

# Silenced and Pushed Out: The Harms of CRT-bans on K-12 Teachers

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## *Abstract*

*Over the past year, sweeping local and state-wide policies framed as bans against “CRT” are being propagated to restrict how race and racism can be taught in K-12 schools across the nation. As a result, schools are increasingly becoming a place where teachers face interpersonal and professional risk for teaching about US racial realities, including threats to their professional licenses for engaging historical or current day topics of race, inequity and injustice. In this article, we first draw on CRT to analyze how CRT-bans leverage white defensiveness and white comfort to restrict instruction and discourse about systemic racism, thereby upholding it. Second, we describe a mixed methods research study with 117 teachers across the US that provides an initial look at how teachers are being harmed by these bans. The data suggests that CRT-bans are negatively impacting the racial climate of schools and contributing to the systematic pushout of teachers, particularly those committed to equity and inclusion. In addition to capturing teachers’ experiences about the bans, we specifically examine the pressure teachers are experiencing and its exacerbation of an already national problem, teacher attrition. We end the article with evidence-based recommendations on ways schools might mitigate the harm of CRT-bans on teachers.*

**Keywords:** *critical race theory, critical race scholars, counterstorytelling, possibility, affirmative action, critical race praxis*

In May, 2021, Matt Hawn, a white high school teacher of 16 years, was fired from his job in Kingsport, Tennessee for telling his nearly all-white class that white privilege is “a fact.” The district had received claims he was teaching Critical Race Theory (CRT); although Hawn asserted that he had never heard of the theory prior to the accusations, he was let go (Natanson, 2021).

In March, 2022, Kim Morrison, a white fourth-year high school English teacher, was dismissed from her job in Greenfield, Missouri, through a school board vote. She was accused of teaching CRT, despite confirming that CRT was not something she knew or understood (Riley, 2022).

In the spring of 2022, Lakeisha Patterson, a Black elementary school teacher in Pasadena, Texas was interviewed about the impacts of a state law, passed at the start of the school year, that was driven by CRT rhetoric and prevents teachers from discussing controversial issues or concepts that may cause “discomfort, guilt [or] anguish.” Patterson said, “I felt like they [are] silencing our voices...[and] questioning the integrity of teachers....And now you have teachers who are afraid to even touch on certain topics” (Steinberg, 2022).

Over the past year, sweeping local and state-wide policies have emerged that restrict how race and racism can be taught in K-12 schools across the nation. In a predominantly white and

monolingual profession, where educators are under-equipped by teacher preparation programs and professional development to discuss and navigate issues of racial inequity and racism (Kohli, 2021; Matias, 2016b, Staples, 2015), many schools are already dominated by state standards and district-issued curricula that center Eurocentric history, literature, and perspectives (Au et al., 2016; Vasquez Heilig et al., 2012; Muhammad, 2019), and policies that reinforce the racial status quo of inequity (Epstein & Gist, 2015; Picower & Mayorga, 2015; Price-Dennis & Sealy-Ruiz, 2021). Now, schools are increasingly becoming a place where teachers face interpersonal and professional risk for teaching about US racial realities, including threats to their professional licenses for engaging historical or current day topics of race, inequity, and injustice. Although much of the discourse about CRT-bans has centered on students, teachers are in fact a target of many anti-CRT laws and policies, and these shifts are impacting their retention, which is already a major professional and policy concern (Carver-Thomas & Darling Hammond, 2019; Gist, 2018; Goldhaber & Theobald, 2022).

In 2014, a national poll on occupational stress found that close to half of teachers reported high levels of daily stress; teaching was tied with nursing as the most stressful occupation (Gallup, 2014). By 2022, the pandemic has exacerbated teacher stress (Kush, et. al, 2022), resulting in mass resignations and rampant vacancies across schools and districts (Varghese, 2022). K-12 educators already work within (and seldom see change in) a system designed to produce and reproduce inequities along racial lines, a working condition that is especially stressful and threatens the retention of Black Indigenous and people of color (BIPOC) teachers (Gist, et. al, 2021; Kohli, 2018, 2021; Pizarro & Kohli, 2019). CRT-bans contribute to the complexity and pressure teachers face navigating their profession, adding on the fear of teaching the wrong topic through the censorship of longstanding curriculum and the policing of pedagogy.

Although CRT is not often taught in elementary and secondary schools, it does provide a useful framework for understanding how the anti-CRT movement—at the local, state, and federal policy level, and in media coverage of school events—has come about. In this article, we first draw on CRT to analyze how CRT-bans leverage white defensiveness and white comfort to restrict instruction and discourse about systemic racism, thereby upholding it. Second, we describe a mixed methods research study with 117 teachers across the US that provides an initial look at how teachers are being harmed by these bans and suggests that CRT-bans are negatively impacting the racial climate of schools and contributing to the systematic pushout of teachers, particularly those committed to equity and inclusion. We end the article with evidence-based recommendations on ways schools might mitigate the harm of CRT-bans on teachers.

### **What Actually *is* Critical Race Theory and How is it Useful?**

Racism is the creation and/or maintenance of racial hierarchies and racial inequities supported through institutionalized power (Solorzano et al., 2002). CRT is a theoretical framework that emerged in the 1970s from critical legal scholars working to make visible the racism embedded in laws and institutions (Crenshaw, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). According to Crenshaw, Gotanda, Peller, and Thomas (1995), it is an expansive theory unified by two defining threads. First, it guides an exploration of “how a regime of white supremacy and its subordination of people of color have been created and maintained in America.” It is used “to examine the relationship between that social structure and professed ideals such as ‘the rule of law’ and ‘equal protection’,” (Crenshaw et al., 1995, xiii) that legitimize the status quo. Second, CRT calls for this

understanding of racialized structures to be paired with action towards disrupting how the law reifies racial power systems (Crenshaw et al., 1995, xiii).

CRT scholars have studied how whiteness is prioritized and elevated to justify ongoing violence toward communities of color. Harris (1993) demonstrates how, in the United States, whiteness is leveraged and enjoyed while being protected like a formal property right within the legal system. Similarly, Gotanda (2004) and others (Lopez, 1997; Moore, 2014; Ross, 1990a) point to the law's construction of white people as innocent—always only abstractly connected to, but not responsible for, the privileges and structures that elevate their status while subordinating and dehumanizing Black people.

In the 1990s, CRT became part of the education landscape. Key critical education scholars borrowed from the legal theory to challenge structural racism within various facets of the U.S. educational system. Ladson-Billings & Tate (1995) applied Harris' argument that the US is built on property rights over human rights to demonstrate how schools are designed to serve white economic interests through disparate educational opportunities. Solórzano (1997) engaged CRT to disrupt genetic and cultural deficit theories that feed racial stereotypes and are used to justify how teachers see and act towards Black, Latina/o/x, and Indigenous students.

CRT in education has helped scholars and practitioners understand and challenge racial injustices within curriculum (Akom, Cammarota, & Ginwright, 2008; Ladson-Billings, 2003; Valencia, 2010; Yosso, 2002), resources (Lynn & Parker, 2006; Pollack & Zirkel, 2013), and discipline (Annamma et al., 2019; Dutil, 2020). It has also been used to uncover how systemic racism contributes to an unhealthy racial climate guided by policies and practices that ultimately serve to pushout students of color (Kim et. al, 2010; Tuck, 2012), and teachers, particularly teachers of color fighting for a more just education system (Fultz, 2004; Hudson & Holmes, 1994; Kohli, 2018). We intentionally use the term pushout to reframe the idea that students “dropout” or teachers simply leave schools by their own will; instead, it acknowledges that the educational system is constructed to impede their success and inclusion (Fine 1991; Kohli, 2018; 2021; Tuck, 2012).

CRT has also been utilized for decades to understand how schooling structures (policies, practices, norms) contribute to the perpetuation of white supremacy (e.g., Bell, 2004; Kohli, 2021; Perez Huber, 2011; Yosso, 2013). Part of this work has focused on the dynamics of white defensiveness that work to undermine racial justice. For example, Leonardo and Porter (2010) engage CRT to argue how safe spaces for racial dialogue are violent toward students of color when they prioritize the comfort of white people. Matias (2014) uses CRT to theorize on the socially constructed, relational nature of white racial emotion within a white supremacist society that falsely presents emotions as individualized, unraced, and normative. Scholars have also expanded this understanding to explore how white emotionalities recycle power relations (e.g., Ahmed, 2004; Matias et al., 2016), and undermine antiracist education (e.g., Applebaum, 2017; DiAngelo, 2011; Matias & DiAngelo, 2013). Collectively, this scholarship sheds light on how *white defensiveness*—emotive responses of white people to discourse on racism that serve as a barrier to accountability, and *white comfort*—the option that white people have to ignore white normativity—are embedded within the logics of a legal system that contributes to the fortification of white supremacy (Freeman, 1995, p. 29).

Our use of “white defensiveness” is aligned with CRT’s legacy of challenging white normativity and is a rejection of the white fragility framing. While “white fragility” has become a popular term for naming the overt ways white people emotionally resist racialized discussions—including anger, crying, physically leaving, or (more subtly) silence, guilt, and withdrawal (DiAn-

gelo, 2011)—DiAngelo's theorizing fails to recognize such emoting as a performance of invulnerability (as opposed to vulnerability) (Applebaum, 2017). We use "white defensiveness" to describe the range of emotive responses that ultimately support white people to victimize themselves and police emotions of people of color (Accapadi, 2007), to engage in a performance of false empathy and care (Matias & Zembylas, 2014), and/or to justify apathy toward issues of racism (Forman, 2004). Similarly, we use "white comfort" to describe the option that white people have to simultaneously learn and ignore white normativity (Mills, 2007), facilitated by their avoidance of vulnerability (Applebaum, 2017) and racialized emotions (Matias, 2016a).

A legacy of critical race scholarship in both the law and the field of education teaches us to see CRT-bans as a structural strategy: they leverage a legal system and social norms that cater to white defensiveness and white comfort, to facilitate the creation and maintenance of inequitable schooling structures that harm communities of color. In the section that follows, we trace the lineage of the ban's language and analyze the narratives constructed about them, building from analysis that first appeared in Jayakumar's (2022) introduction to a special issue about CRT in *Philosophy and Theory in Higher Education*.

### **CRT Analysis of CRT-Bans**

On May 18, 2021, a white community member at a school board meeting in Forsyth County, Georgia angrily decried the inclusion of Critical Race Theory (CRT) in the curriculum, stating, "If you have materials that you are providing where it says, 'if you were born a white male you were born an oppressor,' you are abusing our children." Although the district insisted it was just trying to promote a welcoming and inclusive environment to students of all races, this CRT opponent was followed by numerous parents in agreement, one who argued, "The DEI program is a trojan horse that will bring in a slippery slope. A slippery slope that will ultimately end in Critical Race Theory, white repentance, and the McDonaldisation of America's students." (11Alive, 2021). Nine days later, the school board released a statement, "Forsyth County Schools does not and will not teach, nor promote, Critical Race Theory" (Kerns, 2021).

At this writing, nearly 200 bills banning "CRT" and related "divisive concepts" have been proposed across 40 states (PEN America, 2022). Few bills mention CRT by name (Johnson et al., 2022); however, given how rarely CRT is taught in undergraduate education, much less K-12 schools, such claims would not likely hold up in courts of law. The anti-CRT strategy is what Patricia Williams calls "definitional theft" (Cobb, 2021) and Kimberlé Crenshaw calls the creation of a "boogeyman" (Hatzipanagos, 2021). The creators of the anti-CRT narrative, such as Christopher Rufo (Wallace-Wells, 2021), admit, and even gloat, on Twitter about the racial gaslighting they are doing: they are using "CRT" as a decoy to block teaching about the history of racism and DEI efforts in general.

CRT-bans are part of a political and increasingly state-sanctioned movement rooted in white supremacy. Many CRT-bans borrow language from an executive order by the Trump administration to ban all federally funded diversity trainings (Johnson et al., 2022). The order and the bans that borrow its language prohibit "divisive concepts," such as the concept that "the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist" or the notion that "an individual, by virtue of his or her race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex," or anything that might elicit "discomfort, guilt, or anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of [a person's] race or sex (Exec. Order No. 13,950, 2020, p. 436)." Teachers who want to discuss race or racism are framed as indoctrinating students into such

“race and sex stereotyping and scapegoating (Exec. Order No. 13,950, 2020, p. 433),” when, really, students are already being indoctrinated into race and gender stereotypes through Eurocentric and white-centered curriculum (Matias 2016b). This deceptive misattribution, which draws on white defensiveness and white comfort, is central to the gaslighting of anti-CRT narratives, promoted by Fox News, politicians, and policymakers.

Informed by CRT as our conceptual framework, we argue that the bans similarly claim that white people and men are the ones victimized by efforts to raise awareness of racism and sexism. In effect, this codifies white comfort, while silencing challenges to racism and sexism. It protects the centrality and primacy of their perspective. In the end, then, these efforts are about denying the lived experiences of BIPOC students and communities, ignoring, and distorting the racialized truth of U.S. history and society, and ultimately, leaving white supremacy unchecked.

Another strategy of the anti-CRT legislation is to attack teachers and suppress racial literacies, what Harvard law professor Lani Guinier (2004) defined as “the capacity to decipher the durable racial grammar that structures racialized hierarchies and frames the narrative of our republic” (p. 100). Many bans include a list of right and wrong beliefs, acceptable and unacceptable books and materials. While the executive order listed beliefs that federal workers and contractors could no longer espouse or be presented with, more recently, anti-CRT legislation has honed in on the banning of history and literature in schools, collectively blocking libraries and classrooms from including over one thousand book titles (African American Policy Forum, 2022). For example, *New Kid*, a text that simply featured Black characters, was banned from school libraries in Texas this past year (Cronin, 2021). And in Florida’s Osceola County, the school district canceled a teacher professional development that had been held annually about the civil rights movement (Meckler & Natanson, 2022). An Oklahoma teacher is preparing to resign after being attacked and placed on leave for sharing a free, publicly available link to the Brooklyn Public Library, where students could access books currently banned in their home state (Singer, 2022).

These bans on historical truths and racialized realities of communities of color seek to censor and police teachers from advancing students’ racial literacies in schools, and public districts are condoning and engaging in these processes. They claim to protect teachers from a supposed harm that CRT is creating, while in actuality, they exert control over the labor of teachers whose reality in the classroom is different than the false narratives being told. In this way, the policies—and media narratives about the policies—contribute to a kind of ambient racial gaslighting: the “political, social, economic and cultural process that perpetuates and normalizes a white supremacist reality through pathologizing those who resist” (Davis & Ernst, 2019, p. 47; see also Davis & Ernst, 2011; Matias & Newlove, 2017; Ruíz, 2020). Moreover, even in places where bans haven’t yet been established, anti-CRT legislation and efforts have threatened the job security of teachers if they teach topics of race and privilege. Anti-CRT legislation and efforts are a manipulation of white backlash to strategically make a battleground out of racially relevant education and attack those who attempt to deliver it; namely, teachers (Wallace-Wells, 2021).

### **Empirical Methods**

Given the current political context and climate, in this article, we wanted to systematically understand how teachers are making sense of anti-CRT bans. Through an analysis of survey and questionnaire data collected with K-12 teachers across the country, we explore how a range of teachers perceive and have been impacted by actual or pending legislative bans.

## Participants

This study is part of a larger collaborative research project on CRT-bans conducted by Sophie Trawalter and the first author.<sup>1</sup> We recruited 185 K-20 educators via Prolific, an online platform for recruiting participants for online studies. We launched data collection on May 2, 2022, and ended data collection on May 24, 2022, due to the Robb Elementary School shooting in Uvalde, TX, to be sensitive to educators' mental health; we did not want to ask teachers about professional stress in the wake of this tragic event. Of the 185 educators, 117 reported working in the K-12 schools. Among these K-12 educators, 56% were women, 16% were teachers of Color, and the mean age was 37.9 with a *SD* of 10.41. The average educator self-identified as liberal,  $M = 2.10$ ,  $SD = 1.15$ , though educators spanned the political spectrum from 1-*Very liberal* to 5-*Very conservative*. This is reflective of the general political views of teachers at large, where a minority of teachers identify as conservative (Kline, 2017). Educators came from across the U.S. See Appendix Table 1 for states represented in the sample, and whether those states had an anti-CRT ban.

## Procedure and Research Approach

Participants completed an online survey that included a series of questions, including questions about factors associated with attrition, studied under the label of “burnout.” We acknowledge that the concept of “burnout” is limited in that it attributes attrition factors to internal sources, as opposed to recognizing the myriad of external sources responsible for “pushing out” teachers (Kohli, 2021).

Still, we utilize an established “Teacher Burnout Scale” (Richmond et al., 2001) for the purpose of contributing to legal advocacy, given that teacher burnout is the label recognized as a significant policy concern. This approach is described by Mari Matsuda as having a “dualist approach” to advocacy, driven by a “multiple consciousness” that intentionally operates both within the demarcations of what is legislatively legible and toward oppressed community knowledge and advocacy (Matsuda, 1989). It is also referred to as Critical Race Praxis in educational research (Yamamoto, 1997; Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015; Stovall, et al., 2009).

To assess burnout/pushout, participants rated their agreement with statements such as, *My job doesn't excite me anymore*, and *I am weary with all of my job responsibilities*, on a scale from 1-*Strongly disagree* to 5-*Strongly agree*. Attrition questions were followed by questions about factors associated with retention: their desire to seek another job. Specifically, they were asked: *Would you consider taking another job in another state?* And, if so, *Would you consider taking a job in a state with a ban (or attempts to pass a ban) on 'critical race theory'?* Participants answered these questions on a scale from 1-*Definitely no* to 5-*Definitely yes*. In addition, we included survey questions that asked participants, *Has your state passed a ban on 'Critical Race Theory' in public education?* Of the 117 educators in our sample, 25 said yes and 92 said no. We also collected information on what state they currently live in, so we could observe whether there are bans or bans under way. As expected, educators who were in ban states were significantly more likely to

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1. The larger ongoing project includes an experiment design where participants were primed to focus or not focus on CRT bans before filling out the survey. More specifically, participants were randomly assigned to one of two conditions. In the Experimental Condition, they read an article about Critical Race Theory bans in education. In the Control Condition, they did not read this article. This is not a part of the analysis for this article. In addition, the survey included many more questions not included in this analysis, including questions about racial climate that the research team plans to analyze and publish in future articles.

report that they were in a ban state,  $t(115) = 3.53, p = .0006$ . In other words, educators seem aware of the situation in their state, something that also comes through in their qualitative responses.

## Limitations

We note that these analyses are exploratory, a first pass at assessing educators' reactions to the bans. The design of the broader study allows us to document a relationship between bans/proposed bans, on the one hand, and teacher's professional lives and retention. The data do not allow for strong causal inferences, which we do not claim to make. Still, we think the relationship we capture with the current data reflect a real relationship, one that may well generalize to other educators, outside of our sample. At the very least, the data provide an existence proof: for many teachers, these bans are harmful.

## CRT-Bans Harm School Climate

Of the 117 K-12 teacher sample, 100% wrote in answers to open-ended questions that solicited their opinions on CRT ("How do you feel about bans on 'Critical Race Theory' in public education?" and "In what ways have the bans impacted you?"). Of those individuals, most (roughly 79%) characterized the bans as negative for education and society. Participants pointed to several reasons when describing their discontent with the bans, including the bans being a political strategy used by conservative political officials, CRT not being taught at the K-12 level, and the bans being harmful to marginalized populations. The descriptive qualitative findings from this data suggest that CRT-bans have a negative impact on the professional climate of teaching.

All liberal identifying participants disagreed with the notion that "bans are ok or good." Eight liberal identifying participants who disagreed with the bans cited the way the bans limit teachers' autonomy and are harmful to students of color. More specifically, they lamented that while CRT is not taught in K-12, the bans work to limit any conversations about race and racism in the classroom. They stated that these limits would cultivate an ignorance of a racialized structuring of society and work against efforts to fight against racial injustice. For example, a white, somewhat liberal identifying woman, who was a teacher of six years in Texas stated:

I think banning Critical Race Theory would actually serve to REDUCE freedom, as politicians attempt to micromanage educators at all levels of K-12 education - quite ironic. I also think it reduces freedom in the sense that Black people will be further oppressed, if a generation is unable to learn about actual race relations in this country.

The overwhelming majority of teachers in our study believe the bans are politically manipulative. Some (17) participants in this study described CRT in K-12 as "a make-believe problem" created by right-wing politicians to earn votes in a political power struggle. While others (23 participants) named conservatives or the Republican party specifically as targeting Critical Race Theory and using it as a political weapon in what one participant labeled as a "bad-faith culture war." They describe it as a narrative of fear that has been built around topics of race and racism in order to "whitewash" America's past in an attempt to avoid accountability. For example, a White, very liberal identifying man teacher of 20 years, currently in South Dakota, described the issue as a facade:

I think [the bans] are an overreaction to a problem that doesn't exist. They are a cynical targeting of a marginalized group for the purpose of grabbing more political power by those who are already in charge.

Another participant, a Black very liberal identifying man, who was a teacher of 12 years, currently in Georgia, broke the façade down further:

As a Black man, I think it's silly. Systemic discrimination and racism are already taught and studied outside of CRT. In addition, I have never heard of CRT being taught in public schools or private schools for people under the age of 18. I have only seen it taught in Black Studies classrooms at colleges and universities. It's not a threat. Finally, the concept was created by academic heavyweights who are highly respected and well published. They are Derrick Bell, Richard Delgado, Charles Lawrence, Mari Matsuda, and Patricia Williams. Finally, Derrick Bell's book on CRT has been around since 1973, why is it a problem 48 years later?

Participants attested that these narratives exist to gain conservative politicians political points as they spearhead the attempt to ban "CRT" in K-12 schooling, even while CRT itself is not usually part of K-12 curriculum.

Almost 10% of those stating the bans are bad for education and society believed that the bans on CRT are negatively impacting the teaching professionals as a whole. These beliefs about agenda pushing and the bans' negative impact on teaching connect to a larger idea that the bans on CRT across the United States are only a single strategy in a more extensive operation to defund and demean public education. This concern is exemplified in an assertion by a white, very liberal identifying man, who was a teacher of nine years in Minnesota. He stated:

I think [the bans are] ridiculous. Schools haven't taught this up until the college level, and it's just something that the republicans want to have control over. They're trying to get teachers fired so that they can keep gutting education.

Similarly, a white somewhat liberal identifying woman, who was a teacher of six years in Texas, asserted:

They're an absurd means of demonizing public education and pandering to far-right voters. There is nothing real here to legislate against, first of all because Critical Race Theory is a primarily a fairly complex concept that is really only taught to students at a college level, second, because there is nothing 'oppressive' or inherently guilt-inducing about Critical Race Theory, it is simply a way of informing students about the structural racism that is built into much of our government law and institutions as a result of hundreds of years of racism and the fact that our government was founded when slavery was still a perfectly legal institution in the US.

Many participants' pointed to political fabrication, based on their understanding that CRT is not actually taught in K-12 schools. Nearly one-third of participants (31 out of 106) asserted that the claim of Critical Race Theory being taught at the K-12 level is a purposeful spread of misinformation. Some understand Critical Race Theory as a graduate-level critical theory rather than a



teaching strategy used at the primary and secondary education levels, as exemplified by the following assertion by a white very liberal identifying woman, who was a teacher of five years in Georgia:

It sounds to me like a buzzword scare tactic. Also I'm not sure there's a need to have an opinion on CRT in schools, because my understanding is that CRT is a college level course and no grade school is actually teaching this stuff. Overall I think that this whole CRT thing is meant to help extremist conservatives whitewash the teaching of history.

There are implications for the stress and manipulation brought on by CRT-bans. Perhaps most strikingly, the majority (54%) of those responding to the question “Would you consider taking a job in a state with a ban (or attempts to ban) on ‘critical race theory’?” indicated they would likely not consider the job. But the data also suggests an impact on quality of life in the profession and racial climate in schools, especially for teachers who identify as politically liberal.

In the study, there were a minority of teachers who did align with the anti-CRT agenda and were committed to maintaining a race-evasive environment. In line with the fear-stoking, politically-driven narrative being built around CRT, several white teacher participants (ranging from “very conservative” to “somewhat liberal” political orientations) indicated that they “do have worries about teaching CRT in the classroom,” specifically around the potential of bringing unwarranted shame and guilt to both white students and students of color. For example, a white moderate identifying woman teacher of 22 years, currently in Colorado, noted:

Though I am white, my immediate family are not. I don't know anyone in my immediate surroundings who feels Critical Race Theory is a “good” idea. No one wants to be told the most important part of their being is the color of their skin. No one wants to be told they are the poor little brown kid who will have a hard time doing anything in life. Is racism a problem in America—yes, in some parts more prevalently. I don't believe that CRT is the answer to this issue though.

Conservative identifying teachers were especially convinced of the narrative of CRT as causing undue psychological distress and harm to white students. Although conservative teachers made up only 10% of the sample, 67% of those conservative identifying participants that actually acknowledged the presence of racism and a significant need to teach history accurately in the United States, still simultaneously saw CRT as a problem. It was also mostly conservative leaning participants that justified their concern about CRT being taught, out of a protection for white student comfort. Five participants in particular wrote in comments expressing their view that CRT leads to psychological discomfort and/or shame among white students. For example, a white moderate identifying teacher of three years in Pennsylvania who is a woman, stated about her feelings toward CRT-bans: “I think that it is a good idea on principal [sic], but that it needs to be clear so that teachers can teach history still--just without making students of caucasian or white ethnicity feel depressed or guilty for their ancestors...” Such comments map onto the white backlash politics of appeals to white defensiveness and comfort that were embedded in Trump's executive order and now being concretized through CRT-bans. Despite these opinions, however, only 13% of participants (15 total) indicated that the “bans are ok or good.”

## Teachers are Experiencing Burnout/Pushout

To explore the impacts of bans on educators, we examined burnout/pushout and educators' desire to change jobs as a function of whether they report living in a ban state (yes v. no). We control for race (BIPOC vs. not) and ideology. We do not formally test for interactions with these variables due to insufficient power; we have relatively low numbers of BIPOC educators ( $n = 19$ ) and conservative educators ( $n = 13$ ). For the same reason, we do not test interactions between condition and whether educators live in a ban state.

The burnout scale scores ranged from 1 to 4.2 out of 5, with a mean of 2.12 and standard deviation of .75. In other words, educators reported burnout/pushout below the midpoint of the scale, indicating slight disagreement with items describing burnout/pushout. Still, there was a range, with some educators reporting very high levels of burnout/pushout. Notably, educators who reported being in a ban state reported *more* burnout/pushout than educators not in ban states. See Table 1.

## Teachers are Considering Leaving their Schools

Responses to the questions, Would you consider taking another job in another state? and Would you consider taking a job in a state with a ban (or attempts to pass a ban) on “critical race theory”? ranged from 1 (Definitely no) to 5 (Definitely yes) with a mean of 2.67,  $SD = 1.20$ , and 2.54,  $SD = 1.29$ , respectively. Here, note that participants reported a greater likelihood of taking a job in another state than taking another job in a state with a ban,  $t(59) = 5.81, p < .0001$ , suggesting that bans might, on the whole, make it more difficult to recruit educators. In percentages, 50% of participants said they would maybe, probably, or definitely consider taking another job. Of those, 75.2% said that they would not take a job in a ban state. Moreover, we find that participants who reported being in a ban state were more likely to report wanting to take another job. See Table 1.

**Table 1. Test of Statistics**

	Burnout/Pushout	Other job?	Job in a ban state?
Self-reported ban state:	$B = .33, SE = .17$	$B = .83, SE = .26$	$B = -.30, SE = .34$
Yes (1) vs. no (0)	$t(113) = 1.99$	$t(113) = 3.21$	$t(55) = -.89$
	$p = .049^*$	$p = .002^{**}$	$p = .377$

Note: Regression analyses of burnout/pushout, desire to take another job, and desire to take another job in a ban state as a function of ban state status (self-reported), controlling for race (BIPOC vs. not) and ideology (1-5).  $^{**} < .01$ ,  $^* < .05$

## Discussion

Nationally, conservative educators make up a minority in K-12 public schools (Klein, 2017). The teachers in our dataset reflect the broader political sphere of educators, and most opposed CRT-bans. Those who align with the bans tended to identify with conservative political ideologies, expressing comments reflective of CRT ban propaganda that has been strategically implemented starting with Trump's executive order and now with legislation (or threat thereof) in 40 states. The data also reflect significant numbers of progressive and liberal teachers who are

aware of the manipulation, don't agree with bans, and are experiencing a negative impact on their teaching and retention.

The quantitative data, in particular, demonstrates that bans contribute to teachers' burnout/pushout and their desire to take another job in another state. As our findings reveal, the majority of teachers are experiencing additional pressure and stress in the wake of legislative bans that feel like a deceptive attack on education and teacher's autonomy in making the best pedagogical choices for their students. Most of the teachers in our study name what is underlying the bans—calling it out as whitewashing history, bad faith cultural wars, and buzz-word scare tactics from the extreme right.

Fighting against the negative impact of bans will require that school districts as well as school leaders and personnel—not only teachers but administrators—are capable and committed to naming and appropriately responding to the ways in which racism is enacted through schooling policies, practices, and norms. In the recommendation section ahead, we connect our findings to the importance of supporting teachers, and racial literacies in schools, to ultimately ensure healthy learning conditions for BIPOC students and their white peers.

## **Recommendations**

Teaching is already a profession characterized by significant stress and subject to high rates of turnover. While the education of future generations is dependent on this community of professionals, teachers are underpaid and tasked with a great deal of responsibility with limited resources, as exemplified and exacerbated during the global pandemic of 2020. K-12 schools are currently operating with unprecedented vacancies, and districts are scrambling to cover classes, stretching already thin resources thinner. These problems are more prominent in districts serving working class, students of color—leaving the most underserved students even more underserved.

It is within this context that conservative groups are advocating for changes to curriculum that restrict discussions of racial injustice, and the historical and current realities of racial inequity. As seen through the data analyzed in this paper, this has an impact on the professional stability and wellbeing of teachers. Most of the teachers in our study were not only aware of the deceptiveness of the bans, but also seemed to be enduring additional stress and emotional labor contributing to factors associated with experiencing burnout/pushout of the profession. Based on our findings, we offer several research grounded recommendations drawn from the literature on K-12 schools, teachers, and teacher education. These recommendations can support districts and schools to mitigate the stress that our data suggests teachers are enduring:

### **1. Districts and schools must maintain their commitments to serving all students.**

Minoritized communities have fought for decades to be more visible in the curriculum (Tintiangco-Cubales & Duncan Andrade, 2021), and for years, research has demonstrated that education is far more effective when it is culturally responsive and sustaining, and students can use the curriculum to make sense of their world (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Paris & Alim, 2017). In this study, the majority of teachers surveyed felt that CRT-bans are harming education and society, and they acknowledged that there is a significant need in U.S. schools to teach accurate history, including discourse on racism. As students of color comprise over half of students in US public schools, and racism is a reality in their lives, pandering to white conservative minority factions that want to suppress discussions of race and inequity is not in the best interests of students

of color. In fact, it is a blatant exploitation of the resources that states, districts, and schools receive to oversee education. Districts and schools must instead maintain their commitments to serving all students by recognizing that a free and appropriate education includes narratives and history reflective of the past and current realities of students of color.

**2. Districts and school administrators should create supportive climates for teachers.**

Teachers are one of schools' biggest resources, and it is important that teachers feel they have the space, resources, and support to effectively teach young people in all their diverse identities. Yet most of the teachers we surveyed indicated added pressure from "CRT" bans contributed to their burnout/pushout from the profession. Creating a supportive climate for teachers who are enduring an already high stress and high stakes profession means trusting them as professional experts and supporting their decisions to include curriculum reflective of students' realities with racial inequity, which proposed and adopted legislation have put on the chopping block.

**3. Districts and schools should commit to strengthening their collective racial literacy.**

Racial literacy is the capacity to identify and disrupt racism on both interpersonal and structural levels (Guinier, 2004). Much like any type of literacy, racial literacy is strengthened by practice and engagement (Price-Dennis & Sealy-Ruiz, 2021; Sealy-Ruiz, 2013). As we saw in the introductory example, even when school boards and district administrators are trying to maintain a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion, they do not always have the language and skills to navigate the pressure of parents who are fear-mongering or are promoting false racial narratives. Without a strong understanding of racism, inequity, diversity, and inclusion and how to stay accountable to these principles, districts often default to sweeping language that can restrict the capacity of teachers to effectively serve students. It is important that districts and schools provide the training and resources to its staff so there is a collective understanding that can guide policy decisions so they can stand with their students and teachers.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we explored how CRT-bans came about and how K-12 teachers across the country are feeling about and being impacted by actual or pending legislative bans. Given that teacher retention is an ongoing national problem, in addition to capturing teachers' thoughts about the bans, we specifically examine the pressure teachers are experiencing as related to the likelihood of them leaving their jobs. These findings are relevant to future legal efforts to challenging existing state bans—such as those efforts being prepared by the American Federation of Teachers on behalf teachers who “get in trouble for teaching honest history” (Headly, 2021), and the first federal lawsuit against bans filed by the Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law, the American Civil Liberties Union, and others, challenging Oklahoma's classroom censorship bill HB 1775 (Crawford, 2021). This study is among the first to empirically explore the impact of CRT-bans, showing that they stand to harm teachers and the teaching profession during a national teacher shortage

(Varghese, 2022). The extant literature suggests that harms identified in this study are likely exacerbated for teachers of color, thus having implications for their recruitment, well-being in the profession, and retention; all of which have been identified as essential to supporting the success and well-being of a growing population of students of color. The harm extends to white teachers and communities as well—including those teachers and students' parents standing up in school board meetings decrying victimization and psychological harms of racially responsible content in K-12 schools. Yet their victimization narrative, rooted in white defensiveness, like the anti-CRT movement itself, is a racial spectacle that serves to obfuscate how white supremacist state power, including schooling structures, dehumanize and disenfranchise students of color as well as poor whites (Davis & Ernst, 2019). This is why we have argued that CRT-bans and the underlying movement that they push forward amount to racial gaslighting: they claim to prevent harm by a CRT boogeyman, while actively inflicting harm in the not-so-subtle background that is denied at every turn. The real agenda of the legislation is to assert state-sanctioned control over education, stoke white defensiveness, and to reinforce the existing race-evasive curriculum. This study provides empirical evidence that shines a light on harm to teachers and the profession that is already transpiring from the looming threat of CRT-bans. It provides empirically based hope in showing that most teachers are aware of what the anti-CRT movement attempts to obfuscate. And finally, we recommend supporting teachers and healthy climate, and argue for the power of racial literacies in equipping K-12 teachers in challenging and successfully navigating through the racial gaslighting currently underway.

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## Appendix

**Table 1: Number of Participants From Each State and Status of Anti-CRT Bans in Those States**

State	N	CRT Ban Proposed?	CRT Ban passed?	State	N	CRT Ban Proposed?	CRT Ban passed?
Alabama	1	Y	Y	Montana	0	Y	Y
Alaska	1	Y	Y	Nebraska	0	Y	Y
Arizona	5	Y	Y	Nevada	0	Y	N
Arkansas	0	Y	Y	New Hampshire	0	Y	Y
California	13	N	N	New Jersey	2	Y	N
Colorado	2	Y	Y	New Mexico	1	Y	N
Connecticut	1	N	N	New York	7	Y	N
Delaware	1	N	N	North Carolina	6	Y	Y
Florida	11	Y	Y	North Dakota	0	Y	Y
Georgia	3	Y	Y	Ohio	7	Y	Y
Hawaii	0	N	N	Oklahoma	0	Y	Y
Idaho	0	Y	Y	Oregon	4	Y	N
Illinois	3	N	N	Pennsylvania	8	Y	N
Indiana	0	Y	Y	Rhode Island	0	Y	N
Iowa	2	Y	Y	South Carolina	0	Y	Y
Kansas	1	Y	Y	South Dakota	1	Y	Y
Kentucky	1	Y	Y	Tennessee	3	Y	Y
Louisiana	2	Y	Y	Texas	9	Y	Y
Maine	1	Y	N	Utah	0	Y	Y
Maryland	3	N	N	Vermont	1	N	N
Massachusetts	2	N	N	Virginia	1	Y	Y
Michigan	4	Y	N	Washington	0	Y	N
Minnesota	0	Y	N	West Virginia	0	Y	Y
Mississippi	2	Y	Y	Wisconsin	4	Y	N
Missouri	3	Y	N	Wyoming	1	Y	N
Note: This table reports state-level (not district-level) bans at the time of the study, and whether they were passed. For updated data, see the following sources:							
<a href="https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06">https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06</a>							
<a href="https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu/">https://crtforward.law.ucla.edu/</a>							