



## WHITE FRAGILITY. WHAT IT LOOKS LIKE IN SCHOOLS



Public school enrollment has been majority “minority” since 2014. Yet roughly 80 percent of teachers are White. Although it’s not easy to get data on the racial makeup of local school boards, a 2010 survey suggests about 80 percent are White. State legislators, who typically call the shots on K-12 policy and funding, are also about 80 percent White.

So how are educators and policymakers dealing with this glaring gap between the demographics of the people who implement and make education policy and the students who live its results? How are they handling the even bigger chasm between the societal and educational opportunities offered to White students versus students of color?

In many cases, they’re not.

Even as many White educators and policymakers try their best to serve as allies in schools, others grow defensive or deny problems exist in the first place, making it difficult if not impossible to even begin to address the issue.

Recently “White fragility” has become a term used to explain such defensive or refuting attitudes. In this Q&A, National Education Policy Center Fellow Paul Thomas explores this concept, defining it and explaining how it applies to schools. He concludes by offering advice on how educators can be White allies.

Thomas, a former high school teacher, is a professor of education at Furman University in South Carolina. His areas of expertise include literacy, the impact of poverty and race, and political dynamics influencing education. He blogs at <https://radicalsolarship.wordpress.com/>.

**Q: What is “White fragility?” To what extent is the term identifying something new versus relabeling a phenomenon that has previously gone by different names?**

**A:** According to *Robin DiAngelo (2011)*:

*White people in North America live in a social environment that protects and insulates them from race-based stress. This insulated environment of racial protection builds white expectations for racial comfort while at the same time lowering the ability to tolerate racial stress, leading to what I refer to as White Fragility. White Fragility is a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves. These moves include the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation. These behaviors, in turn, function to reinstate white racial equilibrium.*

*Only recently have I seen an overt confronting, analyzing, and labeling of “White fragility,” but this label identifies what I would say is the essential nature of the U.S. from its inception. Whiteness has always been centered in the U.S. in a way that makes it both invisible and “normal.”*

*White studies, then, is a scholarly way to interrogate that. It’s a way to connect its racist beginnings (slavery) to the Civil Rights era and then to the current lingering racial inequity in the country (pay inequity, mass incarceration [see *The New Jim Crow*], etc.).*

**Q: How does White fragility manifest itself in K-12 educational settings? How, if at all, is this different from the way it manifests itself in other settings?**

**A:** *One example would be curriculum and standards that persist in promoting a core or traditional foundation of knowledge for all students. Another example is the resistance to multicultural efforts in schools.*

*The traditional canon in teaching literature and the ways we teach the founding of the U.S. and the so-called Founding Fathers (idealized and glorified) maintain a grip on whiteness and allow those suffering from White fragility to claim “tradition” and “basic skills” to mask the need to cling to whiteness at the exclusion of other narratives and other races.*

*This isn’t unique to schools and education, but it does offer evidence that schools themselves are rarely progressive (or liberal). Instead, they work to reflect and perpetuate the (White) norms of U.S. culture.*

**Q: What can and should be done to address White fragility in schools?**

**A:** *White fragility can only be calmed with systemic change to policy and practices over a long period of time. Some of these changes don’t directly address the issue but are still important because context itself is important. Policies can move in this direction by, for example, shifting away from standardized curriculum and testing as ways to impose accountability on schools.*

*More broadly, policies can pursue a commitment to education reform grounded in equity, which would work powerfully to counter White fragility. That would include seeking ways to diversify the teacher workforce by race and gender. Schools should also end inequitable practices that negatively impact Black and Brown students—teacher assignment, gate-keeping courses and programs, tracking, and punitive discipline and dress code policies.*

*Also, as noted above, diversifying the curriculum to include more and different voices would allow teachers and students to investigate whiteness at a level that could both calm White fragility and shift the culture of schools to greater diversity and inclusion.*

**Q: The NEA recently passed a directive requiring that the concept of White fragility be incorporated into trainings, literature and communications. To what extent, if any, will this help address the issues associated with White fragility?**

*A: The paradox is that White fragility results when whites are confronted with their whiteness or any aspects of racial tension, but in order to ease or move past White fragility, it must be named and addressed.*

*This approach is a first step about awareness; its effectiveness will depend on how those being trained are allowed to come to and sit with the concept.*

*Regretfully, the Trump era has highlighted that whites can and often do retaliate against charges of privilege and racism, doubling down in many ways to support harmful ideologies and practices.*

*Training may start the path to awareness, but as noted above, White fragility can only be calmed with systemic change to policy and practices over a long period of time.*

**Q: What, if any, other steps are educators and schools taking to address White fragility? What kind of response have these educators/schools received?**

*A: The California Ethnic Studies Model Curriculum and the pushback (for example, the Williamson M. Evers op-ed in the Wall Street Journal) are good examples of this.*

*The new curriculum represents on one level how difficult it is to confront and move past whiteness, since the creators of the new curriculum admitted that the initial effort had flaws. But the really overblown and angry response by Evers helps highlight two key points: (1) “Whiteness” is embedded in many so-called traditional values in the U.S. (in Evers’ case, capitalism); and (2) Conservatives in the U.S. see anything challenging that conservative ideology as “political,” but their own politics on the right are seen as objective, the norm.*

*The Evers response also suggests that at least some conservatives in the U.S. either lack a complex understanding of key terms and ideas (critical thinking, capitalism, socialism, communism, social justice, multiculturalism, etc.) or are willfully misrepresenting these concepts for political gain.*

**Q: Can you describe the nature and rationale for the pushback against current**

## and past efforts to take the idea of White fragility seriously?

**A:** *This may seem circular but White fragility is its own explanation. Those who reject the idea that White fragility exists are also those who argue that racism and privilege do not exist. That resistance is grounded in a powerful lack of awareness about race and power.*

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*To reject confronting White fragility is an act of White fragility, just as those who reject racism exists are themselves racist* *Ultimately, the resistance is a core nationalist movement, one now being named “White nationalism,” but in many ways adding the “White” is redundant, but necessary. The essence of that resistance is also in slogans such as “make America great again,” which resists explaining when and how America was great—and more broadly, never interrogates a key question, “Great for whom?”*

## **Q: What can and should White educators and students do to become effective allies of people of color in schools?**

**A:** *Have the hard conversations. For example, consider this [racism scale](#). We all have to understand better what racism, allyship, and ultimately being an abolitionist look like. Too often we stay at the level of abstractions, such as definitions. This racism scale also challenges us to move beyond allyship to a much harder commitment that requires sacrifice.*

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

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