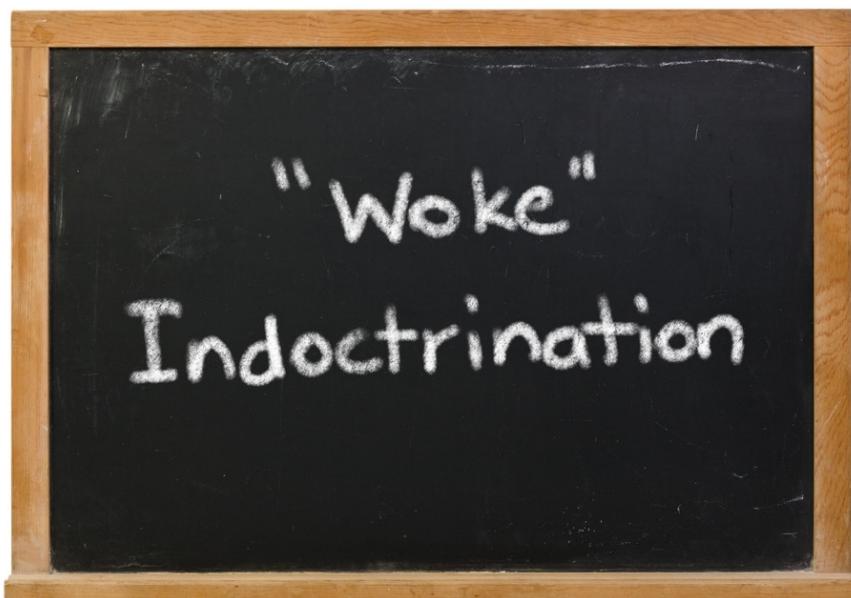


# **NEPC Review: School Choice Is Not Enough: The Impact of Critical Social Justice Ideology in American Education (Manhattan Institute, February 2023)**



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**Reviewed by:**

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David R. Garcia, Arizona State University

May 2023

**National Education Policy Center**

## Acknowledgements

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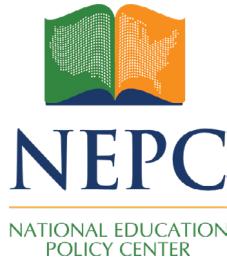
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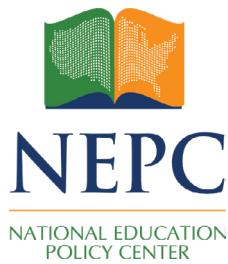
Christine Sleeter, California State University  
David R. Garcia, Arizona State University

May 2023

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## Summary

A recent report by the Manhattan Institute, *School Choice Is Not Enough*, presents results of a survey of U.S. adults aged 18-20 to determine the extent to which eight concepts the report equates with “critical social justice” (CSJ) theory—which the report frowns upon—are taught in schools. The first concept, for instance, is, “America is a systemically racist society.” The report finds that such concepts are being widely taught, even in private schools and homeschooling. Because these CSJ concepts are being taught beyond public schools, the report argues that school choice is an ineffective option for shielding children. The report also puts forward the unfounded conclusions that (a) teachers rather than others outside the classroom are the primary source of exposure, (b) CSJ concepts are being indoctrinated as “truth,” and (c) policy attitudes and political party affiliation are influenced by exposure to CSJ concepts. The report recommends that any discussions of CSJ are balanced by classical liberal approaches and that public schools provide curriculum materials on demand, among others. Given that the methods do not adequately isolate exposure in school from the many other sources in which young people encounter these eight concepts, and that no causal relationships are established, there is no support for the report’s highly intrusive policy recommendations.



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## I. Introduction

Teaching students about racism and nontraditional conceptions of gender has always prompted pushback. The most recent pushback began in 2019, with the release of the *1619 Project*, followed by attempts to address racism in the wake of the murder of George Floyd in 2020.<sup>1</sup> In 2021, after then-president Trump's executive order banning "critical race theory" (CRT) training for public employees, many states began considering and passing legislation prohibiting teaching about racism in public schools. Inclusion of LGBTQ issues and attention to transgender rights was then added to this wave of legislation.<sup>2</sup>

Against this backdrop, the Manhattan Institute looked into the frequency with which "critical social justice" (CSJ) theory—a combination of CRT and "radical gender theory"—is being taught in public schools. *School Choice Is Not Enough: The Impact of Critical Social Justice Ideology in American Education* was co-authored by Zach Goldberg and Eric Kaufmann, both of the Manhattan Institute.<sup>3</sup> The report claims that, based on a survey of U.S. young adults, this ideology is being widely taught in schools as "truth," and that such teaching is shifting youth to the political left. The report claims that while school choice is often viewed as a remedy for families who wish to shield their children from ideologies taught in schools, CSJ concepts are so widespread outside of schools as well as within schools that most young people will be exposed to them in any case. The report concludes with recommendations aimed at reducing the political indoctrination taking place in schools.

## **II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report**

The report finds that 93% of U.S. young adults aged 18-20 have been exposed to at least one applied CSJ concept, with 77% of these instances occurring outside of school. In addition, participants report that they were specifically taught such concepts by a teacher (85%) or another adult in an educational setting (93%). Only 32% report that a credible counterargument was presented at the time. In addition, 73% of parochial schoolers, 82% of students in nonreligious private schools, and 83% of homeschoolers were taught at least one CSJ concept. Young adults in Democratic and non-White counties were exposed to the most CSJ concepts. The survey found a positive relationship between the number of CSJ concepts that participants were exposed to at school and their self-identification as Democrats and as liberal.

## **III. The Report's Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions**

The report purports to isolate exposure to CSJ concepts to content taught by teachers in schools or by other adults in educational settings, as distinct from exposure to these concepts outside of school (e.g., from friends or social media). The report argues that if participants were not taught a counterargument or if the counterargument was not presented as “respectable,” then the content was taught as “truth.” In addition, the report makes an argument that exposure to CSJ concepts influences both policy attitudes and political beliefs, producing young people who feel shame for their country, and who identify as Democrats rather than Republicans. It argues that conservative parents can best serve their children by protecting them from exposure to these eight concepts.

## **IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature**

The report defines CSJ theory as a combination of CRT and radical gender theory, drawing on the work of Pluckrose, a critic of systemic analyses of social inequality.<sup>4</sup> The term “critical social justice theory,” however, appears infrequently in academic literature in education; it is used more commonly in nursing.<sup>5</sup> Aside from mentioning Derrick Bell and Kimberlé Crenshaw, the report does not draw on any of the CRT scholarship. There is no body of academic scholarship called “radical gender theory” except when the term is used by critics of identity politics.<sup>6</sup> Christopher Rufo appropriated it “as a catch-all term for academic queer theory, transgender ideology, and gender identity activism.”<sup>7</sup> But the report sidesteps its lack of engagement with academic literature by drawing a distinction between “high” (or academic) CSJ theory, and “applied” CSJ. It acknowledges that the applied concepts are not formally included within academic CSJ, but states that they are “fully consonant” with it.<sup>8</sup>

It is not until page 8 that the report details the applied concepts it uses to operationalize CRT and radical gender theory. It uses five concepts to operationalize CRT:

1. America is a systemically racist society.
2. In America, White people have unconscious biases that negatively affect non-White people.
3. In America, White people have White privilege.
4. America is built on stolen land.
5. Discrimination is the main reason for differences in wealth or other outcomes between races or genders.<sup>9</sup>

Of these five, only the first is actually a tenet of CRT, and the fourth is a tenet of tribal critical race theory.<sup>10</sup> The other three are not tenets of CRT.<sup>11</sup> The three concepts the report uses to operationalize what it calls radical gender theory include:

6. There are many genders, not just male and female.
7. America is a patriarchal society.
8. Gender identity is a choice, regardless of the biological sex you were born into.<sup>12</sup>

The report takes issue with these eight concepts being taught as “truth” rather than as disputed theories. For example, it argues that territorial conquest “has been the norm across human history,” so nothing is special about land stolen from the native Americans.<sup>13</sup> And since slavery has always existed—with some slave trades, such as the Arab slave trade, being larger and more long-lasting than the American slave trade—American slavery should be placed in that historical context. The report also elevates highly disputed competing explanations for racial/ethnic group outcomes (such as genetics)<sup>14</sup> to debate claims that Black/White differences in economic outcomes today are a result of slavery, claiming that competing explanations should also be taught.

## V. Review of the Report’s Methods

The sample consists of U.S. adults aged 18-20 recruited via online participant panels, which are groups of preselected people who volunteer to participate in research projects. Per the report, participants are recruited via pop-up ads and invitations on websites that range from “astrology to soccer.” As the technical documents indicate, “Absolutely key to the success of this project will be the requirement that a representative sample is achieved.”<sup>15</sup> Yet Deltapoll, the British company that conducted the survey, did not report on the representativeness of its U.S. panels, specifically. They did provide specifics about a large panel in the U.K. and other European countries, but no details about the recruitment of the U.S. panels used to conduct the study.

In the analysis, the data are weighted to adjust the sample to match the target population. The original Deltapoll sample underrepresented Whites by 17 percentage points and over-

represented Blacks by 12 percentage points, both of which were adjusted accordingly. The overrepresentation of Black participants in the original sample creates questions about how the participant panels are created, but no specific information about the participant panels is provided in the report or accompanying technical documentation to verify the panels.

As the pollsters indicate, “the accuracy of these measures hinge on the ability of respondents to accurately recall and faithfully report past events” and that “some degree of misreporting is inevitable.”<sup>16</sup> Respondents’ recollection is particularly challenging for this report because the pollsters attempted to measure all of the following: (a) whether a participant was taught versus exposed to CSJ concepts; (b) whether the participant was taught CSJ concepts at a specific place (at school in the classroom versus at school outside the classroom), as opposed to being exposed to the concepts anywhere else outside of an educational setting; and (c) whether the participant was exposed to CSJ concepts by specific people (teachers versus other adults at school), as opposed to anyone else outside of an educational setting, including friends and social media.

The task of attributing the teaching of CSJ concepts to a specific place and to specific people is made especially difficult because young people are exposed to CSJ concepts via many different mediums outside of school. As the report notes, young people are exposed to CSJ ideas through the media and corporate advertising, and in 77% instances the participants either first heard of these concepts or heard about them most frequently outside of school (e.g., social media or friends in conversation). The primary counterargument to attribute CSJ teaching to schools is that 83% of homeschooled report being taught at least one CSJ concept. These students do not attend school at all, public or private.

Assuming that the participants could recall being taught CSJ concepts, the pollsters then attempted to capture, across the totality of all these events, the extent to which the participants could recall whether or not they were taught any arguments against the CSJ concepts and whether the counterarguments were presented as “respectable” alternatives. There are no items in the survey that ask if the participants were taught CSJ concepts as “truth,” explicitly. The definition of “truth” used in the report includes the instances where either the participants were not presented with counterarguments or the counterarguments were not presented as respectable.

The report’s methodological structure is insufficient to measure causality. Per the appendix, “the cross-sectional structure of the data does not permit us to infer or demonstrate causal relationships. For instance, we cannot in any way conclude that greater exposure to CRT-related instructions causes increases in ‘woke’ racial attitudes.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, the methods are insufficient to conclude that being taught CSJ concepts in school causes changes in participants’ policy attitudes or political beliefs. The report acknowledges this point in passing, “While we can’t conclude that exposure *causes* attitude change using cross-sectional data, . . . what we can say is that these relationships are robust to a number of alternative explanatory factors.”<sup>18</sup>

## **VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions**

The main finding the survey supports is that a high percentage (93%) of U.S. young people ages 18-20 have been exposed to CSJ concepts and the exposure occurs both in and away from school. Isolating the exposure to content taught in the classroom is suspect. The conclusions that CSJ concepts are taught as “truth” and that exposure to CSJ concepts influences political beliefs are not supported by the survey methods.

The report assumes that the absence of specific CSJ concepts indicates political impartiality, without investigating the extent to which schools teach conservative concepts. It further assumes that the eight concepts it measured are “leftist” rather than representing points of view articulated by groups who are harmed when those concepts are ignored. In addition, the report assumes that the presence of these concepts indicates indoctrination without asking young people whether they felt pushed to adopt a particular ideology.

## **VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice**

The report concedes that young people are exposed to CSJ concepts outside of school through “social media, entertainment, and peers” and that even exiting all forms of schooling (public and private) will not “prevent young people from acquiring these ideas.”<sup>19</sup> Therefore, implementing the intrusive policies suggested in the report—including “making schools free from bias,”<sup>20</sup> a naive and unrealistic proposition, and requiring public schools to provide curriculum materials on demand—will not have a meaningful effect on exposure to CSJ concepts. Rather, it is much more likely that these overburdensome policy recommendations will create many more problems than they solve.

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