Critical race theory poised to rank among hottest debates in 2022 General Assembly

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ATLANTA – While Republicans and Democrats in the General Assembly tangle over guns, noncitizen voting and Medicaid expansion, education could become the most highly charged issue of the election-year session that began last month.

GOP Gov. Brian Kemp set the tone during his State of the State address, promising to wade into in an aspect of education Democrats and educators want the state to stay out of – what teachers can teach.

"I look forward to working with members of the General Assembly this legislative session to protect our students from divisive ideologies – like critical race theory – that pit kids against each other," he told a joint session of the state House and Senate.

The Georgia Board of Education adopted a resolution last June essentially endorsing Kemp's position opposing the teaching of critical race theory, which emphasizes the existence of systemic racism in America. But the resolution doesn't carry the weight of law.

Republican lawmakers are looking to codify the GOP’s stance against critical race theory into state law with four bills – two in the state House of Representatives and two in the Georgia Senate.

All four of the bills would apply to elementary and secondary schools across the state. While only one – Senate Bill 377 – specifically targets Georgia’s public colleges and universities and the state’s technical colleges, all four mention “state agencies,” a term that includes the University System of Georgia and the technical college system.

"We must stop divisive concepts from being taught in Georgia colleges and universities and seeping down into our K-12 schools – concepts that an overwhelming majority of Georgians outright reject," said Sen. Bo Hatchett, R-Cornelia, chief sponsor of Senate Bill 377 and one of Kemp’s Senate floor leaders.

"We must ensure that no student is taught to feel guilty or 'less than' because of how they were born."

Educators bristle at what they see as interference in their ability to teach.
Matthew Boedy, president of the Georgia Association of University Professors, called the bills “educational gag orders.”

Lisa Morgan, president of the Georgia Association of Educators, which represents elementary and secondary teachers, said Republicans are launching an “attack on public education” by injecting themselves into an aspect of education where they don’t belong.

“Educators are experts on curriculum and instruction,” she said. “Educators should be in charge of curriculum and instruction, not elected officials.”

Besides the resentment educators feel toward politicians encroaching on teachers’ roles, dictating what can be taught in Georgia schools is also stifling to students, Morgan said.

“Children are curious,” she said. “When we have this legislation attempting to censor how we are teaching history … the teacher in many cases will not answer a question. What message is that giving the child? … Children should be allowed to ask difficult questions.”

“[Senate Bill 377] says certain concepts can be taught but only in an ‘objective’ way and without ‘endorsement,’ ” Boedy added. “To somehow divide education into divisive concepts that one can’t opine on and non-divisive ones that merit opinion is malpractice for an educator.”

One key aspect to the debate over critical race theory is whether it is even being taught in Georgia schools. Democrats say it is not and that Republicans are stirring up fear among GOP base voters to gin up support at the polls this fall.

But state Sen. Burt Jones, R-Jackson, who is running for lieutenant governor, sent a letter to the state Board of Education last month asserting that the Gwinnett County School District may have begun teaching critical race theory.

“The syllabus appears to have been since removed from the district’s website,” Jones wrote. “But the notion that the largest school district in our state would be surreptitiously injecting such divisive curriculum into our children’s classrooms – and then attempting to cover it up – is both egregious and completely unacceptable.”

Lawmakers will kick off the debate over critical race theory on Monday when the Senate Education and Youth Committee holds a hearing on Hatchett’s bill.

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