

## Washington Update, May 21, 2021

Dear Colleagues,

We offer two rather distressing summaries today – about how the teaching of our nation’s racial history has been thrown into the heart of the political arena and the mental health crisis of our young people and our educators. We hope these stories will revitalize your advocacy energy. We need to be at the table, not on the menu.

### 1. States Placing Legal Limits on How Educators Can Address Race

On the heels of Rep. Virginia Foxx (R-NC), the top Republican on the House Education and Labor Committee, [backing two bills](#) aimed at blocking the teaching of critical race theory in K-12 schools—four states have now [passed legislation](#) that would limit how teachers can discuss racism and sexism, among other topics. The legislation, passed so far in Idaho, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Tennessee, bans teachers from introducing certain concepts, including: that any individual is consciously or unconsciously racist or sexist because of their race or sex, and that anyone should feel discomfort or guilt because of their race or sex. A similar law also passed in Arkansas. In total, lawmakers in at least 15 states have introduced bills that seek to restrict how teachers can discuss racism, sexism, and other social issues.

In Arizona, a bill that would fine teachers \$5,000 for promoting one side of a controversial issue just passed the House. Texas lawmakers are considering a bill that would ban schools from giving course credit for internships in social or public policy advocacy, as well as limit how teachers discuss controversial issues; this bill has passed the House. In Missouri, proposed legislation would ban the use of specific resources, including the [1619 Project](#), Learning for Justice Curriculum of the Southern Poverty Law Center, [Black Lives Matter at School](#), Teaching for Change, and the Zinn Education Project.

Opponents—including many teachers—say they fear such legislation will stifle discussion of how racism and sexism have shaped the country’s history and continue to effect it by threatening educators with the possibility of legal action. Scholars of critical race theory have said that the laws [mischaracterize the framework](#). Underscoring this political battle is the action of the University of North Carolina’s Board of Trustees who took the highly unusual step of failing to approve the recommendation of the department of journalism to grant tenure to [Nikole Hannah-Jones](#), the Pulitzer Prize-winning writer for The New York Times Magazine who was integral to the 1619 Project.

The legislation, all introduced by Republican lawmakers, uses similar language to an executive order former President Trump put in place to ban diversity training for federal workers. The order has since been rescinded by President Biden.

## 2. Student and Educator Mental Health Concerns Rising

The Biden administration and teachers unions are [mounting a campaign](#) to return American children to classrooms five days a week. "Nothing should stand in the way of fully reopening our public schools this fall and keeping them open," said Randi Weingarten, American Federation of Teachers president, in a [speech last week](#) . But she also emphasized that the full return won't be as easy as reopening the school gates. Educators will have to address students' emotional needs on top of their academic setbacks.

The prolonged isolation kids across the nation endured during the pandemic has exacerbated their need for [social and emotional support](#). From April through October, the number of children ages 5 to 11 who were sent to a hospital emergency room due to a mental health crisis spiked by 24 percent compared to 2019, the CDC reported. For 12- to 17-year-olds, that was a 31 percent jump. Suicide is the second-leading cause of death for 10- to 34-year-olds, according to the CDC.

Teachers are also exhausted from trying to engage their students through a screen. And almost half of principals said pandemic working conditions were "accelerating their plans to leave the profession," according to a poll from the [National Association of Secondary School Principals](#) .

As the school year comes to a close and focus turns to the next academic year, lawmakers and education groups are urging Congress and the Biden administration to ensure that schools have the resources to meet their students' most urgent social and emotional needs when they do at last return. Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto (D-NV.), plans to send a letter calling on Congressional appropriators to invest \$500 million in mental health grants programs. The Senator said she will request \$250 million for the Mental Health Services Professional Demonstration grant program and another \$250 million for the School Based Mental Health Services grant program, both of which help increase the number of mental health service providers in schools.

Policy advisors and mental health professionals alike are urging the Biden administration to tell schools that student mental health is a high priority. Meghan McCann, senior policy analyst at the Education Commission of the States, said that the pandemic put "spotlights on social and emotional learning and mental health and wellness in school reopening plans last spring and summer." During summer 2020, the Commission found, at least 43 states specifically addressed health [social/ emotional learning and mental health](#) in their reopening plan guidance for districts.

## 3. Professional Development Opportunity

The Council for Exceptional Children and the Council for Administrators of Special Education are sponsoring the annual *Special Education Legislative Summit (SELS)*. The convening will be held virtually the week of July 19-23. It will feature town hall events with policy experts and Capitol Hill veterans, presentations by experts on key issues such

as mental health and the shortage of special educators, and opportunities to engage directly with your Congressional delegation.

This event is free and open to the public. You can [register here](#).

#### 4. New Resources for Educators

- [Marc Tucker, senior fellow of the National Center on Education and the Economy](#) examines how funds from the American Rescue Plan Act can reshape the education system in America.
- [Education Week](#) is out with a special report highlighting the need for change in teacher preparation programs as a result of remote learning. Teachers may now need a unique skillset that is not commonly addressed in many current teacher preparation programs.
- [The 74](#) is taking an early look at how school districts plan to spend the American Rescue Plan Act dollars – early reporting suggests a lack of emphasis on learning recovery.
- The disability advocacy organization [Understood](#) is out with a new report examining how schooling changes, as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, have led to behavioral concerns for many elementary school students.
- [The Learning Policy Institute](#) released a new blog, as part of their series on Education and the Path to Equity, that looks at Brown v. Board of Education and the promise of federal policy.

Wishing you a peaceful weekend.

Best,

Jane and Kait

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