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Viewpoint: Stop the assault on public education and democracy

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Black, Indigenous and other people of color's persistent lack of access to quality education, health care and housing make it clear that discussion of race in school is appropriate. After all, race shapes our daily experiences. Still, much debate has focused on how schools should discuss race, racism and the nation's history, especially the proper emphasis of social studies and civics.

Indiana's Attorney General Todd Rokita co-signed a letter with 20 attorneys general, imploring U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona to eliminate initiatives that focus on race. The secretary has offered \$5 million in grant funding that teachers can apply for in an overall budget of \$75 billion for education. Sixteen of the 20 states represented by the signees are at the bottom 50% in the nation for funding of public schools. Six of those states are in the bottom 10 out of 50 states and the District of Columbia.

The overall funding to support the teaching of social studies and civics is quite modest and will have a limited impact on the nation's schools. However, Rokita indicates that reframing history through what is ambiguously described as critical race theory will co-opt America's traditional U.S. history and civics curriculum. However, his version of critical race theory does not exist.

For decades, scholars have argued that critical race theory provides important tools to understand the slow pace and unrealized promise of modern civil rights legislation; explains that race and racism perpetuate inequality; centers the voices of black, Indigenous and other people of color; challenges dominant narratives about meritocracy and how deficit theories of teaching and learning serve as barriers to students flourishing in school; and provides a vision of justice through social action.

Rokita's position is a thinly veiled attack masquerading as an argument. The letter

dismisses the New York Times 1619 project as “factually deficient history.” Rokita makes the unsupported argument that the 1619 curriculum “would lead to racial and ethnic division” and “do little to promote civics instruction.”

The attorney general also worries that federally supported grant initiatives would undermine the Every Student Succeeds Act, which sought to “improve the quality of teaching of (traditional) American history.” How this will occur is simply glossed over. For that matter, Rokita fails to explain how the secretary of education’s priorities “would cause lower performing schools to continue to fail students of color, students with disabilities and students in poverty through teaching revisionist history.”

Ironically, the letter is dated just two days after the 67th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, a decision that promised equality of opportunity by overturning “separate but equal” and triggered a revolution in civil rights law. Yet the attorney general fails to mention this historical moment, while also expressing concern for students of color. He simply asks why race is a necessary component of teaching in a post-pandemic era. After all, students have fallen behind, he argues. So why not just focus on literacy? Why focus on our nation’s racial history?

Rokita overlooks how reading, writing and thinking critically are one and the same in the study of social studies and civics. Literacy is at the heart of everything we teach. A more inclusive study of social studies and civics can, as Ibram X. Kendi observes, “create learning experiences that validate and reflect the diversity, identities, histories, contributions and experiences of all students.” Students need to see the world through the windows of historical accounts, but also understand history in ways that mirror who they are.

The letter appears to reflect a nation’s fear of facing its racial past. In a report card published by Learning for Justice, 78% of the 50 states in our nation received “C,” “D” or “F” in teaching the modern civil rights movement. This is true of 75% of the states represented by the signees. The civil rights movement is a significant, yet neglected, period of history that underscores the rule of law and order in areas of voting rights, labor, education, housing, health, employment, disability and gay rights. We live at a time, however, when some would challenge the advances of the civil rights movement.

A wave of legislation threatens to limit how race is taught in schools. However, a more inclusive study of social studies, civics and other subjects is essential for an educated

citizenry in a functioning democracy. Challenging the dominant story of the U.S. can enrich what students learn about themselves and others.

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