

ACLU Of Wisconsin: Wisconsin school districts, you are legally obligated to teach students about race

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MILWAUKEE —The ACLU of Wisconsin today sent a letter to Wisconsin school district administrators reminding them of their legal obligation to provide instruction about race to all Wisconsin students.

The letter was sent amid increasing opposition to the teaching of Critical Race Theory throughout the country. In actuality, Critical Race Theory is an academic school of thought based on the idea that racist policies and practices are embedded within the American legal system and other institutions, resulting in people of color being treated inequitably throughout society. But in many cases, including in some Wisconsin school districts, it's being used as a buzzword to try to restrict or eliminate any teaching about racial injustice. Doing so, however, would violate Wisconsin law.

The letter notes that state law mandates that districts must specifically teach about human relations with a focus on American Indians, Black Americans, and Hispanics at all grade levels, teach students to understand and appreciate history and society from various cultural perspectives, provide anti-racist programming if there are systemic problems with racism and harassment in schools, and provide programming that is culturally relevant to students of color.

“Ample research supports the proposition that culturally responsive pedagogy — i.e., teaching practices that affirm students’ social and cultural histories — plays a critical role in improving learning outcomes for students of color, and many Wisconsin school districts have made culturally responsive teaching a core component of their efforts to combat racial achievement gaps,” the letter states.

“Districts must continue to use appropriate strategies to ensure they are providing their students of color an equal opportunity for a sound basic education.”

“Teaching students about the history of race, as well as its impact on the present, is not harmful. Our state law makes clear that students need to learn the full and diverse range of American history and current events so they can engage effectively with the world around them,” said Elisabeth Lambert, staff attorney with the ACLU of Wisconsin. “Districts that attempt to suppress discussions of race in the classroom by stirring up baseless fears about Critical Race Theory are setting a very dangerous precedent — one that could lead to whitewashing American history even more than it already is.”

“Race education is essential to reckoning with our nation’s history and dismantling the institution of white supremacy that has gripped the United States since its founding. Conversations about race can serve as a necessary form of historical truth-telling that provides young people with a more honest depiction of our past, and we should be teaching about race more, not less,” Lambert said.