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Demobilizing knowledge in American schools: censoring critical perspectives

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Controversies have erupted in recent years over the teaching of critical perspectives in United States K-12 schools, particularly related to issues of diversity, race, gender, and sexuality. These tensions have resulted in attacks on critical curriculum, with nearly one-third of states banning curriculum that offers critical views of the racial past of the U.S. and over 200 bills introduced in 40 states that would restrict curriculum related to diverse topics. In this study, we apply a knowledge mobilization framework to examine what and whose knowledge is being restricted in U.S. K-12 schools, and how and why this is happening. Our findings indicate that in 16 Republican-dominated states, policies have been enacted to restrict the teaching of critical perspectives on race, sexuality, and other controversial subjects and to perpetuate a positive view of U.S. history. The study sheds light on the prevalence, underlying nature, and consequences of these educational policies.

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Introduction

Controversies have erupted in recent years over how to teach about the United States' past, and often these controversies now also incorporate how issues of diversity, race, gender, and/or sexuality are to be taught or approached in public schools (Morgan 2022). Opinions on these matters also appear to have hardened and polarized, with conspicuous emotion-laden duelling narratives (Malin and Hornbeck 2022) available to support either position. With respect to the teaching of history, for example, on one side there are strong arguments for teaching history in a way that would evoke an image of the U.S. as a work in progress, requiring continued efforts to perfect the union. Conversely, there are those strongly arguing for exceptionalistic, patriotic accounts of US history, which would appear to align more so with traditionalistic approaches to public policy. These tensions appear to reflect agreement at least among politicians and other elites that the past and how we think about it matters, helping us also to interpret and navigate the present (Malin and Hornbeck 2022).

These disputes are having major effects. One important manifestation has been a vague but strong attack on Critical Race Theory¹ (CRT) in schools: Since 2021, nearly one-third of states have banned K-12 school curricula that offer critical views of the racial past of the U.S., with some of these laws explicitly mentioning CRT or specific materials like the *1619 Project* (Waxman 2023). Legislatures in 40 states have introduced over 200 bills that would restrict curricula, and some of these laws would penalize teachers (Morgan 2022) for teaching certain 'divisive concepts' (e.g., topics related to race, gender, diversity, oppression, and/or sexuality). At local levels, too, recent school board races have often hinged on these same topics, with many candidates campaigning on platforms that sought to ban critical perspectives in schools (Payne 2021). Overall, disputes about how history, inclusive of issues of diversity and identity, is being taught in schools have been strong enough to fuel an ongoing political/policy firestorm across much of the U.S.

Against this evolving backdrop, the present study applies a process-oriented knowledge mobilization framework (Ward 2019) to surface and examine *what* and *whose* knowledge is being restricted (demobilized) in U.S. K-12 schools vis-à-vis these policies, and *how* and *why* this is happening. In so doing, we achieve insights into the underpinnings, nature, and consequences of these new, far-reaching educational policies. It should be noted that some other states are engaging in the reverse (see Blume and Gomez 2022) by expanding offerings that include critical perspectives. Our study, however, focuses solely on those that are restricting and demobilizing such perspectives. Our findings indicate that in 16 Republican-dominated states, lawmakers and executives have used legislation, state school board resolutions, and executive orders to restrict the teaching of critical perspectives surrounding race, sexuality, and other controversial subjects, and simultaneously have sought to perpetuate exceptionalism/triumphalist historical master narratives that aim to mythologize a singular, positive view of U.S. history.

Relevant literature

This section reviews literature related to controversial curricula in states, both broadly and in relation to contemporary attacks on CRT, "gender ideology," and "wokeness," and on particular materials like the *1619 Project*. It also reviews scholarship showing how social studies curricula that omit critical perspectives serve to disproportionately harm students from marginalized backgrounds.

Curricular controversies in the US: a concise review. Since the early twentieth century, when high schools nationwide grew exponentially, school curricula have been a subject of contention and political debate (Hartman 2013). Fundamentalist Christianity and political ideology have been primary drivers of disputes over curriculum. A significant example of such conflicts is the 1925 The Scopes Monkey Trial. John Scopes, a Tennessee science teacher, was charged and convicted of violating a state law that forbade the teaching of evolution (see Laats 2010), a scientific theory that conflicted with Fundamentalist Christian teachings.

The 1960s were turbulent and dynamic, bringing about immense social changes and featuring the new left political movement on college campuses (Rossinow 1998). Critical theories from the European Frankfurt School became prominent among some university faculty; from this perspective, academics sought to explore history and society through the lens of power relations as found in social conflict theories (Rossinow 1998; Hartman 2013). Critical theories tend to directly challenge master/dominant narratives that perpetuate triumphalist or exceptionalist views of U.S. history (Malin and Hornbeck 2022). Critical ideologies, along with civil rights, antiwar, feminist, and queer liberation movements, brought about cultural conflicts between conservatives and liberals or leftists that remain today (Hartman 2013).

In the 1980s, the presidential administration of Ronald Reagan ushered in a conservative ideological and political wave—and with it, a distrust of government, including increased skepticism toward public schooling and school curricula (Hartman 2013). While in office, Reagan's Secretary of Education William Bennett sought to diminish federal authority over public education and to return power to states. In the 1990s, the Clinton Administration pushed an outcomes-based national standards movement where the U.S. Department of Education would provide consistent standards across the board for schools, including a push for national history standards (Ravitch, 1995). Bennett and other conservatives like Lynn Cheney (former chair of the National Endowment for the Humanities) and Chester Finn (education reformer) attacked the national standards movement as being driven by left-wing ideology. Bennett (1994) wrote that the U.S. was in a culture war with elites who promoted antipathy toward American history, and Cheney declared in a *Wall Street Journal* op-ed that the national standards would be the "end of history" (1994, p. 1). She argued the standards focused too much on multiculturalism and social justice movements rather than the political heroes of the past, even lamenting that the content standards left out important confederate historical characters like Robert E. Lee while focusing more on those we admire today like Harriet Tubman. Finn argued the social studies had been deteriorating for decades, with "no respect for western civilization" and that they "pooh-pooh history's chronological and factual skeleton as somehow privileging elites and white males over the poor and oppressed" (Leming et al. 2003, p. 7). Given these conflicts and controversies, national-level history/social studies standards never came to fruition, leaving key decisions to the states regarding history and social studies standards and curricula.

By contrast, since the passage of the *No Child Left Behind Act* in 2001, the federal government has tied substantial money to the requirement that states implement standards focused on reading and math, requiring testing to measure how students performed in these areas while also attaching specific performance-related consequences at school and district levels (Ravitch 2017). In the U.S., states have historically been largely left to craft their own programs of schooling because the Constitution mentions nothing about education, leaving little power directly to the

federal government (Hornbeck 2017). Nevertheless, the federal government provides significant funding for special education and other programs, motivating states to accept their demands—and, in the case of state standards and annual assessments, states obliged.

Academic content standards vary from state to state, with some states explicitly outlining what will be taught in schools and others including broad, sometimes vague, statements that leave discretion to individual teachers (Hornbeck 2018). In the past, local school districts might simply purchase textbooks from a popular company and use those books or the materials provided by the company as their curriculum, but state standards have refined what schools in states are required to teach, making the role of the state more influential in providing curriculum guidance and displacing some of the role of local school boards (Ravitch 1995).

Backlash to the national history standards was certainly related to the fact that academic historians were explicitly pushing back against exceptionalistic master narratives manifesting in textbooks and classrooms. Esteemed historians such as Howard Zinn (1980) used social history to show how the traditional master narrative of American exceptionalism had another side, such that policies too often worked to benefit those with power and dispossess those on the margins of society. In *A People's History of the United States*, for example, Zinn (1980) centers another story, one in which the traditional heroes made decisions to perpetuate their own power and grandeur in posterity. Sociologist James Loewen (1995), in his work *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, critically examined twelve widely used U.S. history textbooks, showing how textbooks tell stories about history and attempting to shed light upon and rectify the stories being told. For example, he found textbooks commonly made it seem as though Native People in the United States were welcoming of European colonists, when in fact European colonists displaced natives and brought disease that killed many (Loewen 1995). Zinn and Loewen provide important examples of pushback against mythologized versions of US history, and such examples and approaches began to gain traction in some state textbooks and standards (Swalwell and Sinclair 2021). For example, in California, non-traditional families, including those in LGBTQ relationships, are intentionally included in academic content standards and in social studies (Camica and Zhu 2019).

In response (at least in part) to pushback against exceptionalist narratives and the adoption of academic content standards, controversies regarding history and social studies standards spread to state legislatures and state boards of education in recent years (Hornbeck 2018; Anderson 2013; Hillburn et al. 2016; Journell 2010). Texas, in particular, has long been at the center of debates related to controversial history curricula (Erekson 2012; Noboa 2011). In 2010, its state board passed an updated version of their social studies academic standards; these updated standards drew international attention for their naked promotion of American exceptionalism and triumphalist narratives. For instance, the new standards directed teachers to replace the word “imperialism” with “expansionism,” and to replace “slave trade” with “Atlantic triangular trade” (Noboa 2011, p.44). One controversial textbook referred to enslaved African people as “immigrant workers” (Collier, 2015, p.1). Moreover, few minorities were included in the new standards, and broader narratives were apparent that sought to cover up or minimize negative aspects of U.S. history (Noboa 2011).

Influence of Trump/Trumpism. Accordingly, we see a long history of curricular controversies, and frequently (but not always) these controversies have centered around how to teach

history. More recently, though, they have expanded, evolved, and taken more of a front-and-center position in American politics, which is traceable at least in part to Donald Trump and Trumpism. Indeed, even Trump’s 2016 campaign slogan—“Make America Great Again”—made a historical claim, suggesting the US had been better sometime in the past. Trump also frequently made controversial or inaccurate historical claims while in office, including alleging that his adversaries sought to “wipe out our history,” “erase our values,” “defame our heroes,” and “indoc-trinate our children” (see Wheeler, 2020). He further directly attacked historical teaching in US schools as “left-wing indoc-trination” (Balingit and Meckler 2020, p. 1) Trump also established a 1776 Commission, supported by a federal grant, which he said would promote a “pro-American curriculum” in schools, and he proclaimed that CRT should be banned from schools (Morgan 2022).

Although Trump played a key role in these debates and took several influential actions, he was not a lone actor, and one could even argue he was simply intuiting this as a political expedient area of focus. Indeed, our view is that several social forces and key precipitating events converged to increase tensions about historical and contemporary social (in)justice (see Malin and Hornbeck 2022). In 2019, for example, the 1619 Project was published by *New York Times*; provocatively, its writers sought to recenter the historical founding of the United States from 1776—when the *Declaration of Independence* was signed—to 1619, which is when the first enslaved people from Africa were brought to North America (Hannah-Jones 2019). The 1619 Project drew huge amounts of attention, including by then-President Trump, who claimed: “This project rewrites American history to teach our children that we were founded on the principle of oppression, not freedom” (see Watson and Segers 2020, p. 1). Also, in the wake of police killings, massive protests and national debates ensued around systemic racism and police brutality, and intermixed were controversial efforts to remove perceived racist and discriminatory statuary (Malin and Hornbeck 2022). And more broadly, large inequities, including across racial and ethnic lines, were particularly glaring during the pandemic. For some, these disparities and injustices have been a source of focus and motivation to push for progressive change, and for others the very focus on change has been highly threatening.

In this recent populist political moment, we have seen historians, adjacent scholars and journalists increasingly and openly sparring with conservative claims about history (Malin and Hornbeck 2022). They have been active participants through media and/or in person during key events, such as when historians were present and made key contributions during Trump’s two impeachment trials. Such disputes did not cease after Trump’s defeat in his 2020 reelection bid; instead, after Joseph Biden assumed the presidency in 2021, Republicans wasted little time introducing and/or furthering legal schemes at national and state levels to prohibit schools and teachers from teaching history or other courses from a critical perspective. One significant example was when Governor Ron DeSantis of Florida banned Advanced Placement African American Studies from being taught in the state (Heyward 2023).

The importance of inclusive curriculum. Substantial research exists highlighting benefits of inclusive curriculum, and particularly for students with marginalized identities (Hornbeck 2018; Yosso 2002; Ledesma and Calderon 2015; Snapp et al. 2015; Emdin 2016). Inclusive curricula are those that incorporate marginalized voices and encourages respect for all, not just the dominant group. Broadly, studies find that students of color and LGBTQ students perform better in school and have better mental

health when schools and teachers incorporate inclusive curriculum (see Hornbeck and Duncheon 2022). As previously noted, however, scholars examining history textbooks and content standards have found that master narratives in favor of exceptionalism and triumphalism more often dominate the curriculum in U.S. schools. They argue teaching from a critical perspective is a better approach, serving as a corrective act that seeks to tell a more accurate and inclusive story (Anderson 2013; Hornbeck 2018; Loewen 1995; Hillburn et al. 2016; Journell 2010; Zinn 1980).

Social justice pedagogy offers one way to approach the complicated reality of dealing with dominant master narrative (Applebaum 2010). Using a social justice pedagogical approach entails asking educators to use pedagogy to question dominant ways of being and to work toward justice in the classroom. Social justice pedagogy recognizes that identity groups exist and that some such groups are in the minority, facing repression, and asserts that students have a right to use knowledge to deconstruct these narratives, bringing about a narrative of justice. Belle (2019) further argues that seeing students who are often forgotten “requires teachers to recognize them as valuable contributors to the classroom space, as opposed to social, cultural, and academic burdens on the so-called master in the room — the teacher” (p. 1). In this vein, an authentic ethic of care is one way to support LGBTQ students and resist heterodominance and repression in schools, and especially in states that have banned or sharply restricted the teaching of LGBTQ topics and history (Hornbeck and Duncheon 2022).

Method and framework

Data for this study come from primary and secondary sources including documents from government and news websites from August 2019 to November 2022². We employed textual analysis (TA) (Allen 2017) as a method to answer the questions posed within Ward’s (2017) knowledge mobilization framework; adapted to our study, this meant seeking to answer questions regarding *what* and *whose* knowledge is being restricted and *how* and *why* this is occurring. We considered this framework to be appropriate and useful for support the task at hand, insofar as:

- teaching fundamentally concerns the construction, dissemination, and mobilization of knowledge;
- schools are key sites of contestation wherein some knowledge is privileged and other knowledge is marginalized, and new policy can have effects;
- seeking to address broad questions (i.e., what, whose, why, how) supports the exploration of an emerging and evolving process/phenomenon.

TA is a method centered on “understanding language, symbols, and/or pictures present in texts to gain information” (Allen 2017, p.2). TA is a qualitative method, with an implication being that the researcher is the research instrument and subjectivity plays a role in interpreting data. TA is useful for qualitative work because it allows researchers to closely examine and interpret the meanings and messages within a text (Smith 2017). Accordingly, it can provide valuable insights into the beliefs, values, and perspectives of the people who created the text, as well as the cultural and social context in which it was produced. TA can also be used to identify patterns and themes within a text, which can be useful for understanding complex social phenomena. Additionally, because TA is a relatively flexible method, it can be applied to a wide range of texts, including written documents, speeches, and even visual media, making it a versatile tool for researchers (Belsey 2013).

We initiated our research process with a multi-step approach to ensure a thorough and comprehensive review of the topic. Our

process was as follows: (1) We began by scouring for stories that referenced terms such as “critical race theory,” “The 1619 Project,” “anti-CRT legislation,” “woke educators,” and “gender ideology” across various national news outlets. Our search spanned from August 2019 – which marked the publication of the first 1619 Project story in the *New York Times* -- to November 2023. We specifically focused on instances involving state government actors and actions with legal implications such as legislation, state school board resolutions, and executive orders by governors. We also encountered several opinions penned by State Attorneys’ General, but opted not to include these in our analyses because they do not carry the weight of law unless subsequently interpreted as such by a court. Similarly, we identified many instances of *local* school districts and school boards implementing resolutions to restrict critical curricula, but we determined that these were beyond the scope of our *state*-focused study. (2) We then meticulously organized the data by state. This step allowed us to recognize patterns and trends on a state-by-state basis and provided a clearer picture of the nationwide landscape. Here, we were also attentive to the political environment within the identified states and the extent to which one political party was dominant (e.g., by controlling the legislature and/or the governorship). (3) After determining which states had enacted measures, we sought news reports and press releases from each respective state regarding the actions taken. We prioritized the identification of quotations from the primary political actor(s) involved (e.g., governor, sponsor of legislation), reasoning that these statements could illuminate their specific intentions and framings of the issue; (4) Concurrently, we sought to source the original text of the actions undertaken by the states (e.g., statute, board resolution, etc.). These primary documents allowed us to understand and analyze the precise language and legal mechanisms being employed. (5) Lastly, after compiling quotes and the text of state actions aimed at censoring certain curricula, we conducted a line-by-line review of the texts. We used an inductive coding scheme (Glaser and Strauss 1967) to identify emergent themes across the texts, and to understand how meanings were constructed, produced, and represented (Lockyer 2008, p. 865). The goal was not merely to document what was overtly stated, but to discover and expose any underlying, implicit meanings (Bhattacharya 2017, p. 70). We organized the themes around our research question, seeking to understand whose/what knowledge was being demobilized. Concurrently, we referred to evolving theory and literature to support, contest, and refine our growing comprehension of why and how critical perspectives are being silenced.

This methodology was developed and utilized because it provided a systematic and robust approach to analyze the actions taken by state governments regarding critical perspectives in school curricula. It allowed us to distill complex narratives into identifiable themes and extract implicit meanings from seemingly straightforward statements, thereby offering a richer understanding of the motivations and impacts of these policies.

Limitations. This study contained certain limitations. First, the time constraints we placed on the study (August 2019 to November 2022) could have resulted in potential gaps in the data collected and analyzed. This is an ongoing and evolving issue, but our research is limited to the data collected in the time constraints we chose. Our analysis was also restricted to state-level actions involving state government actors with immediate legal implications. While this was by design, focusing solely on these higher-level interventions certainly excluded other significant influences and decisions at local levels, such as school boards and districts, and meant excluding some state-level activities as well (e.g.,

opinions written by state Attorney Generals). As such, the findings do not fully capture the entire landscape of knowledge restriction and censorship in school curricula.

Another limitation revolves around our use textual analysis and the formats of data we analyzed. TA’s flexibility allows it to be applied to a wide range of texts, however it does not permit an assessment of non-verbal cues, tone, or context beyond what is present in the text itself. Consequently, some subtle nuances and implications could have been missed.

Our research process was systematic and rigorous, and while the limitations presented here may affect the extent to which our findings can be generalized, they do not detract from the importance or trustworthiness of our study. Nevertheless, recognizing these limitations provides avenues for future research to build upon this work, perhaps by including local level data and/or by using different data sources and methods to gain an more comprehensive understanding of this issue and its ongoing effects.

Findings

Findings for this project are organized around our efforts to identify whose, what, why, and how knowledge is being (de) mobilized, using Ward’s (2019) framework. Regarding *what* and *whose* knowledge, we found that 16 states – in which Republican politicians control the government – are using their formal authority to demobilize critical perspectives in schools. Related, these states are actively seeking to prevent or dissuade schools from engaging in critical and sociological thought, in large part by encouraging or requiring them to steer clear of content that might be sensitive or controversial. Curricula that are being targeted include the *1619 Project*, those mentioning critical race theory, those alleged to “[inflict] shame and guilt on students,” those framing race or racism as a systemic problem in the US, and those discussing issues related to gender identity and/or sexual equality. Our findings also disclose that all students in these states, and especially marginalized/minority students, are likely to lose or miss key social studies perspectives as a result of these policies. Regarding *why* this is happening, data reveal that key actors frame targeted curricula as being “divisive,” “racist,” “ideologically motivated,” and as promoting feelings of “guilt” and “shame” among students. These actors are often politically motivated and supported by organizations that try to influence

elections often without having to report their donations. Finally, regarding *how* this is occurring, we identified three means through which Republicans have sought to ban or censor certain topics from being taught in schools: state legislation, executive actions by governors, and actions by state boards of education. We also show how a network of elite-funded actors and intermediaries are supporting these actions and attempting to frame these curricular disputes. We explore each of these next.

What knowledge is being demobilized? 16 states are recently and actively restricting critical perspectives in schools using official government actions in overlapping ways to ban or restrict curriculum. In some cases, the legal language clearly bans specific topics or concepts, and in others broad, subjective, and unclear language leaves interpretation and discretion to teachers and schools. Even in the latter instances, though, we and others (Malin and Harnish 2023; Morgan 2022; Rogers et al. 2022) expect there will be a substantial chilling effect, with teachers and administrators making conservative curricular and pedagogical decisions out of fear of consequence. One high-profile example is the way that The College Board, the parent organization of Advanced Placement courses, changed their African American Studies curriculum because the conservative governor of Florida attacked it as being “woke” (Hartocollis and Fawcett 2023). In this instance, moreover, students across *all* U.S. states (i.e., those who are enrolled in this particular course, which is offered in many high schools nation-wide) will be affected by the change.

Four major linguistic patterns were identified (See Table 1): (1) language that bans CRT and the *1619 Project* specifically by name; (2) language that bans or restricts teaching about the existence of systemic racism or language that causes guilt/shame based on race (in our interpretation, the aim here is to protect White students); (3) language that bans stereotyping based on gender or sex or that aims to reduce guilt/shame based on sex (in our interpretation, the aim here is to protect heterosexual students); (4) Provisions that ban controversial topics specifically or that require teachers to “teach both sides” of a particular issue. We explore these patterns further below.

The first pattern included explicitly referencing and banning “critical race theory” and/or the “*1619 Project*.” Four states—Idaho, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Virginia—mentioned CRT in their statewide actions by name, and one state (Texas)

Table 1 What historical knowledge is being demobilized?					
State	Mentions CRT	Mentions 1619 Project	Uses Language that denies Systemic Racism or Bans Curricula that causes guilt/shame based on race	Uses language that bans stereotyping based on gender or sex or guilt/shame based on sex	Requires divisive issues to be taught from multiple perspectives
AL			Yes	Yes	
FL	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	
GA			Yes	Yes	
IA			Yes	Yes	
ID	Yes		Yes	Yes	
KY			Yes	Yes	
MS			Yes	Yes	
ND	Yes		Yes		
NH			Yes		
OK			Yes	Yes	
SC			Yes	Yes	
SD	Yes		Yes		Yes
TX		Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
TN			Yes	Yes	Yes
UT			Yes	Yes	Yes
VA	Yes		Yes	Yes	

mentioned the *1619 Project*. House Bill 377 in Idaho provides an example:

The Idaho legislature finds that tenets outlined in subsection 23 (3)(a) of this section, often found in “critical race theory,” undermine the objectives outlined in subsection (1) of this section and exacerbate and inflame divisions on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, national origin, or other criteria in ways contrary to the unity of the nation and the well-being of the state of Idaho and its citizens.

Here, the Idaho Legislature has specifically referred to CRT as knowledge to be restricted in schools, effectively preventing students from having access to such knowledge. The knowledge to which they refer is vague and subjective, offering little clarification as to what they mean by CRT; rather they imply its use in schools is divisive on several bases.

The second pattern included language restricting or banning curriculum content regarding the existence of systemic racism, or that allegedly would cause guilt or shame. Much of the language related to this pattern was vague, including words like “fault,” “blame,” “anguish,” the “promotion of racism,” and “race scapegoating.” The curricular mandates related to this pattern are usually subjective, leaving interpretation to the school, parent, teacher, administrator or even the student. In South Dakota, for example, the legislation bans any curricula that might make a student “feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex.” This statement, like those found in 16 other states, leaves unclear how such “discomfort” criteria might be objectively applied or evaluated. Indeed, we expect such language will frequently lead teachers and administrators to take a conservative approach to teaching, for fear of potentially causing a student to feel discomfort or anguish. What this means is that such “discomfort” provisions will frequently serve to demobilize particular types of knowledge (i.e., perspectives and histories that are critical—or, worse yet, that might be *perceived* by some as being inappropriately critical—in nature).

Other language aiming to restrict whether/how teachers could talk about systemic racism was more specific. Tennessee’s legislation, for example, forbids teachers or curriculum from acknowledging that a “race is inherently privileged, racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or subconsciously.” While Tennessee also includes some vague phrases (e.g., controversial topics) they also include specific phrases that they ban from curricula, as in a provision that states teachers cannot teach that “This state or the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist.” Such provisions, in our view, also will have the effect of demobilizing particular (critical) knowledge by leading teachers and schools to omit realities about social studies subjects surrounding race, sex, and gender.

The third pattern identified in state actions included language restricting curricular content that might make students feel guilt or shame for their views about sex, gender, or sexuality. Most of the language in the state laws and actions are similar, often listing race and sex together. It is clear, though, that sexuality and sex are a key part of the calculus in these government actions. For example, in Alabama a new law asserts schools cannot teach “concepts that impute fault, blame, a tendency to oppress others, or the need to feel guilt or anguish” because of their “sex.” As with race in the previous paragraph, the language regarding sex/sexuality is vague and subjective and thus left to interpretation. Iowa’s law is different, as it doesn’t mention race or sex; instead it states that schools cannot “teach, advocate, encourage, promote, or act upon specific stereotyping and scapegoating toward others on the basis of demographic group membership or identity.” The

legislation fails to explain what is meant by certain words, such as scapegoating. Additionally, in relation to sexuality, one state (Florida) changed the word “gender” to “sex” in their existing law, making it clear that protections for gender did not include transgender or other queer students.

The final pattern included requirements to refrain from teaching “divisive concepts.” A representative example came from an executive order from South Dakota’s Governor, which stated that employees, students, or teachers cannot be compelled “to personally affirm, adopt, or adhere to inherently divisive concepts.” Similar to language from other states, the executive order defines these concepts as those that go against the *Civil Rights Act of 1964*, which include provisions stating that individuals cannot be discriminated against on the basis of race, sex, age, or religion. However, the order also states that it is “not limited” to the provisions of the *Civil Rights Act*, making it very challenging for schools and teachers to determine what may or may not be considered divisive. Another example from Texas’ legislation included language that no teacher could be required to teach controversial current topics, but if they chose to do so that they “shall, to the best of the teacher’s ability, strive to explore the topic from diverse and contending perspectives without giving deference to any one perspective.” This language is complicated, leaving teachers and schools with discretion to decide what is and is not controversial and what should be included or omitted in their instruction. It also directs teachers to explore topics from diverse angles, again leaving important questions about which angles to include.

Whose knowledge is being demobilized? Sixteen states have enacted laws and/or issued state school board resolutions or executive orders that result in the demobilization of critical perspectives in schools (See Table 2). As a result of these knowledge restrictions, all students who attend public K-12 institutions in these states will potentially have less access to critical perspectives in their classes.

In our view, these curricular restrictions are harmful to all students whose learning experiences are affected; we believe students are best served by learning to take a variety of perspectives and to more fully comprehend US history and other subjects (see also Malin and Harnish 2023). We also conclude that marginalized communities, including non-White and LGBTQ students, will be particularly harmed by the lack of or limited access to perspectives that are critical of master narratives provided in coursework. For example, *The 1619 Project* is the target of many of these laws, and the premise of this work is to present an alternate way to think about the founding of the United States where slavery was a central motivation. This idea and perspective would be banned in these states. Additionally, the concept of CRT, which for these state actions often means that the concept of systemic racism cannot be taught, will be left out of curricula. As such, these actions effectively limit the ways that teachers can approach curricula that deals with issues of race, racism, sexuality, and how they play a role in U.S. and global history, which in turn limit the ways that students may contextualize relevant history and have access to knowledge. We concur with Richeson (2020, p. 10), however, who claims “unless people understand the systemic forces that create and sustain racial inequality, we will never successfully address it.”

Why is knowledge being demobilized? To answer ‘why’ knowledge is being demobilized, first we draw on statements made by government officials in states that implemented actions to restrict critical perspectives. Governors and other Republican politicians made statements through press releases, press

Table 2 Examples of state actions that demobilize critical historical content (Updated December 30, 2022).

State	Government Body Implementing Restrictions	State Action Example(s)
AL	State Board of Education Resolution: "Preservation of Intellectual Freedom and Non-Discrimination in Alabama Public Schools"	Selected excerpts of specific teaching restrictions listed government action "concepts that impute fault, blame, a tendency to oppress others, or the need to feel guilt or anguish to persons solely because of their race or sex."
FL	Legislature SB 148 Stop W.O.K.E. Act	"classroom instruction and curriculum may not be used to indoctrinate or persuade students to a particular point of view inconsistent with the principles of this subsection or state 536 academic standards." "The State Board of Education shall develop or adopt a curriculum to inspire future generations through motivating stories of American history that demonstrate important life skills and the principles of individual freedom that enabled persons to prosper even in the most difficult circumstances."
GA	Legislature HB 1084	"America is fundamentally Racist" "Anguish, guilt, or distress" "race scapegoating or stereotyping"
IA	Legislature House File 802	"the superintendent of each school district shall ensure that any curriculum or mandatory staff or student training provided by an employee of the school district or by a contractor hired by the school district does not teach, advocate, encourage, promote, or act upon specific stereotyping and scapegoating toward others on the basis of demographic group membership or identity."
ID	Legislature HB 377	"The Idaho legislature finds that tenets outlined in subsection 23 (3)(a) of this section, often found in "critical race theory," undermine the objectives outlined in subsection (1) of this section and exacerbate and inflame divisions on the basis of sex, race, ethnicity, religion, color, national origin, or other criteria in ways contrary to the unity of the nation and the well-being of the state of Idaho and its citizens."
KY	Legislature SB 1 (Vetoed and overridden)	"An individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, does not bear responsibility for actions committed by other members of the same race or sex"
MS	Legislature SB 2113	"Affirm that any sex, race, ethnicity, religion or national origin is inherently superior or that individuals should be adversely treated based on such characteristics."
ND	Legislature HB1508	"is systemically embedded in American society and the American legal system to facilitate racial inequality."
NH	Legislature HB2	"That an individual, by virtue of his or her age, sex, gender identity, sexual orientation, race, creed, color, marital status, familial status, mental or physical disability, religion, or national origin, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously"
OK	Legislature HB 1775	"any individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex"
SC	Legislature H. 4100 1.105	"one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex; (2) an individual, by virtue of his race or sex, is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously" "an individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his race or sex" "fault, blame, or bias should be assigned to a race or sex, or to members of a race or sex because of their race or sex."
SD	Governor Executive Order 2022-02	"The Department of Education (DOE) shall not compel employees, students, or teachers to personally affirm, adopt, or adhere to inherently divisive concepts"
TX	Legislature HB 3979	"the advent of slavery in the territory that is now the United States constituted the true founding of the United States" "require an understanding of the 1619 Project"
TN	Legislature SB 0623	"An individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, is " "An individual, by virtue of the individual's race or sex, bears responsibility for actions committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex" "An individual should feel discomfort, guilt, anguish, or another form of psychological distress solely because of the individual's race or sex" "This state or the United States is fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist" "Promoting division between, or resentment of, a race, sex, religion, creed, nonviolent political affiliation, social class, or class of people" "Ascribing character traits, values, moral or ethical codes, privileges, or beliefs to a race or sex, or to an individual because of the individual's race or sex."

Table 2 (continued)

UT	State Board of Education Resolution 277	"various counterpoints to a topic in an impartial manner." "a student or educator bears responsibility for the past actions of individuals from the same sex, race, religion, sexual orientation, gender identity or any other protected class as the student or educator"
VA	Executive Order 1	"end the use of inherently divisive concepts, including Critical Race Theory, and to raise academic standards."

conferences, news interviews, executive orders, and social media posts. These statements reveal their stated intentions, which were to prevent division in schools, protect students from racism/sexism, and teach what they framed as being more accurate history. After examining their stated explanations through text, we then also examine the ‘why’ question through the lens of outside motivations behind these government actions and statements, including populist forces and organized political influencers.

In the statements examined by politicians who enacted bans on critical perspectives in school curricula, like the *1619 Project*, words like “divisive,” “racist,” “sexist,” and suggestions that these materials would or did “inflamm[e] division” and make students feel “guilt” and “shame” dominated the stated reasons as to why they were being banned. Statements by politicians implied that students (and it appeared they were generally focused on White and heterosexual students) would be negatively affected by such content. As noted, the curricula that are in question include critical perspectives that question master narratives about race and sexuality in U.S. History and society, offering more perspectives from the margins, and the public officials appeared to be focused on preventing such ideas from offending White and heterosexual students (and parents). An example of this came from a state representative in Texas, where he said, “You can’t teach that one gender is better than the other. You can’t discriminate either... and say that one race or one gender is responsible for the ills of the past.”

Officials in the identified states made claims that they were protecting students from division and racism. For example, the Governor of Alabama posted a statement on the social media platform Twitter: “We have permanently BANNED Critical Race Theory in Alabama. We’re focused on teaching our children how to read and write, not HATE.” Here, the governor attempts to connect the word “hate” to CRT. However, we note that the resolution passed by the Alabama State School Board does not define or mention CRT; rather, it contains vague statements about banning curricula that make students feel guilt or shame about their race/sex. This is inconsistent with the governor’s multiple statements in which she claims to have banned CRT. Nevertheless, this was her attempt at explaining why it was wise or necessary to ban this content in the state she governed. Similarly, Tennessee’s Governor released the following statement: “Critical race theory is un-American...It fundamentally puts groups of people above the sanctity of the individual which is a founding principle of this nation. It’s appropriate that we would not teach critical race theory in this state.” Here as well, the governor claims that CRT should not be taught in the state, yet the legislation passed by the Tennessee Legislature does not mention or define CRT. Thus, discourse surrounding CRT, a legal theory, and the term’s usage by politicians does not reflect what the actual theory states; rather they appear to be using the term rhetorically for political purposes (see also Malin and Hornbeck 2022). Again, in this instance, the governor explains that they are banning CRT because it teaches hate, citing this as the ‘why.’ The governor of Alabama stated publicly that CRT was not actually taught in schools, but asserted that, by enacting a rule, the state

would ensure schools would never teach CRT (Moseley 2021). We also noted some statements in which officials claimed history should be taught more accurately, often while simultaneously asserting that critical perspectives are inaccurate and dangerous. In North Dakota, State Senator Janne Myrdal stated that “we need to teach true history” while also warning that critical perspectives found in CRT would “have a political consequence on our children later.” No evidence, however, is provided to support such assertions. Again, the answer to why these restrictions were necessary is that critical perspectives are detrimental to children. The Governor of Tennessee also stated, “We need to make sure that our kids recognize that this country is moving toward a more perfect union, that we should teach the exceptionalism of our nation.” The Governor implied that “exceptionalism” was the accurate and productive way in which to teach history in schools. State Representative Ron Naate of Idaho said that “CRT, rooted in Marxist thought, is a pernicious way of viewing the world. It demands that everything in society be viewed through the lens of racism, sexism, and power.” This statement again implies that critical perspectives about history are dangerous and inaccurate.

This question, surrounding the “why” behind bans/restrictions of critical perspectives in schools, warrants an exploration that extends beyond just the words and explanations of the politicians who are banning them. The contemporary U.S. is characterized by uniquely high levels of political polarization and hyperpartisanship, and some of the largest and most emotion-laden issues of late have centered on education. Education is now a central battleground in ongoing “culture wars” (Hornbeck 2023). The years of pandemic schooling brought major conflicts around education – e.g., vis-à-vis school closures, instructional mandates, vaccines, and masks – and it appears that these conflicts opened opportunities for conservative actors to ratchet up their attention toward and challenges to public schools (Malin and Harnish 2023). Such actors have worked concertedly to introduce content aimed to distract and divide U.S. citizens and to foster identity-based sensibilities of us versus them (Hacker and Pierson 2020; Malin and Lubienski 2022).

Recent research by Knight-Abowitz and Sellers (2023) also suggests that populism is playing a significant role, as evidenced by a powerful racial reckoning among the right. These populist tendencies are harnessed by the aforementioned network, which not only introduces concepts like “CRT” and “gender ideology” into the political landscape but also actively frame and polarize them, leveraging them as powerful ideological instruments. Indeed, emergent evidence suggests a broader influence architecture, constituted by non-profit groups, media outlets, think tanks, foundations, and law firms, that is systematically injecting challenges to educators, professional decision-making, and school curriculum into political discourse, helping to fuel the political and legal movement we are observing (Kumashiro 2021; Legum and Zekeria 2021; Hornbeck 2023). One important example regarding how individuals and outside organizations are playing an increased role can be seen through the actions of Christopher Rufo, a conservative activist, who is connected to conservative and difficult-to-trace political (dark money) groups (Carter 2023). Rufo substantially contributed to igniting and sustaining the

conflict over CRT (Wallace-Wells 2021). Despite little to no significant pre-existing controversy, Rufo managed to frame CRT as a threat to American values, creating an uproar within the Trump populist base. This in turn led to further demands for this issue to become a rallying cry among conservative politicians, establishing a firm stand against CRT as a requisite display of alignment with their base's concerns. In such a politically charged atmosphere, such attacks—as largely manufactured through elites—are more than ideological alignment. They form part of a broader populist wave (see Knight-Abowitz and Sellers 2023), a reckoning with racial and social issues that resonates with certain segments of society. Consequently, the political expediency of these efforts to restrict or ban critical perspectives becomes significantly influenced by this socio-political climate, where populism and the rhetoric of influential figures like Rufo become powerful drivers. Depending on the context, these efforts to demobilize critical content and perspectives may be substantially well-received.

How is knowledge being demobilized? Finally, as to the question of 'how is knowledge being demobilized?' three approaches dominated the Republican strategy to ban or censor critical topics from being taught in schools (See Table 2): state legislation, executive actions by governors, and actions by state boards of education. Of the 16 states that have enacted such restrictions, two states (South Dakota and Virginia) used executive orders by their governors. Two states (Alabama and Utah) used state school board resolutions to implement their bans on restrictive curricula. Of the remaining 12 states, legislatures passed laws that were subsequently enacted. It should be noted that in Kentucky, the Democratic Governor vetoed the bill, but the Republican-dominated state legislature successfully overrode the veto, making the measure the law of the state.

Findings indicated that all 16 states that used official power to demobilize critical perspectives were dominated by Republican majorities. They used party cohesion to achieve their aims in these states, considering that their state government actors who passed these measures are all of the Republican party. In the one state where the governor vetoed the measure, the governor was a Democrat, and the legislature was Republican. In Virginia, where the Republican Governor used an executive order to implement knowledge demobilization measures, the legislature was Democratic, which meant the order could only apply during his tenure in office. In the two states (Alabama and Utah) where state school boards made changes, the states were controlled by Republicans in both their legislature and governors' offices.

As with the *why* question, the *how* question may also be partially answerable on a different level—e.g., with attention toward more behind-the-scenes efforts to secure support for such changes, model legislation, webinars/trainings to support politicians and activists who are leading these charges, etc. To fully analyze this influence architecture is beyond the scope of the article, but again we can point to emergent evidence that this is a substantial, well-funded, organized effort (Malin and Lubinski 2022; Legum and Zekeria 2021; Lopez et al. 2021; Kingkade et al. 2021).

Discussion

This study examined knowledge (de)mobilization in school curriculum across states. We find that in 16 states, government officials have enacted laws and resolutions that seek to prevent the teaching of critical perspectives in K-12 schools. This section reconnects with the literature and considers implications. Broadly, we conclude that demobilizing critical knowledge will serve to perpetuate a tradition of using dominant master

narratives to teach history and social studies topics in schools. We also return to the prevalent issue of vague legal language, considering implications and describing early effects in schools. Additionally, we further examine how these actions appear to be reacting to a largely manufactured crisis, and we consider the coded language within actions that seeks to protect White racial dominance and heteronormativity.

Perpetuating dominant historical narratives and division. Our study reveals that state actions limiting the inclusion of critical historical perspectives in schools are partly driven by politicians' professed belief that there is a single accurate or correct interpretation of history. For instance, the state senator in North Dakota (refer Table 3) who argued that "we need to teach true history" implies that only one version of history holds truth. Similarly, the governor of Tennessee suggested that schools should uphold a singular historical narrative, extolling the exceptionalism of the United States. Such dominant narratives have long been ingrained in school curricula (Loewen 1995); however, the recent drive by states to legislate restrictive rules on teaching content that may cause discomfort or offense poses an unusual, elevated threat. These state actions not only impinge on teachers' professional freedom and discretion to deliver a more balanced, accurate perspective of history, but they may also jeopardize the breadth of knowledge produced and shared by scholars and experts who are often consulted for their expertise when creating K12 curricula, thus stunting students' ability to develop critical thinking skills.

From our perspectives, it is not necessary to deliver a curriculum steeped solely in critical perspectives; rather, what is needed is a balanced approach that includes critical viewpoints as an essential component. A singularly positive, uncritical, or exceptionalist historical version restricts and distorts our understanding of history. Traditionally, debates at the state level about textbooks and standards have revolved around what should be included. In a striking departure, recent actions actively work to suppress certain knowledge, excluding certain curricula and content, instead of focusing on how to foster critical thinking and accurate understandings in schools.

Officials often assert that critical perspectives breed division, which they argue has no place in schools. However, this viewpoint fails to recognize that maintaining a dominant historical narrative could equally generate or exacerbate division. They don't take into account that engaging with diverse perspectives might induce discomfort but also might lead to richer, more nuanced understandings of history. Adopting a balanced approach that includes critical perspectives could foster dialogue and encourage a more complete historical understanding.

Insisting schools perpetuate the narrative of exceptionalism while ignoring the abundant evidence of existing societal inequalities glosses over reality. It could potentially deepen societal divisions when students, parents, and other citizens as they recognize certain knowledge is being inappropriately withheld or distorted. Such policies might be interpreted as attempts at indoctrination, compelling students to absorb a potentially historically inaccurate version of events. A balanced approach that incorporates critical perspectives could provide students with a more holistic view of history, acknowledging the complexities and contradictions inherent in our shared past.

Vague language in demobilizing actions. Vague language is pervasive within state actions that limit critical perspectives, leaving interpretation to schools, teachers, parents, and students. Consider again the law in Alabama that restricts "concepts that

Table 3 Why: Selected justifications for actions taken to censor critical concepts.	
State	Why (Selected Justification of Action)
AL	Governor "We have permanently BANNED Critical Race Theory in Alabama. We're focused on teaching our children how to read and write, not HATE." (Ivey, 2022)
FL	Governor "I think [CRT] it's going to cause a lot of divisions. I think it'll cause people to think of themselves more as a member of particular race based on skin color, rather than based on the content of their character and based on their hard work and what they're trying to accomplish in life." (Desantis, 2022)
GA	Governor: "[CRT] is divisive anti-American curriculum" (Kemp, 2022)
IA	Governor: "Critical Race Theory is about labels and stereotypes, not education. It teaches kids that we should judge others based on race, gender or sexual identity, rather than the content of someone's character," "I am proud to have worked with the legislature to promote learning, not discriminatory indoctrination." (Leys, 2021)
ID	Rep Ron Nate: "House Bill 377 is a great win for Idaho because it prohibits the promotion of Social Justice programming and advocacy for Critical Race Theory (CRT) in our schools and universities. CRT, rooted in Marxist thought, is a pernicious way of viewing the world. It demands that everything in society be viewed through the lens of racism, sexism, and power. CRT tries to make kids feel bad because of the color of their skin, or their sex, or any other category—one group is seen as an aggrieved minority and another group is the oppressive majority" (ABC 4 Utah, 2021)
ND	Senator Janne Myrdal "[CRT] It's a political ideology ... It is an ideology that if we can indoctrinate it into our children young it would have a political consequence on our children later," "... We need to teach true history" (mydakotan, 2021).
OK	Oklahoma Governor: "We can and should teach this history without labeling a young child as an oppressor or requiring he or she feel guilt or shame based on their race or sex." (Frosch, 2021)
SC	"The critical race theory is a theory, but it is being taught as a fact," said Rep. Mike Burns, R-Greenville, who is a sponsor for H.4325 and H.4343. "They are dividing people along racial lines, socio-cultural lines. We need more unity, not division," (Bojorquez, 2021)
SD	"Critical Race Theory is a political and divisive ideology that teaches a distorted view of the United States of America and its institutions." (Fox 11, 2021).
TX	Gov Abbott: "House Bill 3979 is a strong move to abolish critical race theory in Texas, but more must be done," (Abbott, 2021)
TN	Governor: "We need to make sure that our kids recognize that this country is moving toward a more perfect union, that we should teach the exceptionalism of our nation and how people can live together and work together to make a greater nation, and to not teach things that inherently divide or pit either Americans against Americans or people groups against people groups," (AP News, 2021) "Critical race theory is un-American," "It fundamentally puts groups of people above the sanctity of the individual which is a founding principle of this nation. It's appropriate that we would not teach critical race theory in this state." (AP News, 2021)
UT	Rep Christiansen: CRT will "degrade certain societal values" and can "harm students' learning." (The Tennessee Star, 2021)
VA	Virginia Secretary of Education, Amy Guidera: "We're talking about inappropriate things like privilege walks, privilege bingo, putting children into situations where they're playing as the victim," Guidera said. "Those are completely inappropriate ideas." (US News and World Report, 2022)

impute fault, blame, a tendency to oppress others, or the need to feel guilt or anguish to persons solely because of their race or sex.” How will a teacher know how to teach the concept of slavery or Jim Crow, and how will they teach about voter suppression? How will they teach about the Civil Rights Movement? Teachers may avoid teaching such important topics in depth out of fear for their jobs or of inadvertently creating strife within their classes and workplace. The potential chilling effect related to teaching critical topics in schools because of the vague details found in these laws is quite large, in our estimation, potentially leading to the exclusion of important perspectives. The language and rhetoric would appear to forestall teachers from exploring approaches to learning found in social theory, which have developed for over one hundred years within the academy. The legislator from Idaho claimed that CRT was dominated in “Marxist thought,” insinuating it is problematic to recognize class and cultural inequality within U.S. history and society.

Manufactured problem. Ward’s (2019) knowledge mobilization framework reveals how some motivations for mobilizing knowledge may be to solve a problem, change policy, or create new programs. While politicians who support efforts to limit critical knowledge may claim that they are seeking to solve a problem, the reality is that leading opponents have only provided specious examples of rare occurrences in schools while they erroneously claim these are pervasive issues. In some cases, leading officials have been unable to back up their assertions when directly challenged, yet they have continued their pursuits. The Governor of Alabama, for example, was asked if CRT was being taught in schools and she replied that it was not; subsequently, she continued to push for official state action (Moseley 2021). In another

case (See Table 3), the Virginia Secretary of Education claimed that their executive order is designed to stop “inappropriate things like privilege walks, privilege bingo, putting children into situations where they’re playing as the victim.” In this instance as well, they provide no data that support that these instances are occurring, in isolation or broadly, in schools. The lack of evidence to support that CRT or other critical perspectives are pervasive in schools or that they are problematic, suggests that politicians and associated advocates have largely manufactured a political problem to garner support with their base, uphold the status quo, or scare parents for political gain (see also Malin and Harnish 2023).

Protections for white and heterosexual students. Language used by politicians for the justification of limiting critical perspectives has largely revolved around protecting students from feeling guilt and shame, or asserted that critical perspectives would cause division in schools around topics related to race and sexuality. However, as we have interpreted, the students that these acts are intending to protect are White and heterosexual, two dominant groups within society. These groups are not mentioned overtly within legislation, school board resolutions, or executive orders. Revisiting one example that illustrates this comes from the language of the Governor of Alabama, where they stated that they were “focused on teaching our children how to read and write, not HATE.” This governor, who also denied that CRT was being taught in schools in Alabama, insinuated that teaching critical historical perspectives in schools leads to hate. Based on the language of the school board resolution in Alabama, the students to which CRT and other critical historical perspectives would harm White and heterosexual students; however, little to no evidence was put forth to show how these students were being harmed.

Student exclusion. In the 16 states that have formally restricted critical perspectives in schools, students of color and LGBTQ students stand to lose valuable perspectives in school that demonstrate the reality of the historical struggle of marginalized citizens and the barriers they faced. The dominant narrative that lawmakers suggest should be taught tells a naïve story and shares an incomplete picture of the past that excludes LGBTQ students and the story of racism. Leaving out critical perspectives in school curriculum can be dangerous because it can lead to a lack of understanding and knowledge about certain groups of people, their histories, and their experiences (Hornbeck 2018; Yosso 2002; Snapp et al. 2015; Emdin 2016). This can result in a lack of empathy and understanding and can even contribute to harmful stereotypes and biases. Omitting critical perspectives can also deprive students of the opportunity to learn about different ways of thinking and understanding the world (Hornbeck 2018). It can limit their ability to think critically and make informed decisions and can even lead to a narrow and one-sided view of the world. Leaving out critical perspectives can also contribute to a lack of representation and inclusivity in education (Ledesma and Calderon 2015.) This can exclude certain groups of students from feeling seen, heard, and valued, and can create a sense of isolation and marginalization.

International context. While this study primarily focused on policy debates and implementation in the U.S., there are echoes in similar discussions happening worldwide. The parallel events across different countries are not merely coincidental but are indicative of a larger global trend. This includes the rise of conservative movements in Europe—most notably in Poland, France, and Italy—that advocate for a return to more traditional societal norms, including those propagated in schools.

In Hungary, under the leadership of right-wing Prime Minister Viktor Orban, the education system has seen significant changes. Patriotism and nationalism now take center stage in the curriculum, attempting to instill a sense of national pride in students (Schlagwein 2020). Moreover, there has been a deliberate attempt to recast controversial historical figures, such as Miklos Horthy, a known Hitler sympathizer, in a more favorable light, demonstrating how the control of historical narratives can shape current societal attitudes.

Similar currents can be seen beyond Europe. In Brazil, political activists have increasingly campaigned for the monitoring of school curriculum to ensure the promotion of traditional values (Alves et al. 2021). These actions mirror in some ways what is happening in the U.S. and further highlight the international nature of this trend. Japan, a democratic country with a long history of internationalism in education, is experiencing a surge in right-wing discourse linked to nationalism. This shift is pressuring the school curriculum to become less internationalist and more focused on Japanese nationalism (Yoon and Asahina 2021).

It's important to note that the movements to censor critical information and promote nationalistic perspectives have far-reaching international implications. By fostering a single national narrative, these trends risk creating an environment conducive to misunderstanding and conflict. History has shown repeatedly that when diverse perspectives are silenced in favor of a singular national narrative, it can lead to strained international relations and, in extreme cases, conflicts between nations. This global context underscores the importance of our study, as the consequences of such actions are not confined within national borders but can impact the global community as a whole.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates the ways that states that are controlled by conservative actors are using their official power to

demobilize historical knowledge that questions or critiques dominant narratives in school curriculum. While school curriculum is not the be-all and end-all when it comes to access to knowledge for young people, it is a pervasive and important way for students to learn and understand historical knowledge and may be the only way that some students encounter such knowledge. These data show ways that states are censoring information that might help students outside of the dominant identity feel included as part of the larger historical story. Additionally, critical historical perspectives can help all students see a more holistic interpretation of the past, an important reality in a democracy. Historical knowledge demobilization, as we call it, is only one part of the ongoing story related to the culture wars and the control of historical master narratives. The clear example of the Governor of Florida influencing the white-washing of AP African American studies curriculum shows the potential ramifications of such policies and warrants continued study as these types of demobilizing policies proliferate. Our study provides insight into strategies being used by political actors to advance their power and narrative in schools, leaving new questions but furthering our collective understanding of their aims.

Data availability

All data for this study are summarized in tables and are accessible by using this study's reference list, which provides paths to data available at public websites.

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Notes

- 1 CRT, which has origins in critical legal studies showing how racism has been foundational in law and public policy, has developed into a broadly adjustable attempt at explaining the production and maintenance of racism (Crenshaw, 2010; Ray, 2023). As a theory, it draws attention toward understanding structural racism.
- 2 Also, as we moved forward we reviewed, reconciled, and incorporated recent scholarly and gray literature that included pertinent analysis for addressing 'how' and 'why' questions.

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