

THE CORNER

EDUCATION

Ultra-Woke Illinois Mandates Are Top Threat to U.S. Education

By STANLEY KURTZ | January 19, 2021 9:05 AM



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Step aside, California. Minnesota, hang your head. Illinois is the wokest of all, and what it does will spread.

Yes, woke K-12 curricula grounded in **neo-Marxist Critical Race Theory** are on the march through America's schools. We've just **learned** that a California elementary school is forcing third-graders to deconstruct their racial identities and rank themselves by "power and privilege." Although California governor Gavin Newsom vetoed a too-woke ethnic-studies high-school graduation requirement last fall, a reworked version, still saturated with Critical Race Theory, has just been **released** for public comment. Minnesota's new draft social studies standards **minimize** key events in American history and stress "systemic racism" and "marginalization" instead. Cities like Seattle and San Diego are moving in the same direction. The **egregious** 1619 Project has already been adopted by school districts across the country.

Keep your eye on the under-the-radar case of Illinois, however. That is where woke has gone for broke, and America may soon pay the price.

On February 16, **The Joint Committee on Administrative Rules** (JCAR) of the Illinois General Assembly will decide whether to officially enact a rule already approved by the Illinois State Board of Education. The new rule is called "**Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning Standards.**" It's a doozy. Should the rule be ratified on February 16, the entire Illinois teacher corps will be effectively forced into political re-education and compelled to turn their classes into woke indoctrination sessions. We'll look at details, but the most extraordinary in a raft of outrageous dictates is that teachers must "embrace and encourage progressive viewpoints and perspectives." Illinois is literally about to mandate that every one of its licensed teachers adopt progressive political orthodoxy and impart that ideology to students. I've seen some

pretty extreme stuff in my time, but my jaw is now officially on the floor.

And I'm only just getting started. Yes, the new Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning Standards are filled with commands that utterly politicize the classroom and very likely trample the free-speech and religious-liberty rights of teachers. The larger problem, however, is that Illinois has already laid the groundwork for this assault on the Constitution by enacting a so-called civics law that forces teachers to discuss current political controversies in class. The Illinois civics law also compels teachers to organize adventures in "action civics" (student protests or lobbying expeditions on behalf of causes like gun control or the Green New Deal.) These so-called civics requirements are transparent attempts to import leftist political activism and indoctrination into Illinois schools.

But now it's official! Teachers already pressed into the role of de facto leftist community organizers by the 2015 Illinois civics law will soon be liable to negative performance reviews; student, peer, or parent complaints; or even failure of licensure, if they refuse to lead classroom discussions or organize student protests and lobbying expeditions on behalf of leftist causes. Illinois's new Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning Standards, in combination with the existing Illinois civics law, really do formalize the conversion of K-12 schools into political indoctrination camps.

What's more, the Illinois experience is about to go national. As I [explained recently](#), a nation-wide movement is pushing for the enactment of state history and civics standards on the model of Common Core. That movement is top-heavy with leaders and

supporters of the Illinois civics model (considered the ultimate in “best practices” by the education Left). This new education movement wants Biden to follow Obama’s lead on Common Core, using federal carrots and sticks to pressure states into adopting woke history/civics standards. The eventual result would be “action civics” on the Illinois template in every state in the union.

No doubt, this “action civics” coalition and its Biden administration allies will move slowly and cautiously, at first, in red states. But the new Illinois “Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards” expose the endgame. Once states force civics teachers to lead discussions of contemporary political controversies and organize student lobbying and protest expeditions, it’s only a matter of time until the education Left imposes formal ideological controls on those activities. The new Illinois civics law was enacted in 2015. They’ve waited six years to openly force it into a leftist template. Of course, the law was already very much along those lines. The entire “action civics” program amounts to an open invitation to an overwhelmingly leftist teacher-corps to bring politics into the classroom, thereby recruiting students into a progressive political army. It’s worked out rather nicely for the Left to date, but they want to formalize things nonetheless. Too many moderate and conservative districts resist the tide of woke.

We’ll circle back to the national implications of the Illinois experience, but let’s have a closer look at the new Illinois standards and their prospects for approval.

The Illinois Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards are less about education than political re-education. The new rule mandates, for example, that teachers, “assess how their biases...

affect...how they access tools to mitigate their own behavior (racism, sexism, homophobia, unearned privilege, Eurocentrism, etc.)” You might think it impossible to “mitigate” the “unearned privilege” of being white, male, or straight, but Bettina L. Love, a prominent advocate of Critical Race Theory in education, holds that “**White Teachers Need Anti-Racist Therapy.**” By this she means therapy that combats “White emotionalities” or what Robin DiAngelo famously calls “White fragility.” The **committee that drafted the new rule** includes an **article** touting white fragility training sessions to help teachers “move past their whiteness” in the readings it offers to explain the standards.

In other words, the new Illinois standards are saying, “Don’t allow your racism to keep you out of therapy designed to extirpate your whiteness.” And if teachers don’t enter such therapy voluntarily, the new standards will make it easy for schools to force them into therapeutic “mitigation” of their “whiteness.” Complaints about a teacher’s failure to embrace “progressive” perspectives or let go of “Eurocentrism” (say, by **assigning too many** novels by white male authors) could easily subject hapless educators to DiAngelo’s cure for their whiteness. Licensure and certification are at stake.

The new Illinois standards also mandate that teachers embrace ideas like “systemic racism.” As the standards put it, teachers must affirm “that there are systems in our society that create and reinforce inequities, thereby creating oppressive conditions.” This blends with the mandate that teachers, “embrace and encourage progressive viewpoints and perspectives that leverage asset thinking toward traditionally marginalized people.” That provision might appear to narrow the forced embrace of progressivism to issues pertaining to race, ethnicity, or sexuality. Remember,

however, the concept of systemic oppression detects racism and bigotry in almost every conservative policy position, from the environment to the budget. That means teachers who want to get and keep their licenses in Illinois have got to be full-spectrum progressives.

The proposed Illinois standards also make it clear that students have to be both indoctrinated and pushed into progressive activism: “Be aware of the effects of power and privilege and the need for social advocacy and social action to better empower diverse students and communities....[Leverage] student activism [by being a teacher who] promotes student activism and advocacy.” Again, given the mandate to “embrace and encourage progressive viewpoints,” the content of this activism is clear. Teachers are also encouraged to substitute “social justice work” or “action civics projects” for more traditional forms of testing when deciding on a student’s grade. Staying woke will get you straight A’s.

The new standards also mandate that Illinois teachers, “intentionally embrace student identities and prioritize representation in the curriculum,” adding that this must include “the wide spectrum and fluidity of identities.” Traditionally religious and/or conservative teachers are commanded here to affirm against conscience that there are a vast number of genders, and highlight that claim in their teaching.

The most inadvertently hilarious part of the standards is their insistence that there is “not one ‘correct’ way of doing or understanding something.” Except for Critical Race Theory, that is. Woke ideology is the one correct way of teaching, according to the new Illinois standards. The **notes** of the committee that created the

proposed standards include a passage saying teacher preparation programs must be “forced” to teach Critical Race Theory. Relativism for thee but not for me.

The proposed Illinois standards on Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning have kicked up opposition from **conservative** and **religious** groups in state, who hold that the rule mandates political indoctrination and violates teachers’ constitutional rights. Every teacher certified by Illinois will have to be trained and assessed in accordance with the new standards. Attorneys for the Thomas More Society, which is working with the Pro-Family Alliance, calls the proposed standards **unconstitutional** and discriminatory on the grounds that they compel speech and violate the free exercise of religion and conscience.

Sadly, however, the new standards are likely to win final approval at the meeting of the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules (JCAR) on February 16, if the vote falls along traditional party lines, that is. The situation is by no means hopeless, however. Serious pushback from the public just might tilt enough votes to block ratification. These bureaucratic approvals are usually quiet affairs. Once the public gets wind of just how wildly radical this new rule is, large-scale blowback could sink this pernicious proposal. The leader of the opposition to the new standards is **Rep. Steven Reick**, who sits on the JCAR. Reick’s **thoughts** on the new rule are well worth a look. As to how the public can make its opinions known to the JCAR before the big decision, that is explained **at the end of this** energetic critique of the new rule by the Illinois Family Institute.

The Illinois Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning Standards

force the woke ideology of the Chicago-based educators behind the 2015 Illinois civics law onto every teacher and school district in the state. That has been the drift of things in Illinois for the past six years.

The groundwork for the 2015 Illinois civics law was laid years before, as progressive educators in Chicago began to push teachers to discuss controversial contemporary social and political issues. These discussions were then tied to “service learning,” i.e., student partnerships with the many leftist community organizations in the area. (Chicago is the home of Alinskyite community organizing, after all.) This approach was formally incorporated into the Chicago Public Schools by an administrator with a background in community organizing, then expanded to include “action civics,” where students protest or lobby for almost exclusively leftist ends. Alinskyite community organizers purport to solicit the concerns of their organization’s members, while in reality pushing them slowly but surely into radical political action. That is exactly how action civics works, with teacher as the organizer and students as the organized.

In 2015, these Chicago educators prevailed upon the Illinois legislature to push their leftist brand of “civics” onto the state. Technically, local districts were left free to develop their own civics curricula, so long as they discussed current political controversies and insisted that students do “service learning” with local community organizations. Cleverly, however, the law’s backers designed it so that schools could use private funding to create their curricula. That created an opening for the powerful (and very left-leaning) Robert R. McCormick Foundation to fund curricular materials and teacher training seminars. McCormick has used its

wealth to take de facto control of the Illinois civics curriculum, in the same way the Gates Foundation took de facto control of reading and math through Common Core.

The backers of the new civics bill openly concede that the “social justice frame” of the Chicago civics curriculum won’t easily fly in more conservative parts of the state. (Note the implicit admission that the Chicago civics curriculum is thoroughly politicized.) Their workaround has been to have McCormick offer free “professional development” seminars designed to push teachers outside the city toward the Chicago approach. The Illinois example is a case-study in the dangers of even state-level overrides of local school-district control. Chicago is very cleverly and successfully imposing its ideology on the more conservative parts of the state.

McCormick also funded a lavish website filled with curricula, course materials, and a blog on civics implementation. The website and the entire McCormick operation are run by Shawn Healy, the key figure behind the Illinois civics law, and Mary Ellen Daneels, the leader of McCormick’s course implementation seminars. Both advocate Critical Race Theory and the “Culturally Responsive Teaching” practices that derive from it.

The McCormick-funded website, [Illinoiscivics.org](https://illinoiscivics.org), is filled with material on Critical Race Theory and **Culturally Responsive Teaching**, much of which overlaps with the readings offered by the committee that crafted the “Illinois Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards.” That means the main backers of the Illinois civics law are fully on board with the ideology behind the new standards. Even before the civics law was passed, the long-term goal of the action civics crowd was to get controversial issue

discussion and activism built into state teacher licensure and certification requirements. The new Culturally Responsive Teaching and Leading Standards do all that, and more.

The inside story of the implementation of the Illinois civics law is told in a **study** published by “CivXNow: A Project of iCivics.” (CivXNow is the national coalition of mostly leftist action-civics-oriented groups run by iCivics.) The national iCivics group, as I **explained** recently, is a major force behind the effort to impose woke action civics on the country at large. They and their coalition partners look to Illinois as a model of what American civics should be. The iCivics/CivXNow report on the implementation of the Illinois civics law lists the following as one of the “universal takeaways” of the Illinois civics experience: “If you’re not schooled and aware of whiteness or privilege, then civic courses can very quickly become oppressive to young people of color.” The proposed new Illinois standards are fully in line with this thinking.

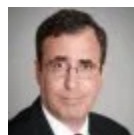
Late last year, in partnership with members of its national coalition, iCivics issued a white paper on “**Equity in Civic Education.**” The paper was co-authored by key leaders and supporters of the Illinois civics model, including Shawn Healy himself. Unsurprisingly, iCivics prominently put forward the Illinois experience as a template for the country at large. The iCivics paper also highlights “Culturally Responsive Teaching” as a perspective to be adopted by other states.

The iCivics coalition is poised to press the Illinois model on America, using the Biden administration as its ally. That would be a disaster for our country, full and final inscription of woke indoctrination into state education mandates. iCivics and its

coalition partners will do their best to wrap their plans in the soothing rhetoric of “civics,” full of platitudes about developing good citizens to strengthen our democracy. Yet the Illinois model is about as far away from America’s foundational liberties as a program of education can get. However much iCivics and its coalition partners slow-walk and disguise it, the new Illinois Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning Standards reveal the endgame of the “new civics” movement. That movement needs to be stopped, first in Illinois on February 16, and then in Congress and every state in the union.



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