

FORUM

History Teachers, Critical Thinking, and the Culture Wars

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At a time when vitriolic partisan rhetoric dominates our headlines and headspace, the AHA's Nicholas Kryczka, Whitney E. Barringer, and Scot McFarlane, thankfully, seek to find out what teachers of history and social studies are really trying to accomplish in their classrooms. They argue that “culture warriors had imposed an analytical framework that obscured the real dynamics of curricular governance in the United States.” Relying on polls and interviews, they conclude that most teachers are not culture warriors but instead are trying to teach history “impartially” to prepare apathetic students for “critical thinking and informed citizenship.” Indeed, “97 percent of surveyed teachers cited critical thinking as among their top learning goals.”¹

American Lesson Plan, the full AHA report on which Kryczka, Barringer, and McFarlane's conclusions are based, argues that the majority of history teachers purposefully avoid biased and partisan sources as unreliable and controversial.² The AHA's findings echo those of a 2021 Heritage Foundation poll that found that although teachers are to the left of the average conservative, they are more moderate than the average liberal, including on issues of race. The Heritage poll's authors concluded that “the results of this survey do not support the idea that K-12 teachers are radical activists.”³

Taken together, the AHA and Heritage reports suggest that teachers—like so many Americans—are more often running interference than embracing the culture wars. Why, then, do the culture wars loom so large? With the loss of earlier forms of cultural solidarity, Americans today struggle to find common ground and are therefore

¹Nicholas Kryczka, Whitney E. Barringer, and Scot McFarlane, “Changing the Subject in the School Wars: An AHA Research Team Perspective,” *History of Education Quarterly* 65, no. 2 (May 2025).

²American Historical Association, *American Lesson Plan: Teaching US History in Secondary Schools* (Washington, DC: American Historical Association, 2024), 112–15.

³Jay Greene and James Paul, “Political Opinions of K-12 Teachers: Results from a Nationally Representative Survey,” Heritage Foundation, Nov. 16, 2021, <https://www.heritage.org/education/report/political-opinions-k-12-teachers-results-nationally-representative-survey>. See also Robert Pondiscio, “Teachers and the Right,” *National Affairs*, Spring 2023, <https://www.nationalaffairs.com/publications/detail/teachers-and-the-right>.

more likely to divide into camps that see the other side as enemies.⁴ Many elite actors in the culture wars—professors, activists, politicians, investors—have agendas that benefit from mobilizing public opinion against public schools and teachers.⁵ As a result, debates over education have gone national and become more partisan.⁶ Elected leaders have reacted to this context according to their political affiliation: in blue states teachers feel pressure to respond to legislative or district mandates about anti-racism and social justice, whereas teachers in red states feel pressure from the opposite direction.⁷

When it comes to US history, most Americans disagree with both sides in the culture wars.⁸ According to the AHA report, most of the nation's history teachers feel the same way. The vast majority of teachers want to offer a history that brings us together as a nation, respects diversity, and has room for pride and shame.⁹ Of course, there are some teachers—as there are some Americans—who take sides. This may be a good thing: in a democracy, we do not want all teachers to think the same. The danger is when Americans think that public schools themselves have become partisans in the culture wars. The report finds that 26 percent of teachers considered it important or very important to teach US history as “a consistent fulfillment of the promises of the nation's founding,” and the same percentage considered it important or very important to present US history as “a story of violence, oppression, and/or injustice.”¹⁰ The report also hints at variations between states as well as a notable divide between urban and rural districts. The influence and intensity of the culture wars in schools may depend on where one lives.¹¹

Even if many history teachers feel caught in the crossfire, there is evidence that progressive ideas are having an impact in public schools. Researchers have documented the influence of progressive ideas in the education schools and humanities departments where teachers and administrators are prepared. The AHA report surveys district-sponsored curricular efforts and professional trainings that embrace progressive ideas

⁴ Among many sources, see James Davison Hunter, *Democracy and Solidarity: On the Cultural Roots of America's Political Crisis* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2024); Michael J. Klarman, “The Degradation of American Democracy—and the Court,” *Harvard Law Review* 134, no. 1 (Nov. 2020).

⁵ See, for example, Jack Schneider and Jennifer Berkshire, *A Wolf at the Schoolhouse Door: The Dismantling of Public Education and the Future of School* (New York: The New Press, 2023); Josh Cowen, *The Privateers: How Billionaires Created a Culture War and Sold School Vouchers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2024).

⁶ David M. Houston and Alyssa Barone, “How the Engagement of High-Profile Partisan Officials Affects Education Politics, Public Opinion, and Polarization,” EdWorkingPaper No. 24-919, Annenberg Institute at Brown University, 2024, <https://edworkingpapers.com/ai24-919>. It is possible that the nationalization of education politics around culture war issues may have been pushed by grassroots activists at the state level. On this point, see Gerald Gamm et al., “The Culture War and Partisan Polarization: State Political Parties, 1960-2018,” *Studies in American Political Development* (Sept. 2024), 1-21.

⁷ American Historical Association, *American Lesson Plan*, 116-27.

⁸ Johann N. Neem, “A Usable Past for a Post-American Nation,” *Hedgehog Review* 24, no. 2 (Summer 2022), 28-37, <https://hedgehogreview.com/issues/the-use-and-abuse-of-history/articles/a-usable-past-for-a-post-american-nation>.

⁹ *American Lesson Plan*, 133, fig. 31.

¹⁰ This may be a false distinction. It is possible for the same person to subscribe to both positions.

¹¹ *American Lesson Plan*, 133-34.

about race and social justice. It is difficult to document the impact these influences have on classrooms, although a poll by the right-leaning Manhattan Institute posits a relationship between the prevalence of progressive ideas in schools and how students were taught American history.¹² Media stories of progressive educators going too far, even if they do not represent the majority of teachers, fuel conservative responses, whether they be parent activism or Republican-sponsored legislation.¹³

Whatever teachers' politics, it is unsurprising that most teachers claim to be impartial and committed to teaching critical thinking. The AHA report relies on these proclamations as evidence of the culture wars' absence in classrooms, but doing so raises as many questions as it answers. Michael Roth has recently articulated three models of critical thinking that he respectively attributes to three teachers: Confucius, Socrates, and Jesus. When teachers say that they teach critical thinking, do they mean that they are teaching students to question society's myths or overcoming ignorance to see the hidden truths about our society (Socrates)? Do they mean learning deeply about our society's ways and traditions (Confucius) or becoming disciples of great teachers (Jesus)? All of these approaches demand critical thinking but rely on different sources of authority and have divergent political valences.¹⁴

If the AHA report's findings are true, we must protect teachers from becoming further caught up in the culture wars. That will be difficult. When defenders of public schools focus on local questions, they can mobilize bipartisan support—voters are not fans of culture warriors taking over their schools—but the news is filled with stories of teachers resisting Republican overreach. Regardless of whether these stories portray teachers as heroes or villains, they reinforce a culture wars

¹²*American Lesson Plan*, 116-25. On progressive influence in education, see Rogers M. Smith and Desmond King, *America's Racial Battle Lines: Protect versus Repair* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2024), 106, 226-29; David M. Steiner with Susan D. Rozen, "Preparing Tomorrow's Teachers: An Analysis of Syllabi from a Sample of America's Schools of Education," in *A Qualified Teacher in Every Classroom? Appraising Old Answers and New Ideas*, ed. Frederick M. Hess, Andrew J. Rotherham, and Kate Walsh (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2004), 119-48. See also David Steiner, "Skewed Perspective: What We Know about Teacher Preparation at Elite Education Schools," *Education Next* 5, no. 1 (Oct. 2009 [2005]), <https://www.educationnext.org/skewedperspective/>; Lyell Asher, "How Ed Schools Became a Menace," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Apr. 8, 2018; Jay Schalin, *The Politicization of University Schools of Education: The Long March through the Education Schools*, James G. Martin Center for Academic Renewal, 2019, especially 48-60; Zach Goldberg and Eric Kaufmann, *School Choice Is Not Enough: The Impact of Critical Social Justice Ideology in American Education*, The Manhattan Institute, Feb. 2023, <https://manhattan.institute/article/school-choice-is-not-enough-the-impact-of-critical-social-justice-ideology-in-american-education>. For context see David F. Labaree, *The Trouble with Ed Schools* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2004), chaps. 7-8; Neil Gross, *Why Are Professors Liberal and Why Do Conservatives Care?* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2013), especially chaps. 1 and 4; and Christopher L. Busey, Kristen E. Duncan, and Tianna Dowie-Chin, "Critical What What? A Theoretical Systematic Review of 15 Years of Critical Race Theory Research in Social Studies Education, 2004-2019," *Review of Educational Research* 93, no. 3 (June 2023), 412-53.

¹³On conservative responses, see Woody Holton, "Chilling Affects: The Far Right Takes Aim at Black History," *American Historical Review* 129, no. 1 (March 2024), 199-216.

¹⁴Michael Roth, *The Student: A Short History* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2023), chap. 1. See also Jonathan Zimmerman, "'Social Justice' According to Whom?," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, Sept. 22, 2019; William Peters, "Teachers' Perspectives on the Purposes of Social Studies Education: A Critical Analysis" (PhD diss., Boston College, May 2022), especially 131-35.

narrative, which in turn undermines trust in public schools. To challenge that framing, Americans need to learn about teachers resisting the excesses of progressivism too. Americans need to know that most teachers have not taken sides in the culture wars but share with them the goal of an honest and complex American history.