


EDITORIAL

Between Recent Political Controversies and Long-Standing Education Histories

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In recent years, the US has experienced a spate of political controversies that have sent shockwaves across the educational system. A handful of the most challenging ones began appearing at almost the same time.

Since the end of 2019, schools, colleges, and universities have been swept up in heated debates over how to handle the intractable global pandemic. Politicians across the country approached the public health issue from widely divergent values and belief systems. Some states encouraged educational institutions to follow nationally recommended public health policies; other states banned these same policies, making their enforcement a punishable offense.¹

Following almost the same timeline, the *New York Times* and Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones sparked a political firestorm over the publication of the “1619 Project.” While the country’s educators began settling into a long-haul pandemic, this collection of essays encouraged a re-centering of US history through the lens of slavery and racism. Some politicians called it “powerful” and “necessary”; others referred to it as “brainwashing” and “propaganda.” The controversy polarized schools in the US and abroad, and it complicated Hannah-Jones’s bid for a tenured position at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.²

Adding to these challenging public debates came a political and media frenzy over critical race theory. This long-standing theory, which originated in legal studies during the 1980s and 1990s, has explored the influence of racism on public policy and the law. Since then, scholars from across the disciplinary spectrum have used this theoretical perspective to identify racism as a systemic and structural problem rather than an isolated or individual phenomenon. Although several decades old and largely

¹Kristin Lunz Trujillo et al., “The COVID States Project #69: Student Attitudes about University COVID-19 Policies,” OSF Preprints, Nov. 16, 2021, doi:10.31219/osf.io/dtxv3; Scott Jaschik, “Kansas AG: Universities Are Violating Law on COVID-19 Vaccine Exemptions,” *Inside Higher Education*, Dec. 1, 2021; Patricia Mazzei, “As G.O.P. Fights Mask and Vaccine Mandates, Florida Takes the Lead,” *New York Times*, Nov. 19, 2021, A13(L); and Edgar Sandoval and Giulia Heyward, “Texas Hospitals Are Full. Doctors Are ‘Frightened’ by What’s Next,” *New York Times*, Aug. 12, 2021, A13.

²Nicole Hannah-Jones et al., “1619,” *New York Times Magazine*, Aug. 18, 2019, 4–93; J. Brian Charles, “The New York Times 1619 Project Is Reshaping the Conversation on Slavery. Conservatives Hate It,” *Vox*, Aug. 20, 2019; and Jack Stripling, “‘What the Hell Happened?’ Inside the Nikole Hannah-Jones Tenure Case,” *Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 11, 2021, 10–17.

confined to graduate schools, the theory has received a sudden avalanche of attention. It has been cast by its opponents as a socially and politically divisive tool used by K-12 teachers—a view that has inspired thirty-six US states to introduce bills or measures banning critical race theory and other so-called “divisive” concepts.³

What these political controversies have in common is the way they cut across all levels of education and raise fundamental questions about the rights and responsibilities of educators and educational institutions. Such questions concern what and how educators teach, the way they organize to assert themselves, and the important distinctions that exist between public and private interests at the institutional level.

This issue of *HEQ* suggests that these kinds of controversies aren’t new. Insofar as that is the case, it highlights disagreements and dilemmas that have arisen repeatedly over time. And more importantly, it helps us see the present in new ways through timeless questions faced by each generation.

Whose history should be taught? In her Barnard Prize-winning essay, “The Intellectual Emancipation of the Negro’: Madeline Morgan and the Mandatory Black History Curriculum in Chicago during World War II,” Ashley Dennis explores the aim of representational diversity in one of its earliest incarnations. At nearly a century old, this effort at curricular inclusion reminds us of how present political controversies are part of a much longer and ongoing struggle.

What should the role of the public be in public education? In “The Fight for a Public University in Boston: Rethinking the Public-Private Divide,” Cristina Groeger examines the thin but important line between two different approaches to governance. At a time when state support for higher education continues a multi-decade pattern of decline in the US, the rationale for establishing public universities explored in this study returns our attention to the many purposes of public institutions.

What does it mean to educate explicitly for the purpose of social change? In “Highlander School and Civil Rights Pedagogies,” Nico Slate identifies different visions of what it means to prepare activists. Contemporary critics have contrasted the Black Lives Matter movement with the presumably more peaceful and disciplined activists of the civil rights era. Yet some of these comparisons, when juxtaposed with the Highlander School, appear ahistorical in nature—overlooking the rich complexity of the past.

What is the appropriate role of educators and their unions? In “The Founding of Education International,” Harry Smaller looks at the teacher labor movement from a transnational perspective and finds that national and international politics are key in answering this question. As organized labor in the US begins to make new gains after decades of retreat, such scholarship can not only help us better understand the present, but also make informed guesses about the future.

This issue also includes a policy dialogue that addresses another contemporary controversy—one about the latest installment of the history wars. It probes questions involving what educators should teach about America’s past, how critical those

³Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate, “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” *Teachers College Record* 97 (Fall 1995), 47–68; “Map: Where Critical Race Theory Is Under Attack,” *Education Week*, Jan. 11, 2021, updated Jan. 31, 2022, <https://www.edweek.org/policy-politics/map-where-critical-race-theory-is-under-attack/2021/06>. Note: this page is updated when new information becomes available.

history lessons should be, what values should take center stage, and, ultimately, who gets to make these decisions. These, too, are old dilemmas, and we turn to two experts—Donnalie Jamnah and Jonathan Zimmerman—to make sense of today’s debate in the context of more than a century of history. Jamnah is the K-12 Partnerships Manager for the Pulitzer Center’s education team and manager of the 1619 Educator Network. Zimmerman is the Judy and Howard Berkowitz Professor in Education at the University of Pennsylvania and the author of *Whose America? Culture Wars in the Public Schools*.

Collectively, the articles and policy dialogue in this issue remind us of the interplay between past and present. They give us a timely, historical perspective on the kinds of challenges that might appear today as wholly new. In doing so, they offer an escape from the tyranny of the present, by reminding us of where our current challenges came from and how the past continues to shape our present-day context.