

# Teachers' Unions Vow to Defend Members in Critical Race Theory Fight



*In this photo illustration, Randi Weingarten, the president of the American Federation of Teachers, left, and Becky Pringle, the president of the National Education Association, right.*

*Courtesy photos*

As the debate over critical race theory and schools reaches a fever pitch, the two national teachers' unions are entering the fray, vowing to defend their members against any backlash over how they teach about the nation's complicated history with race and racism.

Both unions have presented a single underlying message: Teachers must be honest about racial injustices so that students learn to think critically about how the country's problematic past has shaped its present. Any efforts to restrict those conversations in the classroom, the unions say, are akin to censorship.

"The backlash [to teaching about race] that you see in these radicalized circles is going to hurt kids," said American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten in an interview. "I felt the need to make it crystal clear to teachers ...

that I honor their professional responsibilities and that their union will have their back.”

Already, [26 states have introduced bills or taken other steps](#)

to limit how teachers can discuss racism in the classroom, and nine states have enacted restrictions. Many right-leaning policymakers have said they’re trying to keep critical race theory, referring to an academic philosophy that says racism is embedded in legal systems and policies, out of K-12 schools. Critical race theory, which emerged out of a framework for legal analysis more than 40 years ago, has become highly politicized, and experts say that any efforts by the unions to support its use in the classroom will be met by attacks from conservative groups.

Weingarten has already taken steps to distance her union from the divisive rhetoric, telling her members Tuesday that critical race theory isn’t taught in K-12 schools, but that “culture warriors are labeling any discussion of race, racism, or discrimination as CRT to try to make it toxic.”

National Education Association President Becky Pringle has avoided using the term critical race theory in interviews, instead calling for educators to teach the truth about the most painful parts of American history. But at the NEA’s representative assembly, held virtually last week, union delegates passed several measures that explicitly support the use of critical race theory in curriculum and allocated tens of thousands of dollars to those efforts.

One such measure, introduced by the NEA’s board of directors, said the nation’s largest teachers’ union will support and lead campaigns that “result in increasing the implementation of culturally responsive education, critical race theory, and ethnic ... studies curriculum in pre-K-12 and higher education.” The measure is part of a larger \$675,000 effort to “eradicate institutional racism” in public schools.

NEA delegates also adopted a \$56,500 measure to “research the organizations attacking educators doing anti-racist work” so that members are prepared to respond. The conservative Heritage Foundation, which was named in that

measure, [responded by](#)

[saying](#)

[critical race theory](#)

is a Marxist idea that “the world is divided between victimizers and their victims—statuses that are based mostly on race and ethnicity, but other immutable characteristics as well.”

“Do hard-working teachers really want their union dues empowering a political attack machine that wants to scare parents and others, including teachers themselves, who have real concerns about teaching that America is inherently racist or stereotyping students based on their skin color?” Lindsey Burke, the director of Heritage’s center for education policy, and Mike Gonzalez, a senior fellow in Heritage’s center for foreign policy, said in a statement.

Bradley Marianno, a professor of educational policy and higher education at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, said messages like that feed into the broader conservative push to encourage teachers to leave their unions. Ever since [the U.S.](#)

[Supreme Court ruled in 2018](#)

[that](#)

teachers who were not union members didn’t have to contribute to collective

bargaining costs, it's been easier than ever for teachers to cut ties with their unions.

Now, Marianno said, conservative groups can point to messaging from the unions about critical race theory and suggest that any teachers who disagree simply opt out of paying union dues. A recent EdWeek Research Center survey found that nearly a quarter of teachers, principals, and district leaders [do not believe](#)

[systemic racism exists](#), and a third of respondents support legislative efforts to restrict classroom discussions on racism and other controversial issues.

## Unions are preparing for legal fights

The national unions are now starting to organize their legal response to protect educators who might be punished for how they discuss racism with their students.

Some of the state laws specify consequences for teachers who break them: New Hampshire says that anybody, including the attorney general, can sue a school or district for [violating new guidelines](#)

on how teachers can discuss race, gender, and other identity characteristics in the classroom. Also, a teacher who is found to have violated the law could receive a disciplinary sanction by the state board of education. (An Arizona bill would have gone one step further and [fined](#)

[individual teachers \\$5,000](#) for promoting only one side of a controversial issue, but that bill failed to pass the state senate.)

“Mark my words: Our union will defend any member who gets in trouble for teaching honest history,” Weingarten said in a speech Tuesday. “Teaching the truth is not radical or wrong. Distorting history and threatening educators for telling the truth is what is truly radical and wrong.”

In an interview, Weingarten said some of the laws are so broad that they undermine the required state standards for instruction. The union plans to seek some clarification there, possibly in court. AFT has also put additional resources in its legal defense fund.

“There are constitutional scholars that are looking at these laws,” Weingarten said. “I’m just trying to make sure that teachers can teach the constitution.”

Daniel Santos, the executive vice president of the Houston Federation of Teachers, an affiliate of AFT, said he applauds Weingarten’s decision to set up a legal fund to protect teachers. Texas [has a new law on the books](#)

that requires teachers to give contending perspectives for controversial issues and says teachers must not say that slavery and racism are anything other than deviations from the authentic founding principles of the United States.

“I think it’s irresponsible for me, as a teacher, to comply with that law,” said Santos, who teaches Texas and U.S. history at Yolanda Black Navarro Middle School in Houston. “I do suspect that we may have to use that fund because teachers have already made that commitment.”

Pringle said in an interview that the NEA is analyzing the laws that have passed to fully understand their “depth and breadth” before pursuing any possible litigation.

“We’re just going to leave every avenue open,” she said. “We will defend our educators’ right to teach the truth.”

## ‘I felt like the bullies were winning’

Kumar Rashad, a high school math teacher in Louisville, Ky., and an NEA delegate, said he wished his national union had taken a stronger stance against the efforts to restrict classroom discussions of racism earlier on. States began introducing legislation on classroom discussions about racism [as early as](#)

### February and March

Even so, he was pleased with the action taken at the representative assembly, including the passage of his own \$127,600 measure, which will have the NEA publicize information on critical race theory—including “what it is and what it is not”—and convey that it is “reasonable and appropriate” for curriculum to be informed by that academic framework.

“This is a giant step forward,” he said. “This is standing up against the bullies, and we needed to do that because I felt like the bullies were winning.”

Much of the teachers’ unions’ role in this debate thus far has been at the state and local level, where the action against critical race theory is, Marianno said.

Officials from local and state teachers’ unions have testified against bills to place restrictions on what teachers can say in the classroom and have participated in similar discussions at school boards. For example, the Texas branch of the AFT “fought hard” against the bill on social studies curriculum, Santos said, but its passage was “inevitable,” given the Republican majority in the statehouse.

“What the NEA has done [with the approved measures] is given locals an avenue to pursue a more forceful response in these conversations around the teaching of critical race theory,” Marianno said. “They may open up some funds to state

affiliates to pursue litigation, but largely they're just setting the direction and leaving it up to the local and state affiliates to really pursue action.”

Pringle of the NEA said this fight over how to teach history is simply the latest attempt by conservatives to sow division and to distract from the fact that state legislatures have not equitably funded schools.

“We've been fighting that for certainly as long as I have been a leader within NEA,” she said in an interview. “And every time they attempt to bring up some other way to divide us, and to stoke fear and to take [away] that light shining on them and what their failures have been, we will be there to call it out, to speak up, and to fight back.”