



Critical Race Theory

Communications Guidance for Education Leaders

There is not a one-size-fits-all approach to responding to a controversial topic. The general tactic to address a controversial topic such as Critical Race Theory (CRT) is to reach audiences using your own narrative and avoid reinforcing the frame that is inciting the controversy. Rather than waste time explaining what the policy or curriculum actually is, shift the frame to talk about the policies that you have passed or want to advance, and the steps you're taking as an elected official to actually do the work to ensure all students feel affirmed in school. To do this most successfully, frame your agenda in terms of shared values to stem the divisive tone of the discourse and build goodwill.

The guidance below gives you communications options depending on your circumstances, your personality type, and your risk tolerance, including whether you feel physically safe. **We will address safety concerns in a separate resource, but if you feel physically threatened, please remove yourself from the situation, get to safety, and contact law enforcement immediately.**

Reframing the CRT Debate

Be aware that media, constituents, and opponents will try to pull you into a debate about the pros and cons of CRT. As best you can, refrain from engaging in impromptu debates. Responding along the lines of, "Well CRT is good, actually," is an immediate losing proposition. It affirms the reactionary frame and casts you as the bad actor that anti-CRT voices have already been characterizing to their audiences.

Even using the term "critical race theory" is likely only to intensify negative feelings. A [June 23 poll](#) found that only opponents to racial equity have strong (negative) feelings, while people likely to support the anti-racist goals behind the CRT controversy are likely not to know what it is, if they have heard of it at all.

Key Messaging

Communications guidance typically asks you to start by identifying what you would like to say about an issue, and then deciding how you are going to say it. In this instance, you are not debating a policy issue but rather entering a PR arena. Even so, what you say is still critically

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important. This guidance will demonstrate how to block and shift CRT questions towards policies that advance equity. It would be unwise to treat this discourse as if it's a fairly judged debate, and whoever makes the best evidence-backed case on policy wins. In this instance, people are responding to fear and anxiety. So while policy and evidence do matter in this arena, LEE members stand to lose unless they couch their responses in a frame that works on their audience's emotions by responding with a cooler head than their rageful critics.

Still, -- ***it is essential to know what your message about CRT is, who your audience is, and how you would like them to interpret your message.*** Once you decide whether you "support" the anti-racist, equity-advancing principles under attack and why, you should establish key messages to help you state concise, consistent phrases that minimize room for misinterpretation while avoiding the frame that feeds the controversy.

"[The connotations of the phrase 'critical race theory'] are all negative to most middle-class Americans, including racial minorities, who see the world as 'creative' rather than 'critical,' 'individual' rather than 'racial,' 'practical' rather than 'theoretical.' Strung together, the phrase 'critical race theory' connotes hostile, academic, divisive, race-obsessed, poisonous, elitist, anti-American." Most perfect of all, Rufo continued, critical race theory is not "an externally applied pejorative." Instead, "it's the label the critical race theorists chose themselves." ([source](#))

Communications Strategy

Chart out three key messages you want to address about CRT by copying or modifying any of the sample phrases in the two approaches outlined below.

The Reflective Approach

This approach utilizes bridging phrases to shift the conversation to what you want to discuss. It allows the elected official to answer the questions they want to answer and not the one that is asked.

While the bridging statement may be used to handle tricky interviews or contentious issues, they work best with a delivery that is calm, approachable and unflappable. Use this approach to shift to values of interdependence, collective responsibility, empathy, and openness.

Examples (Phrases in BOLD are the Bridging Phrases. Non-bolded phrases are examples of positions on CRT. You may interchange any of these phrases based on your stance.):

1. "**The more important issue is** looking at how our students learn about the history of race and equity. Truth in our classrooms propels young people towards a more united, inclusive, and just future."

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2. **“I think it would be more accurate to say** we need to start a dialogue on equitable curriculum in our schools. All students are different and to the extent that we can, we should be building on their individual strengths with practical supports and resources. After all, teachers know their students best... right?”
3. “I believe we will create a better future for all children **but here’s the real problem:** Our students need social-emotional support more than ever, this is what we should be talking about”
4. **“Let me emphasize again:** A fair education means teaching the truth, so students start to see themselves as part of the American story..”
5. **“What matters most in this situation** is that our students and teachers feel safe having a discussion on inequity and the ways they can strengthen the American dream.
6. **“I won’t speculate. What matters in this situation is** that we give teachers the support they need to teach our students.”
7. **“The real issue here is** equity and what that means to our students.”
8. **“If we look at the bigger picture** our students need more than we are giving them.”
9. **“Let me put all this in perspective by saying** we have done great work to advance equity for <INSERT DISTRICT> students by <INSERT POLICY WIN> and now is not the time to shift our focus away from putting our schools on a better track.”
10. **“What matters most in this situation is** are our students coming out of our schools ready for college and/or a career?”
11. **“I think it would be more accurate to say** we have a lot more work to do to address how we are teaching racism in our classrooms.”
12. **“The one thing that is important to remember is I** support curriculums and practices that are inclusive of all our students and their families.”
13. **“I cannot speak for [person, news outlet, university, etc.], you should address issues to them specifically. What I can say** is I want what is best for our students.”

The Direct Approach

If you feel physically safe and this approach fits your personality and level of political risk tolerance, you may consider being more direct to the extent you’re comfortable. Just let others

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talk about CRT while you remain calm, letting the audience decide who has the better judgement. Then use their motivations as a bridge to talk about your equity agenda.

Examples of language and retorts you might use under this approach:

1. “I don’t appreciate you threatening me because we disagree...We can have a discussion about policy issues; what we can’t have is you threatening me into doing what you want because that’s not a democracy. And I’ve let the authorities know that you’ve sent these messages.”
2. “Some people have made strong efforts to sensationalize this issue to stir up controversy. However, I am here to have policy discussions on ideas to provide the best opportunities for our students – I ran on equity, which means ensuring that all students’ experiences are valued and affirmed in the classroom. I am here talking to you about this because I am trying to do what’s right for our community. You voted for me: I ran on X, I delivered on X. And we still have work to do...”
3. “You may not think very highly of our students, but I believe they can handle the truth about our country’s troubled past and think critically about how it impacts the present. What’s more, they are ready for better systems and more inclusive institutions now and going forward. Attempting to censor our curriculum, or silence our educators to keep certain ideas from them — these are not our values. We value acknowledging the truth, even when it’s difficult.”

Examples of Leaders’ Communications Styles

Whether or not you support the policy positions of the figures below, you might find communications approaches worth emulating in their social media feeds. You can also follow the example of your fellow elected leaders in the LEE network.

The Reflective Approach	The Direct Approach
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Michelle Obama• Cory Booker• General Mark Milley• LEE member and Gwinnett School Board President Everton “E.J.” Blair• LEE member and Tredyffrin/Easttown School Board member Kyle Boyer (see his remarks at 2:17:00)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Brittney Packnett Cunningham• Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez• Nina Turner• Jamaal Bowman• Cori Bush

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Tips for Communicating Controversial Issues

Communicating Amidst Controversy: Getting Your Point Across Without Making Enemies

What is controversy?

- Strongly polarized opinions.
- High emotions.
- Opposing sides may use loaded rhetoric to persuade.

Why address controversial issues in the media?

- Increase awareness of issues.
- Provide science education to the public.
- To establish yourself as an expert source.
- Expand your base of support and increase public goodwill.

Why would reporters call me?

- They want to be fair.
- They value accuracy.

On controversial topics, it's usually best to be seen as...

- Credible.
- Unbiased.
- Fully aware of all sides of the issue.
- Speaking from experience or research-based knowledge.

Should you ever take sides?

- It's not news if you stay completely in the middle. You can, however, provide context, insight and analysis when you do.
- If your research or experience tends to favor one side or another, say so.

Expert vs. personal opinion

- Expert opinions are research and experience-based. That doesn't mean they're always in the middle.
- Personal opinions need no basis and probably should stay private.

When asked about your (opposing) view...

- Briefly acknowledge other views, but go back to your message.

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- Don't dwell on controversy. Steer interview to higher ground.
- Don't speculate on goals, attitudes, values or hidden agendas of those who oppose your views.

Reporters may be confrontational...

- This triggers your emotions, making answers more animated.
- Keep your cool.
- Practice responding to heated, gotcha, and bad-faith questions with staff.
- Direct your responses to the more charitable audiences who you can persuade, rather than the people who will always view you, your policies, and values negatively.

Attack issues, not people

- Present your data or views and stick to the issue.
- Don't slight those with different views.
- Personal attacks may cause the public to question your motives and objectivity.

What if you are attacked in the media?

- Sometimes the best response is no response. Continued responses may prolong the attack.
- Respond only to correct misinformation reported in the news.
- Op-eds and editorials are a way to respond to attacks. Understand others' perceptions.

Find ways to reduce and/or avoid outrage...

- Fairness
- Trust
- Shared values
- Transparency
- A sense that "grown-ups are in charge"
- Listen to people's concerns.
- Share power and benefits more fairly.
- Don't expect to be trusted; focus on being accountable.
- Acknowledge efforts.
- Treat adversaries with respect.

Be persuasive

- Persuasion is not a dirty word.
- In controversial situations, the "other side" will likely use these techniques.
- Not likely to change minds of hard-core believers, but could influence masses.
- Convey your credibility: Why are you an expert?

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- Establish “common ground” with your audience.
- Be objective about the topic.
- Be likable and dynamic.
- Establish a sense of urgency.
- Make sure your message is limited, not global.

Remember...

- Keep it cool.
- Keep it conflict-free.
- Keep it contained.
- Stick to the facts.
- Don't take opposing views personally.
- Try to find common ground with those who have opposing views.
- Be comfortable with your position and with yourself.

[*Communicating Amidst Controversy: Getting Your Point Across Without Making Enemies*](#): Created by Martha Filipic, filipic.3@osu.edu, 12/2009

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