

# Georgia parents, teachers on edge by push to limit discussions on race



Credit: Steve Schaefer

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Atlanta Public Schools teacher Anthony Downer speaks to Georgia State University education students Feb. 7, 2022. Downer says students are "hungry" for discussions about race. (Steve Schaefer for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

For Laura Judge, a Black parent in Cobb County, attempts to [curb discussions](#) on race in classrooms are worrisome.

“I feel like we’ve taken a giant step back,” the mother of two said. “If we avoid these discussions with children, I feel like we’re stunting their growth.”

That’s a matter of fierce debate as state Republican lawmakers are [pushing legislation](#) that limits how teachers can talk about race and what conservatives consider divisive issues. For instance, legislation would prohibit teaching that the country is systemically racist. Teachers could still cover slavery, oppression, segregation and discrimination, but “in an objective manner,” according to lawmakers.

Georgia isn’t the only place this is happening. [Numerous states](#) have already adopted such laws, and some include a process for filing complaints. They are spurred by a notion promoted by conservative think tanks: that [critical race theory](#), a higher education framework for analyzing the abiding impact of racism on society, is endemic in K-12 classrooms.



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Gwinnett County Public Schools teacher Aireane Montgomery speaks to Georgia State University education students on Feb. 7, 2022. (Steve Schaefer for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

Aireane Montgomery, a teacher in Gwinnett County Public Schools, said attempts to curb race discussions are misguided. Classrooms should be a safe place to discuss these issues, she said.

“There’s space in my class — whether you’re moderate, conservative or liberal — to engage in debate, to engage in disagreement,” said Montgomery, who teaches a high school ethnic studies course.

The push for limits in Georgia has been largely led by people who are white, from lawmakers to boisterous crowds at board of education meetings. Many parents [told school boards](#) they feared their children were being taught they were racist because of the history of white oppression of Blacks.

“We can uphold free speech and academic freedom while ensuring that our history — with all of its shining moments and its painful stains — is something we are to learn from, not something that is stamped into our DNA,” [said Sen. Bo Hatchett](#), R-Cornelia, a co-sponsor of one of the bills.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reached out to numerous students, teachers and parents from diverse backgrounds whose voices haven't been widely heard in the debate. Some teachers asked to speak without being named in this article out of concerns for their careers as well as their safety because they might be targeted by others with opposing views.

## Whose history

Atlanta Public Schools social studies teacher Anthony Downer said much of what he teaches in a new Africana studies course would be outlawed if those bills become law. His course offers a historical look at Black culture and society.

He said his students are “hungry” for those lessons.

“To be equitable and inclusive, you have to go above and beyond,” he said.

Some say schools are doing too little to prepare students to live with diversity. They should teach more about it, not less.

“The curriculum that we teach is centered around the white male experience,” said a Fulton County middle school teacher. “What you have is a curriculum that leaves out lots of great accomplishments by Black, indigenous people of color.”

Teachers aren't indoctrinating children, she said, but instead providing students with facts and giving them “avenues to think critically.”

“It's not like white people are bad,” she said. “That doesn't happen in the classroom, which is what I think these people are thinking — that we are just bashing one race of people.”



Credit: HYOSUB SHIN / AJC

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Teachers, parents and activists rallied outside the Georgia State Capitol on Feb. 12, 2022, to protest legislation by state Republican lawmakers that would limit how race can be discussed in classrooms. (Hyosub Shin / Hyosub.Shin@ajc.com)

Another APS social studies teacher said: “This whole debate has made me a little more self-aware and made me a little more careful with being nuanced.”

Recently, about 50 teachers, parents and activists rallied outside the state Capitol to [protest the race bills](#) proposed by lawmakers.

Many districts across Georgia are marking Black History Month in February with special programs. Districts in Clayton and DeKalb counties, where the student population is predominantly Black, are also celebrating Black Lives Matter — a social justice movement deemed controversial in other districts.

“We’re [celebrating diversity](#) without fear, without favor,” said DeKalb Board of Education Chairwoman Vicki Turner.

APS, which also serves predominantly Black students, recently [established](#) a Center for Equity and Social Justice. The school board is on record with a [2020 statement](#) that reaffirms “that Black Lives Matter” and [calls for the dismantling](#) of “a racist and oppressive system that has an over 400-year legacy.”

## Future generations

Lily Littrell, a high school senior in Gwinnett County, said it feels like some teachers keep difficult topics at an arm’s length.

“Like, ‘Oh, Jim Crow laws existed but they’re gone now,’ like there’s no voter suppression in America anymore,” said Littrell, 17. “It’s like, ‘because of the civil rights movement, a lot of the issues that the Black community faced are gone.’”

The Parkview High School student also said the teaching ranks are not as diverse as the student body, and it matters. She was adopted from China as a toddler. Her parents are white. She didn’t see a teacher who looked like her until eighth grade, when she was assigned to a math class led by a woman of Korean ancestry.

She said a book by an Asian author was never assigned reading until a language arts class in her freshman year.

Tsion Agaro, a student in DeKalb County, cannot rely on her parents to teach her the fraught U.S. history of race. They emigrated from Ethiopia. She said the GOP legislation is personal for her.

“In my classroom, we talk about bills like these and we’re all angry about it,” said Agaro, who is Black. She said she feels people like her are being ignored and their history doesn’t matter.



Credit: Jenni Girtman

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Kristal Seymour (center) helps 6-year-old Brian Seymour III with his jacket while Kayden Seymour (left), a fourth grader, waits to leave the house. Kristal Seymour says she finds critical race theory "nonexistent" in her children's educations. (Jenni Girtman for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

Brian Seymour II, a Black father of three in Cobb County, worries schools might avoid touchy subjects or skim the surface of racial history, though he hasn't seen evidence of it yet.

He liked that his 9-year-old daughter had been taught about how Sacagawea, a young native woman, had helped two white men — Meriwether Lewis and William Clark — with their expedition across

new U.S. lands to the Pacific coast.

Kristal Seymour said her children have friends across the color spectrum. Race is becoming less and less an issue.

“But I feel like if we start to back away from race theory and we start to back away from these conversations, we’re going to repeat history,” she said.

Future generations will misunderstand how they got where they are, she said. They won’t understand people who aren’t like them.

Explore [Teachers rally against bills that limit classroom discussions on race](#)

“Systemic racism is a reality,” said Raymond Pierce, president of the Atlanta-based Southern Education Foundation, an organization founded after the Civil War to advocate for public education in the South.

He thinks GOP lawmakers are proposing a solution to a problem — an assumption that teachers are indoctrinating their students — that doesn’t exist. And he fears it will drive teachers from the profession.

“It lays the foundation to then [start banning books](#), firing teachers, going through the curriculum and eliminating all conversations on history other than George Washington crossed the Delaware,” he said.

A fifth grade teacher in Cobb said her students have been interested in lessons about refugees and the legalization of interracial marriage. Regardless of what state lawmakers decide, she will keep teaching her students the same way — delivering facts without opinion, she said.

“It is their job to know about how other people live and how other people are, and they can’t be empathetic and contribute to society if they can’t understand other people’s experience,” she said.

*Staff writers Cassidy Alexander and Leon Stafford contributed to this article.*

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## **What is critical race theory?**

Critical race theory is used in higher education to examine the effect of racism on society. It looks at how race has shaped culture, legal systems and policies to produce unequal outcomes. Public school leaders say the theory is not taught in K-12 classrooms. Critics say its tenets about systemic inequity have influenced teachers and curriculum.