

Understanding the difference between critical race theory and educational equity

What you need to know

People are asking questions about critical race theory and public schools. Here is some information designed to help you manage questions you might receive on this issue.

The terms critical race theory and educational equity are not the same and should not be used interchangeably.

First, let's consider what critical race theory is.

What it is

Critical race theory (CRT) is a framework and/or analytical tool primarily used in university-level courses. Originating in the 1970s, CRT was first used as a way to help law students think critically about the impact of historical and present-day racism on the legal system. In the 1990s, some colleges of education also started incorporating CRT into their course work to help aspiring school administrators and teachers better understand inequities in the context of education.

Next, let's look at educational equity.

What it is

Educational equity is a **K-12 term referring to federal and state policies and requirements.**

Specifically, the term “educational equity” is closely associated with the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation that was led by former President George W. Bush and signed into law in 2002. This watershed moment in U.S. education policy established clear requirements for school districts to disaggregate achievement data by student groups as a way to address and close achievement gaps.

Additionally, in recent years, the terms **equity work** or **diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI)** have become commonplace in K-12 education as many districts revisit and renew their local efforts to close achievement gaps as required by the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). When signed into law in 2015, ESSA further advanced equity in U.S. education policy by upholding important protections outlined in NCLB. At the same time, it granted flexibility to states in exchange for rigorous and comprehensive state-developed plans designed to close achievement gaps, increase equity, improve the quality of instruction and increase outcomes for all students.

Critical race theory (CRT)

A discipline and analytical tool primarily used in university-level coursework



Educational equity

K-12 national education policy

