

Freedom to learn

Speaking out for honest lessons and safe schools for all students

Most Minnesotans feel there's something deeply wrong about the national campaign to put students in the middle of an election-year culture war. Whether the buzzwords are "critical race theory," "transparency," or "gender ideologies," it's part of a methodical effort to divide and distract from what most of us think is important.

We believe all students should feel welcome and safe in their schools, no matter what they look like, where they're from, or who they love. They should have access to caring, professional educators. Those educators need to teach lessons about the role of racism in history and society that will allow our children to overcome the mistakes of our shared past. And we want our educators to prepare students with the knowledge and skills they will need to succeed after high school, including the ability to think critically and relate to all kinds of Minnesotans.

The campaign to deprive our students of their freedom to learn is deceptive and toxic, but potent. The big money behind the think tanks and politicians trying to whitewash history could overwhelm our efforts to provide fully funded schools, a fair return for our work and quality health care for our loved ones. The goal is to distract and deflect the popular demand for the wealthiest corporations to finally pay what they truly owe to our communities in taxes.

This document is part of a series of handouts intended to equip you to speak and write with confidence on behalf of students and educators. The recommendations are based on time-tested best practices, deep public opinion research, or both.

When it comes to public schools, recent polling shows **Minnesotans** want a few simple things from their elected representatives right now:

- Solve the teacher shortage— the top priority.
- Hire counselors, social workers and similar professionals to improve the mental health of students and staff.
- Preserve teachers' freedom to teach age-appropriate lessons on racism and cultural diversity.

When it comes to education, Minnesota voters strongly **oppose**:

- Efforts to ban books on Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights Movement.
- Any laws or rules to deny children our full American history, particularly around issues of slavery and racism. Most Minnesotans want students to learn from the past.
- Bringing the culture war into their kids' classrooms.

The top three things **Americans** as a whole want from public schools:


- Teach the skills, including critical thinking skills, student will need to pursue jobs and careers.
- Help students learn from mistakes, especially in the context of history, in order to navigate challenges and create a better future for everyone.
- Ensure the children in families struggling to make ends meet can get the same education as children in wealthy families.

We can combine what most Minnesotans want from their public schools with educators' own expertise in teaching and their own experiences in schools. Here are some sample narratives, which are followed by some more general messaging advice.

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THE VOICE FOR PROFESSIONAL
EDUCATORS AND STUDENTS

Sample narratives

Freedom to Learn/Critical Race Theory

All students deserve the freedom to learn an honest history of our nation, both the good and the bad, so they can learn from our mistakes and create a better future for all Minnesotans. But certain politicians and national big money groups are trying to turn us against schools, deny them the funding they need, and ban books that provide accurate, age-appropriate lessons about the role of race, gender and civil rights in America. With the backing of a few greedy billionaires, they're trying to distract Minnesotans, censor our children's education, and divide us by how we look, where we live, and who we love. The billionaires and CEOs know that if we join together, we will make the wealthiest corporations finally pay what they owe in taxes, so our communities and our schools have the resources they need. It's time to reject the lies and support leaders who will protect our children's freedom to learn the lessons they need to live and lead in a multicultural, multiracial Minnesota.

Advocating for ethnic studies

All students deserve the freedom to learn an honest history of our nation, both the good and the bad, so they can learn from our mistakes and create a better future for all Minnesotans. But certain politicians and some national big money groups are trying to turn Minnesotans against their teachers, deny them the funding they need, and ban accurate, age-appropriate lessons about the role of racism, gender and civil rights in America. Minnesota students need ethnic studies to develop their critical thinking skills and prepare them to live and lead in the multicultural, multiracial Minnesota they will inherit someday. Instead of putting our students in the middle of an election-year culture war, let's work together to give every student, everywhere, access to a caring teacher and a professional counselor in a fully funded school.

Curriculum transparency and micromanaging teachers

We need to listen to parents and teachers because our public schools work best when parents and teachers collaborate on what children need, no matter where those children learn or what they look like. Forcing teachers to post lesson plans months in advance, creating hotlines to report teachers, creating the possibility of lawsuits just for doing their job, and even putting cameras in classrooms will have a devastating effect on the teaching profession. We should oppose these additional burdens and threats because it will force passionate teachers out of the profession. Instead of letting certain politicians put our students in the middle of a culture war, let's work together to give every student, everywhere, access to a caring teacher in a fully funded school.

Scapegoating LGBTQ+ students¹

Whether we are Black, white or brown, Native or newcomer, transgender or not, we want our kids to have the freedom to be themselves and pursue their dreams. But certain politicians try to get and hold onto power by putting us in boxes based on what we look like, where we're from, or our genders. They fuel divisions between us, denying Black and brown kids opportunities in underfunded schools, passing laws to erase our history of coming together—from Selma to Stonewall — and exploiting lack of familiarity with transgender people to exclude transgender kids from health care, school and sports. By speaking out for welcoming, honest, and fully funded education, we can make our schools places where children of all races and genders are free to learn all that they – and our country – have the potential to be.

General messaging guidance for parents and other education allies

1. State your values around public education for every Minnesota student, no matter what they look like or where they live. Your values are widely shared in your community.
2. Say why you want students to learn to think critically about race and gender, or why it's important to you for all students to feel safe and welcome in their schools.
3. Say how the attacks on school curriculum and equity policies violate the values you articulated in steps 1 and 2.
4. Describe your vision for the schools you want in your community and what changes we should be talking about to get there, instead of the paranoid fantasies about CRT, etc.
5. While we call out the opposition and their intentions, don't reiterate their arguments or talking points. We focus on our values and vision for our schools and communities.

General messaging guidance for educators

1. Articulate the values that brought you into public education.
2. Say what you truly teach about race and/or gender in school.
3. Explain how it benefits all your students.
4. Say why it matters to your students' future success in life, whoever you define it.
5. While we call out the opposition and their intentions, don't reiterate their arguments or talking points. We focus on our values and vision for our schools and communities.

To receive updated messaging guidance as it becomes available, or to request training for your group, sign on the Education Minnesota website here: www.educationminnesota.org/advocacy/racial-and-social-justice/freedom-to-learn.

¹For a full description of the research for this narrative, and alternate versions, see "Winning Against Right-Wing Scapegoating on Race and Trans Youth" by ASO Communications, Transgender Law Center and Lake Research Partners. <https://www.asocommunications.com/messaging-guides>