
Communicating About CRT in K-12



In recent years, conservatives have accelerated their activism around discussions of race, racism, gender, and sexism in schools. “Critical race theory” (CRT)—an academic theory explaining how racism is embedded in policies and laws—was a particular target, largely as a result of [efforts](#) by a conservative activist associated with the Manhattan Institute, a right-wing think tank. Since 2021, [18](#) states have banned or restricted teaching about CRT (or a concocted version thereof), and [44](#) have contemplated doing so.

Because CRT is, in reality, rarely taught until students reach college or even graduate school, K-12 educators find themselves in the awkward position of being asked to react to activism and legislation related to concepts that, in large part, are not actually being taught. In a recent study published in the peer-reviewed [Peabody Journal of Education](#), NEPC Fellow [Emily Hodge](#) of Montclair State University, [Joshua Rosenberg](#) of the University of Tennessee Knoxville, and NEPC Fellow [Francesca López](#) of Penn State University examined how districts have responded.

The authors analyze 118 Facebook posts from 71 schools and 23 districts that mentioned the term “critical race.” These comments represent the authors’ best efforts to identify all such posts published on the platform over the two-year period between January 2020 and December 2021. The analysis focused on the degree to which the posts and their attendant comments reflected positive, negative, or neutral emotions.

The researchers found that the districts' posts were greater than six times more likely to include positive emotions such as trust, compared to negative emotions such as fear. Comments reacting to posts also leaned positive. Positive comments were more than twice as common as negative ones.

“This is important because school districts can play a key role in stopping the cycle of fearful rhetoric, engaging with stakeholders in ways that unite a school community around shared priorities,” according to the article.

More generally, comments were more likely than posts to reflect any sort of emotion-positive, negative, or neutral.

We believe this is a function of how social media can activate strong and polarizing emotions, with those feeling especially strongly in positive or negative directions being the most likely to engage in commenting on a post and responding to others' comments.

The authors continue: “It makes sense that comments would have significant variation in sentiment compared to relatively mundane, informational posts from a school or district, even if those posts were focused on a polarizing issue such as CRT.”

The researchers also delved more deeply into two posts that generated relatively large numbers of comments. Their intent was to explore the rhetoric employed through the lens of past research on the use of political messaging to diffuse strategies (like those surrounding recent anti-CRT campaigns) designed to evoke fear and anger. This part of their analysis found that the focal post that emphasized a common purpose and shared goals attracted more positive comments than the post that stressed that CRT was not being taught in schools—which was associated with higher rates of polarization.

Based on past research, the study's authors suggest that the post that was associated with higher rates of positive comments might have been even more effective at eliciting positive comments if the author had named “an opponent outside of the district and their divisive tactics” and highlighted “specific groups of students” (e.g., with a statement such as, “We can work together to create an environment where the Black, Latinx, and White children in our district can learn and thrive.”)

“In other words,” the researchers conclude, “school and district leaders should make sure to focus on their mission and vision—focus on affirmative values rather than fact-checking claims or getting bogged down in countering claims about CRT in the district.”

NEPC Resources on Politics

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