

As 21 States Restricted Curriculum, Seven Expanded It. Here's Why.



There's been a lot of airtime devoted to the recent spate of so called "don't say gay" policies and laws limiting efforts to teach students about gender, race, and sexual orientation. After all, between 2021 and 2026, [21 states](#) imposed such restrictions.

But even while these new policies were narrowing curricula, a separate and very different set of changes was expanding what students learn about the world around them. These so-called "inclusive curriculum" policies require schools to teach students about the experiences of a broader range of experiences—including those of people who are LGBTQ, disabled, Latine, Black, Asian American, and/or Native American.

A total of [seven](#) states have approved such legislation (California, Colorado, Nevada, New Jersey, Illinois, Oregon, and Washington). An eighth (Connecticut) required the state's education agency to create an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum that districts would not be required to adopt. Connecticut districts are also required to offer a Black and Latino

studies class as an elective.

According to an analysis by the [Movement Advancement Project](#), 26% of LGBTQ teenagers live in states that have adopted inclusive curriculum policies, as compared to 39% whose states have restricted curriculum and 35% whose states have neither mandated nor banned inclusion.

How might teachers react to these more inclusive laws? Survey responses from 80 Colorado K-12 educators suggest key benefits. Those responses are described in an [article](#) in the peer-reviewed journal *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, by [Devon Hedrick-Shaw](#) of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign and NEPC Fellow [Bethy Leonardi](#) and [Nelia Peña](#) of the University of Colorado Boulder.

The following are eight findings from the article.

- 1. Raising awareness:** Teachers proposed that a more inclusive approach to curriculum could motivate students to change the world for the better by working to right wrongs that had come to their attention via inclusive curriculum.
- 2. Mitigating risk:** Seeing themselves in the curriculum can help students who are members of minoritized communities feel more like they truly belong in school, some educators proposed. As a result, they may be less likely to drop out or engage in self-harm. “Many of these marginalized populations are at high risk for school failure, and helping them to feel supported, included and safe in the school environment can help to mitigate some of the risk factors that they face,” one survey respondent wrote.
- 3. Overcoming challenges:** Learning how minoritized communities have overcome challenges can help students overcome challenges of their own—especially if they find themselves reflected in the content, some teachers suggested.
- 4. Creating social change:** Some teachers noted that broadening the curriculum could lead to positive social change by correcting misconceptions more privileged students may have about minoritized communities they have limited personal experience with. As one respondent wrote, “Education is the only antidote to ignorance.”

- 5. Enriching perspectives:** Learning about experiences that differ from their own is a form of enrichment, several teachers proposed. “[I]t’s so important for all children to learn about and be exposed to all cultures and lifestyles to make them more well-rounded humans,” one survey respondent wrote.
- 6. Building empathy:** Several respondents suggested that learning about diverse experiences could help students develop empathy—especially if they are not members of minoritized communities. One wrote: “It encourages students to put themselves in the shoes of others who are different and have had different life experiences than they have. . . . The proposed change [to the curriculum] encourages broader thinking and empathy, which our society desperately needs.”
- 7. Developing a more nuanced and complex understanding of the world:** Several teachers emphasized the importance of providing a well-rounded perspective of the past that could help them more accurately understand the present. In the words of one respondent:
- Conversations about race, immigrants, and LGBTQ+ people need to happen to be 1. accurate about our history and culture, 2. understand how history has created systems of privilege and oppression, 3. Integrate this into individual schema/experiences, 4. better understand the current events in our world.
- 8. Embracing discomfort:** Curricular restrictions have often been justified on the basis that teaching students about the challenges minoritized communities have faced will make more privileged students in particular feel uncomfortable. The approach may paint a less-than-positive portrait of people who look a lot like them. Some survey respondents learned into this discomfort, describing it as a bearable and important aspect of the development of true understanding. As one wrote: “[W]e NEED to teach youth to sit with an uncomfortable discussion for the sake of better understanding and connection! That skill ALONE is worth doing this.”

NEPC Resources on Curriculum and Teaching

This newsletter is made possible in part by support provided by the Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice: <http://www.greatlakescenter.org>

The National Education Policy Center (NEPC), a university research center housed at the University of Colorado Boulder School of Education, sponsors research, produces policy briefs, and publishes expert third-party reviews of think tank reports. NEPC publications are written in accessible language and are intended for a broad audience that includes academic experts, policymakers, the media, and the general public. Our mission is to provide high-quality information in support of democratic deliberation about education policy. We are guided by the belief that the democratic governance of public education is strengthened when policies are based on sound evidence and support a multiracial society that is inclusive, kind, and just. Visit us at: <http://nepc.colorado.edu>