



Course Correction: Teaching Critical Consciousness in an Anti-CRT State¹

BRIEF-CASE

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Adaptation by Sara O’Brien

<https://justiceinschools.org>

Setting	
Heath Middle School (ages 11-14) in the United States	
Primary Characters	
<p>Daniel Semere: Principal, co-creator of the Critical Consciousness course</p> <p>Sally Bruce: Veteran teacher, co-creator of the 6th-grade Critical Consciousness course</p> <p>Gabby Lewis: Literacy teacher</p>	<p>Brian Hennessey: Social studies teacher</p> <p>Mrs. Peterson: Parent of Carly, a 6th-grade student</p> <p>Nicky: 6th-grade student</p> <p>Reggie: 6th-grade student</p> <p>Janie Hopkins: Social studies teacher</p>

For the past few years, Heath Middle School has run a three-week elective course for sixth graders called Critical Consciousness, co-designed by Principal Daniele Semere. Developed using both the state standards and Learning for Justice standards, the course helps students to think critically about systems of power and privilege and to take steps to redress inequities created by those systems. Since the course started running, the school’s climate surveys have shown significant improvement in belonging for students marginalized by race and gender. Of course, it hasn’t been popular with everyone; Daniel has fielded numerous complaints, including one from a parent frustrated that the presentation gay marriage as a legal victory conflicts with the religious values her daughter is learning at home. Still, as a Black man committed to equity work, Daniel is proud of the impact the course has had.

But the future of the course is now uncertain. The state recently passed a new law forbidding schools from teaching that “the United States and the state is fundamentally or systematically racist or sexist”—which some teachers and parents have interpreted as banning any teaching about institutional racism. The law also outlaws teaching students to feel “discomfort [...] on account of [their] race or sex”—a difficult feeling to avoid in a course about power, privilege, and systemic advantage and disadvantage. Given the political climate, the new superintendent in Heath has put equity work in the district “on hold.”

To make matters worse, Daniel just found out that the Critical Consciousness teacher is leaving for a new job working at the local university. She had already received one parent complaint, which could lead to a challenge against her teaching license. Given her departure and the new law, Daniel is uncertain whether to offer the course again next fall.

¹ For the full case study, visit <https://www.justiceinschools.org/course-correction> or Levinson, Meira, Ellis Reid, Sara O’Brien, and Tatiana Geron, eds. *Civic Contestation in Global Education: Cases and Commentaries in Educational Ethics*. Bloomsbury, 2024, Ch. 6.

While there are teachers at the school who support the course—one teacher tells him that the course is critical in helping kids unpack the injustices they face personally and see all around them—nobody has volunteered to teach it. More than one teacher has told Daniel that they fear losing their license and that taking over the course would put “a target on their back.” While one teacher floated the idea of dispersing the course content into other courses, Daniel worries the materials might not be used with fidelity and may lose their impact if diluted in that way. Many teachers are not prepared to teach a social justice curriculum. He also worries that his own license may be challenged or even revoked if the course draws complaints.

Yet all around him, Daniel sees signs that the course is having a positive impact, from a queer student who wrote that “the course saved [their] life” to the Black students who finally have language to name the microaggressions perpetrated by their peers and teachers alike.

Does offering the course next year bring too many risks? Is there a safe way to keep the content without the course? Is Daniel better off finding another district where he could do equity work with institutional support? What should Daniel do?

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