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A reckoning and our collective will

*Why we must teach about race and racism - the first in a series of editorials
by State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly on equity, inclusion, and diversity*

Critical race theory is an academic lens used in higher education to examine history and law; as such, is not a subject being taught in K-12 schools. However, in the current political landscape, CRT has come to mean something very different: any lesson that criticizes racism; anytime a teacher talks about race in the classroom; honestly, any topic that makes adults feel uncomfortable. And that's a problem. It's a problem because we should criticize racism. We have to talk about race. And yes, deep conversation about both of these topics is likely to make people uncomfortable. To be honest, these conversations sometimes make me uncomfortable. And that's a good thing, because it means I'm learning and building my understanding of race and racism, and that makes me a better state superintendent. And I want our children, mine included, to know what systemic racism is because they will be more equipped to make our state and our nation not systemically racist.

The question has been, "Are we teaching CRT in our K-12 classrooms?" and the honest answer is no, we are not teaching an academic theory that originated and belongs in university seminars. But if what you're actually asking is, "Are we teaching students about race and racism?" then the answer is and should be yes. To do anything else would be a blatant disregard for the truth of our country's history and an erasure of the lived experience of our students. Teaching about race and racism is the only way to teach the complete story of the United States. As Dr. Clint Smith wrote in *How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning with the History of Slavery Across America*, "At some point it is no longer a question of whether we can learn this history but whether we have the collective will to reckon with it."¹ I believe we have the collective will. We must work together – families, teachers, school boards, students, and communities – to reckon with our understanding of race and racism. I believe we have no other choice but to teach about it and learn from it if

(more)

¹ Clint Smith, *How the Word is Passed: a reckoning with the history of slavery across America* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 2021), 290.

we want to protect the strength of our state and nation. Teaching about race and racism is essential, it is culturally relevant, it is good teaching, and saying otherwise is not only problematic, it's racist.

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NOTE: A headshot for publication of State Superintendent Dr. Jill Underly is available online [here on the DPI's website](#). This guest editorial is available online [here on the DPI's website](#).