

Georgia's top superintendent pivots on AP African American Studies course



Credit: Stephen B. Morton for The Atlanta Journal Constitution

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Georgia School Superintendent Richard Woods speaks at the Georgia School Board Association Summer conference in Savannah. Woods' office said Wednesday that the course will appear in the state course catalog by the end of Thursday, after he initially declined to approve it. (AJC Photo/Stephen B. Morton)

Georgia school districts can now offer a disputed Advanced Placement course about African American history, with all the advantages that come with it for students, including the grade boost for state college scholarships.

State School Superintendent Richard Woods' office said Wednesday that the course will appear in the state course catalog by the end of Thursday. The decision comes two weeks after Woods declined to approve it, angering many students, educators and state lawmakers on both sides of the aisle.

Students who take the course will now be entitled to an enhanced grade for the purpose of Georgia Lottery-funded college scholarships.

There is one major caveat: school districts will be responsible for constructing courses that comply with the law. A disclaimer will be added to all AP courses in the state catalog.



Credit: Jenni Girtman

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Rashad Brown teaches Advanced Placement African American Studies at Maynard Jackson High School in Atlanta on Friday, Feb 17, 2023. (Jenni Girtman for The Atlanta Journal-Constitution)

“The contents of these courses have not been reviewed or approved by the Georgia Department of Education,” it will say in part, adding that school districts should engage the public to review AP courses before local adoption.

Woods’ initial reluctance to endorse the course stems from a 2022 law that controls how race is discussed in classrooms. That law targets nine “divisive concepts” that GOP lawmakers asserted were being taught across Georgia. The ideas were copied from a September 2020 [executive order](#) by then-President Donald Trump banning them from federal worker training.

Explore [Earlier: Georgia school superintendent says parts of AP course violate law](#)

They involve generalizations that teacher organizations said were not being taught, like saying one race is inherently superior, that moral character is racially determined, that a person is responsible for past actions by others of the same race or that America is fundamentally racist.

The pivot by Woods, a Republican who has come under fire from members of his own party over his prior decision not to endorse the course, comes in reaction to a recent letter from Republican Attorney General Chris Carr.

Carr sent an unofficial opinion to [Will Wade](#), the Republican lawmaker who authored the divisive concepts legislation, after Wade inquired about the legality of the AP course. Carr's letter said the law states such courses must be taught in a "professionally and academically appropriate manner and without espousing personal political beliefs" and that any curriculum or training for students or staff "shall not advocate for divisive concepts."

Carr's letter also said it was "clear" the divisive concepts measure was designed not to "prohibit the implementation of Advanced Placement, International Baccalaureate, or dual enrollment courses." The letter was sent Friday and [reported Tuesday](#) by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution.

Wade, a close ally of Gov. Brian Kemp and former vice chair of the House Education Committee, said Wednesday that he was encouraged by Woods' new interpretation of the divisive concepts law and how it applies to the AP course.

"I'm glad that the superintendent finally came to the correct understanding of the bill and its intent," the Dawsonville Republican said. He added that he hoped "Georgia students continue in their pursuit of a rigorous education, and we can move past this unfortunate misunderstanding of the law." Explore [Kemp, critics seek answers about decision on African American Studies class](#)

State Sen. Jason Esteves, D-Atlanta, pointed to the Republican-backed [House Bill 1084](#), the divisive concepts law, as the core issue.

"Georgia's students shouldn't have to appeal to state GOP leaders to allow school districts to teach AP African American history," the former Atlanta school board chairman said. "But with Republican laws like HB 1084 that politicize public education, I fear that this is only the beginning."

The Southern Education Foundation, founded after the Civil War to promote the education of Black children, said the law is "offensive," arguing that it "signals that academic coursework focused and centered on African Americans and Black history are treated differently in Georgia."



Credit: Natrice Miller/AJC

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State Rep. Jasmine Clark, D–Lilburn, speaks at the Georgia State Capitol during a press conference on July 24, 2024, to respond to Georgia School Superintendent Richard Woods' decision against full approval of the AP African American Studies course. (Natrice Miller/ AJC)

Atlanta Public Schools Superintendent Bryan Johnson said Wednesday he was pleased with the decision. The district has said it was continuing the course and would use district funds to pay for it. After Woods' announcement Wednesday, Gwinnett County Public Schools said it will offer the course. Classes started Monday in Gwinnett, Georgia's largest school district, which pulled the AP course after Woods declined to endorse it, citing concerns with how the course would be credited when students are considered for important state college scholarships.

“(We) are working with the impacted schools to ensure they are able to make necessary schedule adjustments,” the district stated in a letter sent to families. “If schools can readjust their schedules, the

students who signed up for the course last spring will have the option to change their schedule and take the course as planned.”

Explore [Gwinnett will offer AP African American Studies class after Woods’ reversal](#)

There were previously 240 students across six schools slated for the class.

Gerald Griggs, president of the Georgia NAACP, said his own family is affected by Woods’ decision about the AP class. His daughter is a high school student in Gwinnett.

“It should never have been banned in the first place, especially in the birthplace of civil rights. Culture wars, and politicians that wage them have no place in Georgia,” Griggs said. “I am glad that the people of Georgia stood up for AP African American Studies as now my daughter can take the course.”

Staff writer Martha Dalton contributed to this report.