critical Race Theory (CRT) and similar race-based diversity and ethnic studies programs.

The decision follows Governor Inslee’s signing of SB 5044 in April to require the implementation of mandatory Critical Race Theory training for all teachers and staff at K-12 schools. Earlier, in 2019, the legislature voted to weaken the official definition of “Basic Education” by shifting learning resources away from core academic standards to “producing global citizens in a global society with an appreciation for diverse cultures.”¹

OSPI is now in the process of lowering learning standards in the areas of English language arts, history, social studies, math, and science, and replacing them with standards that “incorporate best practices in Ethnic Studies.” OSPI was expected to announce these new standards on or about September 1, 2021, the legislative deadline. They are also developing Ethnic Studies materials for K-12 grades.²

OSPI and other public education officials use terms such as “diversity,” “ethnic studies,” “inclusion,” and “cultural competence” to refer to academic ideological theories in which students are taught to judge based on a person’s outward appearance rather than on learning, character or ability. They are also used to divide students into “oppressed” and “oppressors” based on traditional race identities. The term “equity” is used to call for outcomes among students based on race and ethnic group identity rather than providing equal access of learning opportunity for all.

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- 1 RCW 28A.655.300 “Global citizens in a global society,” at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.655.300>. Text: “By September 1, 2021, the office of the superintendent of public instruction shall identify existing state learning standards that address the knowledge and skills that all public school students need to be global citizens in a global society with an appreciation for the contributions of diverse cultures. These state learning standards must be periodically updated to incorporate best practices in ethnic studies.”
 - 2 RCW 28A.300.112, “Ethnic studies materials and resources,” at: <https://app.leg.wa.gov/RCW/default.aspx?cite=28A.300.112>.

OSPI's Ethnic Studies Committee

In 2019, OSPI formed the Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee for the task of lowering academic standards in favor of implementing CRT curricula.

The Committee held 14 public meetings between September 30, 2019, and June 10, 2021. The minutes of these meetings reveal that the main focus of the Committee's work was not to build high academic standards to provide students with the knowledge, skills and aptitudes needed to succeed in an increasingly competitive and complex world, but primarily to create a race-centered "appreciation for diverse cultures."³

Learning emphasis on math, science, writing skills, reading comprehension and independent thinking for all students is being reduced. These neutral skill standards have been replaced with a new racially-based focus on "white supremacy culture," "settler colonialism," "racism," "power dynamics," "position and privilege," and "racial bias."⁴

These concepts are drawn from the controversial Critical Race Theory ideology disseminated by socialist professors at universities. They have not been developed by professionals in child development or pedagogical experts in K-12 education, and they shift student focus away from study time on core learning and subject mastery.

OSPI's Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee approves of and promotes racial-grievance thinking and teaching. The minutes of the Committee's April 21, 2021 meeting reveal the proposed Ethnic Studies Framework will be "anti-racist," and "anti-colonial," terms frequently used in implementing CRT.⁵

Committee members were required to consider and discuss these questions:⁶

- "How is your practice disrupting whiteness?"
- "How does your cultural identity mediate your practice?"

The Committee also took testimony and advice from the Executive Director for Washington Ethnic Studies Now,⁷ Tracy Castro-Gill. The organization has a

3 "Committee Meetings, Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee," by Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, accessed July 27, 2021, at <https://www.k12.wa.us/about-ospi/workgroups-committees/currently-meeting-workgroups/ethnic-studies-advisory-committee>.

4 "Ethnic Studies Community Agreements," by Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, accessed August 9, 2021, at: <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/pubdocs/ESAC%20Community%20Agreements.pdf>.

5 "Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee Meeting #7," by Ethnic Studies Committee of the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, April 21, 2021, accessed July 27, 2021 at: <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/pubdocs/ESAC%20Meeting%20%237%20Minutes.pdf>, page 3.

6 Ibid.

7 "Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee Meeting #6," by Ethnic Studies Committee of the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, March 3, 2021, accessed July 27, 2021 at: https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/pubdocs/ESACMeeting6Minutes_March3.pdf.

considerable conflict of interest in the public education system. Washington Ethnic Studies Now secures public contracts from school districts to provide mandated staff and teacher training in “anti-racism.” The Ethnic Studies Now group has issued a list of racist “Demands” directed against “white parents and communities.”⁸ The group also expresses “no obligation to inherently trust white educators or an education system built on white supremacy.”⁹

The Ethnic Studies agenda and lower academic standards

As an indication of the weaker learning standards the Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee is considering, the Committee has indicated full approval for the organization and content of the existing Ethnic Studies Frameworks developed by Seattle Public Schools officials. It is clear that state-level officials intend to implement the Seattle model in school districts statewide.

The Seattle model Framework organizes student topics into four Themes: “Identities,” “Power and Oppression,” “History of Resistance and Liberation,” and “Reflection and Action.” These are designed to provide lower learning standards for students in all areas of academic study.¹⁰

For example, the Ethnic Studies Framework in Math provides that students:¹¹

- “...identify how math has been and continues to be used to oppress and marginalize people and communities of color.”
- “...will be asked ‘Where does Power and Oppression show up in our math experiences? and ‘who gets to say if an answer is right? And ‘Why/how does data-driven processes prevent liberation?’”
- “...will be asked: ‘how important is it to be Right? What is Right? Says Who?’”
- “...will be able to ‘identify the inherent inequities of the standardized testing system used to oppress and marginalize people and communities of color,’”
- “...will be able to ‘explain how math has been used to exploit natural resources,’”

8 “Demands,” by Washington Ethnic Studies Now, accessed July 27, 2021, at <https://waethnicstudies.com/demands-2/>.

9 Ibid.

10 The Ethnic Studies Framework is reframing standards in the Social Sciences, Reading & Literature, Art, Math, Science, Drama, Physical Education, and Music. See “Ethnic Studies Advisory Committee Meeting #7,” by Ethnic Studies Committee of the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, April 21, 2021, accessed July 27, 2021 at: <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/pubdocs/ESAC%20Meeting%20%237%20Minutes.pdf>, page 3.

11 “K12 Math Ethnic Studies Framework (20.08.2019),” Seattle Public Schools, accessed July 21, 2021 at: <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/pubdocs/Math%20SDS%20ES%20Framework.pdf>.

- “...will be able to show how ‘math dictates economic oppression.’”

In English study, the lowering of the academic standard is similar. Instead of gaining mastery in sentence structure, vocabulary, self-expression and communication, students receive instruction in the areas of:

“White supremacy,” “Institutional racism,” “Structural racism,” “White privilege,” “Implicit bias,” “Microaggressions,” “Appropriation,” “Iceberg Model,” and “Colonized Mind.”¹²

Teachers also require students in English to consider and discuss their personal guilt with the question:

“How do I recognize when inaction makes me complicit with the status quo?”¹³

In the study of history, students spend class time on:

“Oppression,” “Social construction,” “Hierarchy,” “Hegemony,” “White Supremacy,” and Racial Democracy.”¹⁴

In history, instead of learning the major political, economic and social causes behind important events, the clash of nations, the rise of governments, or the movement of peoples around the globe, students are now required to consider and discuss:

“In what ways are identities: race, gender, sexuality, ability – ‘historically constructed’ (including Whiteness)?”¹⁵

“Understand that Europeans brought the dominant worldview values of ‘Guns, the bible, private property and social hierarchy, and racial supremacy’ (William Katz) that have driven U.S. History.”¹⁶

Violations of teacher and student civil rights

School officials in Seattle and some other districts have announced a policy of hiring staff based on appearance in order to promote “equity,” rather than judging applicants based on neutral standards of experience and professional ability. Hiring by race is a violation of civil rights laws at both the federal and state level,

12 “High School ELA: ETHNIC STUDIES FRAMEWORK,” Seattle Public Schools, accessed July 21, 2021 at: <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/pubdocs/ELA%20SDS%20ES%20Framework.pdf>.

13 Ibid.

14 “U.S. HISTORY ETHNIC STUDIES FRAMEWORK,” Seattle Public Schools, , accessed July 21, 2021 at: <https://www.k12.wa.us/sites/default/files/public/socialstudies/pubdocs/US%20History%20SDS%20ES%20Framework.pdf>.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.

particularly the voter-approved Washington Civil Rights Act of 2000.¹⁷ This law provides that public officials:

“...shall not discriminate against, or grant preferential treatment to, any individual or group on the basis of race, sex, color, ethnicity or national origin in the operation of public employment, public education, or public contracting.”¹⁸

Similarly, officials at Washington public universities announced in 2020 that academic standards based on nationally-recognized Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and American College Test (ACT) would be canceled and replaced by a lower, race-centered criteria to promote a pre-determined “equity” goal.¹⁹

School officials have also used a lowering of academic standards and announced “equity” goals to deny students of all races access to advanced study and gifted programs, such as the Highly Capable Cohort (HCC) program in Seattle that advances college preparatory programs in literature, math, science and technology.²⁰ Officials have also indicated their belief that providing talented or highly motivated students access to advanced learning constitutes a “microaggression” against students who are not in the program.

Current failures in student learning in Washington public schools

OSPI, Seattle Schools and other school district officials are working to lower academic standards at a time when the state’s own assessments show that education officials are failing to teach students to current standards.

Recent state test scores show that only 59.6% of Washington’s 1.1 million students meet state standards in English Language Arts; only 48.9% met state standards in Math; only 46.7% met state standards in Science.²¹ These academic assessments date to before the COVID-related closure of public schools.

17 “Know your rights – A guide to Critical Race Theory, anti-discrimination law and civil rights protections for everyone,” by Liv Finne, Policy Note, July 2021, at <https://www.washingtonpolicy.org/library/doclib/Finne-Know-your-rights-A-guide-to-Critical-Race-Theory-anti-discrimination-law-and-civil-rights-protections-for-everyone.pdf>.

18 Washington Civil Rights Act, Revised Code of Washington, 49.60.400.

19 “Washington’s public universities will no longer require the SAT or ACT. Will admissions become more equitable?” by Hannah Furfaro, *The Seattle Times*, May 20, 2021 at <https://www.seattletimes.com/education-lab/washingtons-public-universities-will-no-longer-require-the-sat-or-act-will-admissions-become-more-equitable/>.

20 “Seattle Public Schools will no longer offer separate honors classes in middle school,” by Ashley Gross, *National Public Radio*, February 18, 2020, at <https://www.knkn.org/post/seattle-public-schools-says-it-will-no-longer-offer-separate-honors-classes-middle-school>.

21 “State Report Card, Home,” Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, at <https://washingtonstatereportcard.ospi.k12.wa.us/ReportCard/ViewSchoolOrDistrict/103300>.

Washington state has one of the largest academic achievement gaps between white and minority children of any state in the nation. This chart shows the percentage of students passing the state tests in 2018-19, by listed by racial group:²²

Percentage of Washington public school students passing state assessment tests, by identified racial group, 2018-19

	English Language Arts	Math	Science
American Indian	31.2%	22.4%	24.9%
Asian	77.9%	73.9%	61.8%
Black/African American	41.6%	27.9%	24.8%
Hispanic/Latino	42.4%	31.4%	29.4%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	35.9%	25.8%	20.7%
Two or More Races	62.3%	50.6%	49.5%
White	67.9%	55.7%	54.4%

One accusation leveled by CRT supporters is that state officials and school administrators operate the public school system on the basis of “white supremacy,” “implicit bias” and “institutional racism.” As the data shows, however, Asian students, on average, perform better on state assessment tests than any other identified racial group.

The impact of lower academic standards

Even before the COVID school shutdown ordered by Governor Inslee, state education officials reported 118 state-identified failing schools, labeled “Priority” schools. These poor-performing schools have a disproportionate impact on children of color. The 44,000 students that administrators assign each year to failing schools are most at risk of dropping out and of suffering life-time learning loss due to low academic standards.²³

Yet school administrators continue to assign children to these schools every year, knowing they fail to provide children a quality education.

²² Ibid.

²³ “ESEA Priority and Focus Schools,” Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, accessed July 15, 2020 at <https://www.k12.wa.us/policy-funding/school-student-performance/every-student-succeeds-act-essa-implementation/elementary/priority-schools>.

More broadly, state test results for Spring 2019 show that less than half of the 1.1 million Washington public school students achieved proficiency in math and science. Washington school officials are also responsible for one of the widest academic achievement gaps between white and minority students in the nation. These figures are likely to be exacerbated by widespread learning loss due to COVID school shutdowns.

A McKinsey and Company research report describes the risk to students closed out of their schools for over a year “as a hurt that could last a lifetime.”²⁴

Nationally, civic leaders are concerned the public schools are failing to provide U.S. students with the skills and knowledge the country needs to compete in the global economy. Currently, U.S. students rank 36th in the world on international tests in math, behind the countries of China, Russia, Italy, France, Finland, Poland and Canada.²⁵ Lowering academic standards in public schools is likely to make this trend worse.

Policy analysis

The proposed Ethnic Studies Framework developed by OSPI and similar race-centered initiatives promoted by local school officials degrade academic standards by teaching students to view all subject areas through a lens of power, victimhood and oppression.²⁶

These lower standards require students to discard existing academic practices and norms by asking questions like, “Where does power and oppression show up” in a particular area of study, “Who gets to say if an answer is right,” and “How are you involved in white supremacy culture.”

This framing discourages students and tells them that, no matter how hard they work, they cannot succeed and that decisions about their own future are not within their control. The result is that lower academic standards inculcate an attitude of defeatism which negatively affects the learning climate in public schools, sows divisiveness and distrust and makes it impossible for classroom teachers to excel as educators.

By reducing class study time, demoralizing students and constraining professional educators, the Ethnic Studies and CRT agendas deny students access to the basic skills and knowledge necessary to succeed in life and compete in a global society. Lower standards also prevent students from reaching their fullest personal

24 “COVID-19 and student learning in the United States: The hurt could last a lifetime; New evidence shows that the shutdowns caused by COVID-19 could exacerbate existing achievement gaps,” by McKinsey and Co, June 2020, at <https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/McKinsey/Industries/Public%20and%20Social%20Sector/Our%20Insights/COVID-19%20and%20student%20learning%20in%20the%20United%20States%20The%20hurt%20could%20last%20a%20lifetime/COVID-19-and-student-learning-in-the-United-States-FINAL.pdf>.

25 “The End of Merit,” by Joel Kotkin, *The American Mind*, July 23, 2021, at: <https://americanmind.org/salvo/the-end-of-merit/>.

26 In addition to the Ethnic Studies Framework, OSPI has developed standards in Cultural Competency and in Social and Emotional Learning which also promote CRT content.

and learning potential, by wasting their time, effort and talents, and leaving them short of the best they can achieve as human persons.

Policy recommendation: Raise standards and allow school choice

Based on independent research and the best practices in other states, Washington Policy Center recommends two key policy changes in Washington’s public education system.

First, state lawmakers should discard the new Ethnic Studies learning standards OSPI is expected to produce on or about September 1, 2021, and require that state officials maintain high learning standards for students. As part of this effort, state lawmakers should repeal regressive legislation passed in 2021 that mandates the teaching of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in K-12 public schools, at public colleges and universities, and at medical schools.²⁷ Ending the harm caused by CRT is essential to establishing fair, neutral and high-quality academic standards that benefit all students.

Second, state lawmakers should follow the lead of more advanced states and allow families, upon request, to seek alternative learning opportunities elsewhere. Washington state currently spends \$17,000 per student per year, a large portion of which is spent on bureaucracy, unpopular programs and union regulations. A forward-looking program to provide some or all of this public funding to families would allow students to gain access to the best learning options available, whether at a public charter school, private school, comprehensive online program or alternative public school.

In the recent legislative session, Rep. Vicki Kraft (R-Vancouver) introduced HB 1215, to provide parents who request it, an Education Opportunity Scholarship funded with \$7,000 per year so their children could access a high-quality education. This resource would allow parents to work collaboratively with professional educators to escape harmful CRT, “equity” and ethnic studies mandates and enroll in the best services for children.

27 SB 5044, “Concerning professional learning, equity, cultural competency, and dismantling institutional racism in the public school system,” signed May 5, 2021, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billssummary?BillNumber=5044&Year=2021&Initiative=false>.
SB 5227, “Requiring diversity, equity, inclusion, and antiracism training and assessments at institutions of higher education,” signed May 12, 2021, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billssummary?BillNumber=5227&Initiative=false&Year=2021>.
SB 5228, “Addressing disproportionate health outcomes by building a foundation of equity in medical training,” signed April 16, 2021, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billssummary?BillNumber=5228&Initiative=false&Year=2021>.
SB 5194, “Providing for equity and access in the community and technical colleges,” signed May 12, 2021, at <https://app.leg.wa.gov/billssummary?BillNumber=5194&Initiative=false&Year=2021>.

Conclusion

Public records and other evidence show that state-level and some local education officials are no longer focused on maintaining high academic standards and providing the best public education possible to students. Instead, a concern for learning has been replaced by an aggressive political agenda designed to instill doubt, mental pain and low expectations in students. This race-centered agenda also seeks to divide children from teachers, their own communities and from each other.

This harmful trend can only be resolved through policies that return high-quality academic standards to public education and well-funded and supportive education-choice programs that allow families to access alternatives services to meet the learning needs of all children.

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About the Author

Liv Finne is the Director of the Center for Education at Washington Policy Center. She is the author of *An Option for Learning: An Assessment of Student Achievement in Charter Public Schools*, which in 2011 reignited the charter school debate in Washington state. She wrote “Why parents will love charter schools,” “Why teachers will love charter schools,” and many other publications during the 2012 public debate on Initiative 1240, the nation’s first charter school initiative. When charter schools came under attack from the state teachers union, she wrote “Analysis: Why the state supreme court ruling against charter schools is wrong.” She is also the author of Washington Policy Center’s widely-read education blog, and of Washington Policy Center’s Education Reform Plan: Eight Practical Ways to Improve Public Schools. Liv holds a law degree from Boston University School of Law and a Bachelor of Arts degree from Wellesley College. She retired from civil litigation practice to raise two children and work as business partner for a small business she owns with her husband. Liv is committed to improving public schools by expanding school options for all parents, regardless of their zip code, including charter schools, vouchers, online and other innovations in education.