

# Conservatives revolt against critical race theory in Georgia schools



Credit: Ben Gray

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210520-Canton-Rick Cox, who has a son in the Cherokee County school system, holds signs outside of the school board chambers before a meeting Thursday night, May 20, 2021. The building reached capacity and the people in line behind Cox were not allowed in for the start of the meeting. Ben Gray for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution

On a Sunday afternoon in May, dozens of people crowded into a country club in a Cherokee County golf course community to strategize for an upcoming school board meeting.

The topic? Critical race theory. Once an academic abstraction discussed in college classrooms, it's now a flashpoint for conservatives who say it is influencing what is being taught in grade schools.

The decades-old concept seeks to highlight how racism influences all aspects of society and how past systemic inequities continue to shape policies.

The concept has become politicized with critics saying it distorts history. They say it casts white people as exploiters who owe a debt to everyone else, especially Black people.

The debate follows a year of protests against police violence and the aftermath has led to a review of race at all levels from businesses to schools, with many people saying racism and inequality still exist. But a cultural chasm has developed over what solutions society should adopt, how much of it is individual versus institutional, and how much history influences that view.

Although the Cherokee schools administration said critical race theory wasn't being taught there, this group of activists was being advised on a "tsunami strategy" to purge it.

A large turnout matters, a speaker said, and someone should capture video of each speaker "in case Tucker Carlson wants to put you on air." Critical race theory has become a hot topic among conservative media hosts such as Carlson, who routinely denounce it. The furor has gained momentum over the past year, with some conservatives encouraging parents to pull students out of schools teaching what they say is a "rewriting of history."



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Ron Tripodo, center, yells at the Cherokee County School Board after they passed a resolution to ban teaching Critical Race Theory and then adjourned the meeting Thursday night, May 20, 2021 Tripodo was upset that the language in the resolution was ambiguous and didn't really do anything. (Ben Gray for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

The audience in Georgia heeded the turnout advice. Hundreds showed up at the May 20 Cherokee County School Board meeting denouncing a theory they say has ties to Marxism.

Dr. Jillian Ford, an associate professor of social studies education at Kennesaw State University, said one of the tenets of the theory recognizes that racism is not an aberration, but a common thing that happens to people of color every day.

Opponents have misrepresented critical race theory to say that it teaches white people to think they are bad or inherently racist, Ford said.

“Critical race theory is not about individual behavior,” she said. “Critical race theory is about systems and policies.”

Still, the response captured attention across the state and caught school leaders flat-footed as the issue popped up before school boards in Forsyth, Cobb and Gwinnett counties.

“I do not want to be called an oppressor because I’m white,” home-schooled student Sydney Zavieh, 12, told the Cherokee school board, adding that if parents want their kids to learn about America’s history with race, they can teach it at home.

### **National cultural war**

Proposals seeking to outlaw critical race theory or restrict how race is taught in schools are pending in at least 16 states, with [Idaho](#), [Oklahoma](#) and [Tennessee](#) among those already enacting them. Some of the measures tie state funding to adherence to the laws.

In other states, executive action is taking the place of legislation. In Montana, the attorney general recently issued a formal opinion that labeled critical race theory as “[discriminatory](#)” and in violation of local and federal laws.

Explore [Considering race and racism in Georgia classrooms: Here are some helpful definitions](#)

Former President Donald Trump intensified the debate over race’s impact in society, as well as how it is taught in schools. He called critical race theory un-American and denounced The New York Times’ [1619 Project](#), which put slavery and Black contributions to democracy at the center of American history. His administration also banned diversity training for federal employees.

In Georgia, activists condemned critical race theory at several county Republican Party district meetings in April and May. They passed resolutions condemning the policy, and the state Republican convention could follow suit.

The uproar has energized conservatives ahead of the 2022 election cycle. Gov. Brian Kemp is embracing opposition to the theory to shore up support with a GOP base still sore over his refusal to attempt to reverse Trump’s defeat in Georgia. Attorney General Chris Carr also opposes it, and a Republican state representative says he is preparing legislation banning its teaching in schools.

The state board of education passed a resolution last week to set parameters around how race is to be taught in schools.

This latest culture war is reminiscent of those fought over creationism, Common Core education standards, transgender bathroom and athletic policies that quickly became political with schools as the place to fight them out.

At a Republican rally in Dalton in late May, some of the loudest ovations went to Florida U.S. Rep. Matt Gaetz when he said critical race theory should be “defunded, abolished out of our schools, out of

our military, and out of our country forever.”

The GOP umbrage both baffles and alarms supporters of the idea, who worry that restrictions will scare teachers from talking openly about how racism has shaped the nation’s history — and continues to impact society today.

Ford, the KSU associate professor, as well as parents, students and community members, have urged the Cobb County School District to acknowledge and tackle racism in its classrooms. Their group, Stronger Together, has spoken publicly about several instances of students encountering racism from their peers as well as teachers.

“What I think we are seeing now is a situation where the focus on elements of everyday life in Cobb and elsewhere that are being questioned, and so the people who have always held the power are scared they are going to lose that power,” she said.

### **In the classroom**

It is unclear to what extent, if at all, the theoretical framework of critical race theory itself is being taught in Georgia schools. Atlanta elementary school teacher Tracey Pendley said teachers unfamiliar with the concept, may be teaching some aspects of it, such as the history of inequality in America and the importance of respect for all individuals.

For her, it means teaching history from multiple points of view — that Christopher Columbus was a successful explorer who also enslaved Native Americans, that George Washington was an American war hero who also enslaved people and [acquired their teeth for dentures](#), that John Brown was both enslaved and a killer of enslavers.



Credit: HYOSUB SHIN / AJC

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Tracey Pendley, APS teacher and 2020 Georgia Teacher of the Year awardee, speaks as APS teachers and supporters gather outside the Atlanta Public Schools headquarters to push for APS to delay reopening school buildings in this January 2021 file photo. For her, critical race theory means teaching history from multiple points of view. (Photo: Hyosub Shin / Hyosub.Shin@ajc.com)

Pendley, [Georgia's teacher of the year](#), teaches fourth and fifth grade in Atlanta Public Schools and has trained other teachers, including in Cherokee County.

When she thinks about critical race theory in the classroom, it's about culturally relevant teaching methods. "And that means that the things that we present to children, we make sure that it reflects the faces that are in front of us," she said. "We make sure that we are offering multiple points of view, not just the perspective found in the textbook."

Critics of the theory argue it goes hand-in-hand with school districts' diversity, equity and inclusion plans and even social-emotional initiatives. They believe the programs divide the races and some say that may even be the intent.

Hunter Hill, chairman of the Republican Party of Forsyth County, called diversity, equity and inclusion training "a Marxist Trojan horse disguised with sunshine, rainbows, and a bow on top." (He said he wasn't speaking for the party during remarks at a recent school board meeting.)

The opposition extended to Cobb and Gwinnett counties. Cobb resident Benjamin Wehling told board members that critical race theory is a "distractive and divisive ideology" that infiltrates schools through social and emotional learning as well as diversity, equity and inclusion efforts.

Explore [Georgia education board passes resolution to limit classroom discussions of race](#)

One parent, Steve Smith, told Gwinnett board members that students should not suffer the "emotional distress and trauma critical race theory can inflict on them."

Jonathan Butcher likens the theory to a philosophy or world view, with beliefs and concepts that could become part of curriculum and teacher training.

"It stigmatizes people based on race so it is by its very nature discriminatory," said Butcher, a research in education fellow at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative think tank, who co-wrote an article in April entitled "[Keep Racist Critical Race Theory Ideology Out of K-12 Classrooms.](#)"

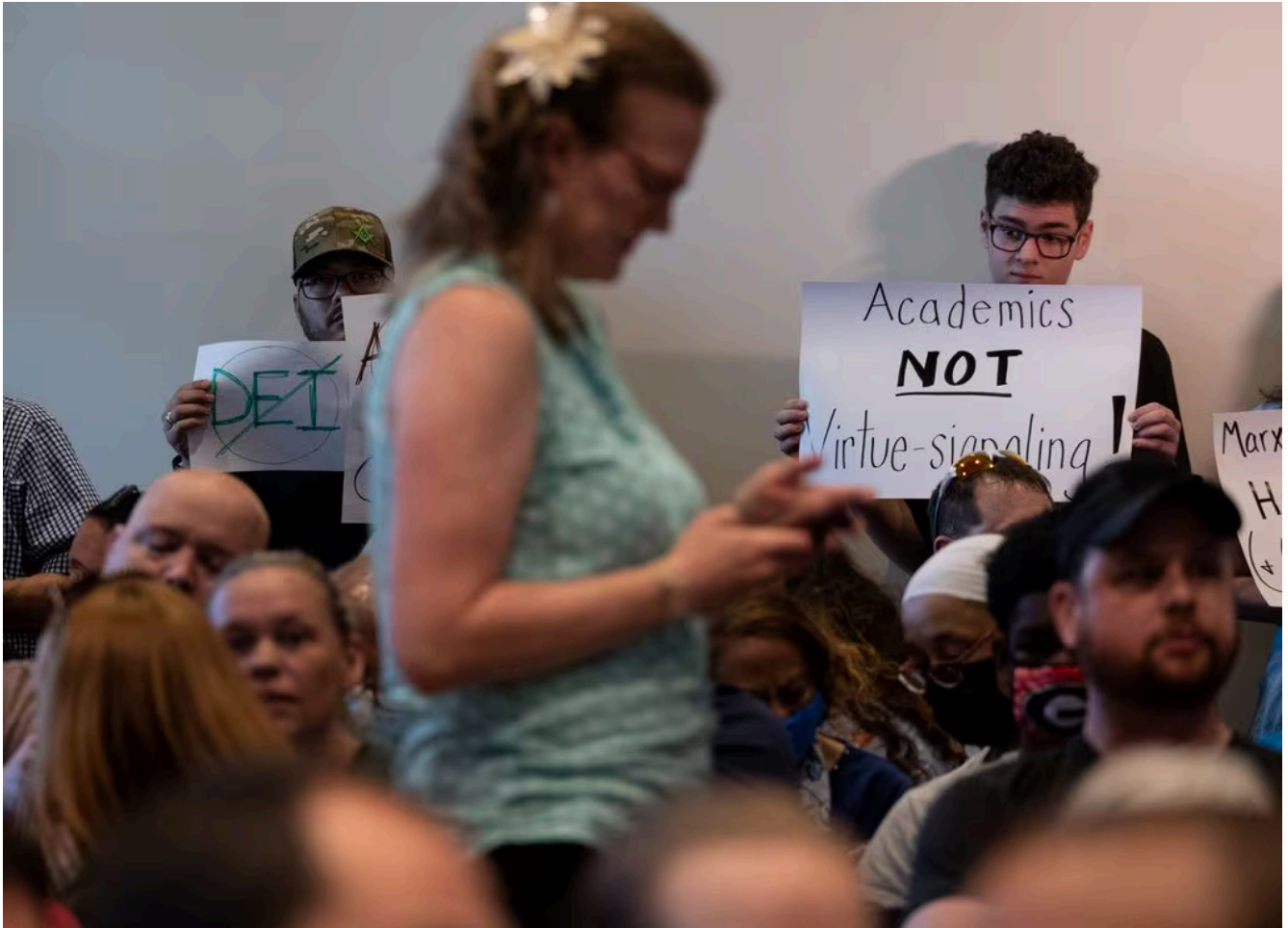
The focus on a "perpetual struggle" against universal racism creates a tension that distracts from efforts to build opportunity, he said.

## **Ongoing battles**

At that Cherokee school board meeting, Desiree Jacobs, a Black mother of two, was greeted with jeers when she spoke in favor of the district's work on diversity.

A week after the meeting, Jacobs said she was surprised by the turnout and disappointed by opposition to what she sees as growing diversity in the community where she moved 13 years ago.

"They grow up in Cherokee," she said. "They never leave Cherokee. So it's fine. But the moment you step outside Cherokee, the skill sets you could learn through these initiatives are exponentially important."



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People pack the Cherokee County School Board meeting to capacity on Thursday night, May 20, 2021 to speak out about critical race theory. (Ben Gray for the Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

Later that night, the board approved a resolution to prohibit implementation of critical race theory and The [1619 Project](#).”

Speakers against critical race theory also opposed the district’s plans to hire an administrator to oversee social and emotional learning and diversity, equity and inclusion. That new hire, Cecilia Lewis, a Black educator in Maryland, backed out of the job soon after the school board meeting.

“Somehow, misinformation inaccurately translated diversity, equity and inclusion into bad words and the position that the district created and offered to me has turned into a platform for negativity, hate, and extremism,” Lewis said in a written statement to news media.

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