HARVARD
GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

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

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In the early 2020s, state lawmakers across the United States introduced legislation designed to target certain approaches to teaching about race and racism and other topics related to diversity, equity, and inclusion in K-12 schooling. Between January 2021 and January 2023, forty-four U.S. states introduced or passed such legislation, often banning the teaching of supposedly "divisive concepts" related to race and gender. The language in most of these bills echoed an executive order issued by former President Donald Trump in September 2020. Across the country, the new legislation created uncertainty for many educators, who reported that the laws had a "chilling effect on teaching lessons related to race and racism," contributing to a "[struggle] to provide historical context for current events." This case is rooted in research on the impact of these laws nationally and the experiences of two of the case's authors, who worked as educators and researchers in a state with such a law. The case explores the consequences of this raft of legislation on students, teachers, and school leaders, and the ways in which differences in identity can differentially shape the effects of these laws and the ways they are experienced.

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

"Daniel, do you have a minute?"

Principal Daniel Semere looked up to see Sally Bruce standing in his office doorway at Heath Middle School. Smiling, he motioned for her to sit. The opening bell wouldn't ring for another twenty minutes, so they had time for the conversation Daniel worried was coming.

"I heard back from State," Sally began. "They offered me the position, and I'm going to take it."

Daniel's heart sank. Sally Bruce only worked half time at HMS, but she was an integral part of the team. A White teacher with two decades of experience, Sally taught the sixth-grade Critical Consciousness course, a recent addition to the curriculum designed both to help students think critically about how power and privilege systematically advantage some while disadvantaging others and to help them take action to redress inequities. Sally and Daniel had built the three-week elective course using materials

from the Learning for Justice Standards with content anchored to the state-adopted Social Studies and Language Arts standards. In Sally's capable hands, the course was a game-changer for students marginalized by race and gender, as the school's recent climate survey showed.

Now the course's future was in doubt, and not just because of Sally's departure to teach pre-service teachers at the local university. For months Daniel and Sally had been wrestling with the future of the course given increasing pushback within the district. Irate parents had been filing complaints against the licenses of any teachers they believed were filling students' heads with "anti-American beliefs." Sally had already received one complaint, which she jokingly called her "badge of honor."

Daniel fully shared her commitment to the course. As a Black man who had been born in a refugee camp in Sudan and immigrated to the United States as a child, Daniel had a personal and professional stake in creating racially inclusive schools. He'd come to the district specifically to help make equity a reality there, having been handpicked to lead HMS by the previous superintendent, who championed equity work at all levels across the district and put the district's equity plan into action.

But the superintendent had resigned from her position just weeks before, amidst pressure from groups like Heath Parents for Education (HPE), who were up in arms about what they saw as "indoctrination" in the district. The new interim superintendent had already told Daniel that the district was putting equity work on hold in light of the complaints. Now Daniel found himself as the only Black administrator in Heath, trying to decide how much he was willing to risk to continue the work with reduced district support.

To make matters worse, the governor had just signed a law, which forbade schools from teaching that "the United States and the state is fundamentally or systemically racist or sexist"—a clause that many teachers and parents alike interpreted as banning any teaching about institutional racism or White supremacy. The law also outlawed teaching students to feel "discomfort [...] on account of [their] race or sex"—a difficult feeling to avoid in a course about power, privilege, and systematic advantage and disadvantage.

While it was unclear just how the law would be enforced, many teachers in the district worried that any discussion of race or gender in their courses would leave them vulnerable to complaints—or even legal repercussions. And the Critical Consciousness course had already been flagged as a "matter of concern" on HPE's website. With Sally leaving, the course's future was more uncertain than ever. Whoever took over teaching the course would have a target on their back long before they stepped into the classroom. Could Daniel place one of his teachers in that position? Should he even renew the course for next year?

Pushing these thoughts aside, Daniel turned his attention back to Sally.

"Congratulations!" he enthused. "They couldn't find a better person to work with new teachers."

"Thanks," Sally smiled. "I'm excited, though of course I'm heartbroken, too. I just hate leaving the kids. I brought you some of their work." She held out a paper, covered in purple writing. "It's the identity reflection the students do in the third week of the course. This student wrote about how they never felt school was a welcoming place for queer kids before. They literally wrote: 'This course saved my life.'"

Daniel knew that the course was making a difference—in the recent climate survey, they'd seen a 27% increase in students' perceived physical and psychological safety compared to the year before the course ran. But seeing the student's words in their own handwriting struck him deeply. Could he eliminate a course that was having such a positive impact on the students who most needed to feel supported? But given the backlash and the new law, would he actually be able to keep the course in its current form?

"Thanks for bringing this," Daniel said, handing the paper back to Sally. "We're really going to miss you."

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Later that morning, Daniel popped into the staff room to grab some water. As he filled his bottle, two teachers approached him, their brows furrowed.

"Sally told us about the job at State," Gabrielle Williams began. She was a literacy teacher in her second decade at HMS. She was also one of the few Black teachers at the school and a surrogate mom to many students, Black and White. "Who are you getting to take over her class?"

"Direct as always, Gabby," Daniel laughed. "I wish I knew the answer to that."

"They'll be in for a rough ride," Gabby sighed. "But we spent years trying to get something like that course off the ground. Just because it's ruffling some feathers doesn't mean we should abandon it now."

"I don't mind ruffling feathers," Daniel said. "But this new law is a serious blow."

"It's downright scary," Brian Hennessey affirmed. He was a social studies teacher who frequently collaborated with Gabby. A White man who had grown up in Annapolis, Brian had worked as a community organizer in Chicago before moving back home to start a family. "Honestly, the Critical Consciousness class might be doomed under this law. I've already been wondering whether I'll have to make any changes to my courses. Everything is grounded in the state standards, of course, but will that be enough to keep us from being challenged?"

"I don't think we should make any changes," Gabby protested. "What we're doing is good for kids."

"But teachers are already getting in trouble, and the new law hasn't even taken effect," Brian pointed out. "I know that the complaint against Sally's license didn't influence her decision, but will we find someone else willing to take that risk? I mean, I've got two little ones at home, and my wife's not working. I know I can't afford to lose my license."

"I wouldn't ask you to take on the risk, Brian," Daniel said. "Truthfully, I'm not sure whether I can ask anyone to do it. And I don't want to lose any teachers doing this work."

"But I don't want our kids losing the chance to talk about the systemic challenges that they're facing every day," Gabby insisted. "They're living with all these injustices—racism, sexism, homophobia—on social media, on TV, even in the hallways here! They need help unpacking all that and finding ways to make change."

"Is this one course the only way to do that?" Brian asked. "What if we spread those conversations and projects out into other courses?"

"I know you both would include more social justice curriculum in a heartbeat," Daniel assured him. "But would the curriculum have the same impact if we dilute it that way?"

"And could we be sure everyone would actually teach it?" Gabby added. "If even you, Brian, are wondering if you need to modify what you're teaching, that means a lot of our colleagues won't be willing to touch anything that smacks of social justice." The bell rang, and she gathered up her bag. "I don't envy you, Daniel, making these decisions. Let me know if I can help at all." "Same here," Brian chimed in. "I know how much this work matters."

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Daniel returned to his office to find several insistent phone messages from Mrs. Peterson, parent of a sixth grader. He had already spoken to Mrs. Peterson at the beginning of the school year, when she

called to ask about opting her daughter Carly out of the Critical Consciousness course. However, Carly had balked at the idea of being separated from her friends and sent to study hall instead, so Mrs. Peterson had relented and allowed Carly to take the course. Based on the messages, she regretted that decision. Sighing, Daniel picked up the phone.

“Mrs. Peterson, it’s Daniel Semere from HMS. How are you?”

“I’m angry, Mr. Semere, that’s how I am. I’m wondering why my family is being demonized at your school.”

“I’m surprised to hear that could be happening,” Daniel said. “Can you tell me what you mean?”

“Gladly,” Mrs. Peterson snapped. “Carly came home yesterday to tell me that Christians like us have persecuted homosexuals for centuries. She said that her teacher called the legalization of gay marriage a victory.”

“In the long struggle for gay rights, it’s a huge legal victory,” Daniel agreed.

“Well, to a lot of people it’s not a victory,” Mrs. Peterson argued. “It’s a perversion. Scripture tells us that marriage exists between a man and a woman. There’s no law that’s higher than Scripture.”

“Many people disagree with that, Mrs. Peterson,” Daniel countered. “And the Critical Consciousness course exists to introduce students to new perspectives.”

“And that’s the problem!” Mrs. Peterson exclaimed. “You’ve preached to me before about different perspectives, but you know whose perspective is missing from that class? Mine! If you’re going to teach my daughter about the morality of gay marriage, she deserves to hear both sides of the argument. But she’s not reading or watching anything that promotes good Christian values. She’s reading gay propaganda instead! If you really believe in different perspectives, then put some Christian authors into the syllabus.”

“Mrs. Peterson, you have a right to your beliefs. But I won’t include readings that devalue LGBTQ students and families,” Daniel stated firmly.

“But you have no problem ‘devaluing’ Carly and her religion?” Mrs. Peterson scoffed. “You’re a hypocrite, Mr. Semere, that’s all you are. And I’m going to make sure that no child ever has to sit through your course again. You won’t be indoctrinating kids for much longer.” With that, she ended the call.

Daniel leaned his head back against the chair. It wasn’t the first time he’d been threatened by a parent, and he doubted it would be the last. Would she be filing a complaint against his license? Was the threat more serious? Daniel was weary of weighing threats to his personal and professional safety against the need to support marginalized students and their families. Was renewing the course worth risking his job? His safety? At the same time, how could he claim to be an equity-oriented leader if he wasn’t willing to stand up for a course that truly was helping students understand different perspectives, a course that was helping marginalized students feel safer at school? ***

Late afternoon light streamed into Daniel’s office. He hoped to send just a few more emails before heading home. But he could hear voices coming down the hallway and sensed that he wouldn’t be leaving any time soon.

“Nah, man, we got to tell Mr. Semere about this. It’s not right.”

Two Black sixth-grade boys appeared in Daniel’s doorway, their faces angry. Daniel knew them well. Nicky had been to Daniel’s office several times before, sent by teachers who deemed his outspokenness a “bad attitude.” His friend Reggie was quieter and had never been referred for discipline, but Daniel

always spent time getting to know the incoming students, especially the boys of color. He had been glad to see a close friendship develop between these two.

“What’s wrong?” Daniel asked.

“Ms. Hopkins used the n-word in front of the whole class during 7th period!” Nicky burst out.

Daniel sighed. Janie Hopkins was a White teacher who had only been teaching for two years. Though she was well-meaning, she had a lot to learn about the nuances of culturally responsive teaching. He hadn’t had reports of her using that kind of language previously, though he’d heard similar complaints about other teachers.

“Go on,” he told the boys.

“We were reading the textbook, and she was trying to explain what ‘derogatory’ means,” Reggie began quietly.

“And then she used it as an example! Just said it, out loud, right in front of us!” Nicky interrupted. “And then she just kept talking, like it was no big deal! So I told her, ‘You can’t say that, Ms. Hopkins.’ And she said she didn’t do anything wrong—she was just giving an example! And then Reggie…you tell him, Reggie.”

“So I raised my hand,” Reggie explained, “and I told her that was a microaggression, and Nicky and I and the other Black kids in the class shouldn’t have to hear that word.”

“We just learned about microaggressions with Ms. Bruce,” Nicky put in helpfully.

“So she made me stay after class because she said *I* was being disrespectful.” Reggie’s voice shook and he looked down at his hands. “But *she* was being disrespectful, Mr. Semere.”

“So I stayed with him.” Nicky took up the story. “And we stayed there for 20 minutes and she wouldn’t admit she did anything wrong.”

“I’m sorry, boys,” Daniel told them.

“You’ve got nothing to be sorry about, Mr. Semere,” Nicky said. “It’s Ms. Hopkins who should be sorry, but she’s not. She’s the one who should be taking Ms. Bruce’s class—why are me and Reggie stuck explaining racism to her?”

Daniel had no good answer. The boys already knew that they lived in an unjust world—they didn’t need Daniel to tell them that. For now they needed a sounding board, and not for the first time, Daniel was grateful that he could help Black kids at HMS in this way. Grateful and tired.

“It’s getting late. You should be going home,” he told them. “I’ll take it from here.”

As the boys left, Daniel added a conversation with Ms. Hopkins to his mental to-do list for tomorrow. And again he came back to the Critical Consciousness course, which had clearly resonated with both Nicky and Reggie—further proof of its positive impact. Didn’t that make the course worth fighting for? But then he thought again about listing Sally’s position and placing another teacher in her shoes, facing the possibility of losing their license. And what about the risks he’d be taking on himself? If he lost his license, who would support kids like Reggie and Nicky? But how much could he realistically do with diminished district support? Would he be better off finding another district—or another state—where he could do this work unchallenged? What should his next step be?

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