



## Slavery Caused the Civil War. Do America's Schoolchildren Know That Fact?



At the end of December, Republican presidential candidate Nikki Haley [stood up](#) in front of the American flag and declared that the cause of the Civil War was “the role of government [and] the rights of the people.” No mention of slavery was made.

As a former governor and native of a Confederate state (South Carolina), Haley herself almost certainly realized that she had neglected to mention the war's main cause. In fact, in the wake of the [criticism](#) she faced, Haley acknowledged slavery as the war's main cause during a [radio interview](#) the very next day.

Although Haley's comment may have been more indicative of her political strategy than of the actual depth of her knowledge, this is not the case for many of America's schoolchildren.

A [2018 report](#) by the Southern Poverty Law Center's Learning for Justice (formerly, Teaching Tolerance) project found that just *eight percent* of U.S. high school seniors knew that slavery was the war's main cause.

Since that time, it is unlikely that this share has increased. In response to a racial reckoning sparked by the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police during the summer of 2020, politicians launched a “backlash campaign” that introduced what a [recent NEPC report](#) calls “discriminatory censorship laws.” Enacted now in at least 21 states and

145 school districts or other local government entities enrolling half the nation's 50 million public schoolchildren, these laws limit what schools can teach students about, among other things, racism and race—slavery included.

These knowledge gaps are not limited to children. A [2019 poll](#) found that 48 percent of American adults did not know slavery was the Civil War's main cause.

In a [regular column](#) he writes for *Forbes*, NEPC Fellow [Shaun Harper](#) of the University of Southern Californian notes, "Schools, colleges, and workplaces largely deny [Americans] opportunities to learn, rehearse, make and recover from mistakes, and become more highly-skilled in engaging in productive conversations about our nation's racial past and present."

For educators and parents who want to help reverse this trend, Learning for Justice has published a helpful resource. Entitled [Teaching Hard History](#), this (no-cost) guide includes curricula for elementary and secondary grade levels as well as free professional development for educators. Other resources include the [Gilder Lehrman Center for the Study of Slavery, Resistance, and Abolition](#) at Yale University, the PBS documentary series [Africans in America](#), and the [Freedom to Move](#) database featuring thousands of runaway slave advertisements, [Raphael E. Rogers](#) of Clark University [writes](#) in *The Conversation*.

As NEPC director [Kevin Welner](#) of the University of Colorado Boulder told [neaToday](#), "A lie is always more of a threat than the truth, even when the truth is painful . . . Our children need to understand the painful truth of racism."

### NEPC Resources on Diversity - Race, Ethnicity, Class, Culture, and/or Gender

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