



WOKE EDUCATION

a broadside from the oregon **education** project



Oregon Education is no longer American Education.

IT'S WOKE EDUCATION.

The Oregon Department of Education is *transforming* K-12 schools into centers for social justice activism.

Critical theories of ethnicity, race, and sex select and frame curriculum standards. Students are racialized, divided into identity groups, and taught a cynical, caricatured version of America's founding and history — designed to “decenter whiteness” and dismantle Liberal Democracy.¹

The focus is producing **critical consciousness**² {“wokeness”} in students so they become acutely aware of “**systemic oppression**”³, transforming themselves into *change agents* for “equity” and “social justice”— which are *political* aspirations.

That's the goal of **Woke** Education. Not focusing on **Merit, Excellence, and Success**.⁴ It's one of the reasons Oregon students perform so poorly on proficiency tests designed to *determine* student success.⁵ Rather than putting their *focus* on students' acquiring core knowledge and essential skills to think critically, ODE is *focused* on preparing “woke” social justice activists to support progressive *political* causes.⁶

IMPORTANT

The term “woke” is often *weaponized* by its critics and is now a “trigger” word in much popular discourse. That's **not** how it's being used here. It's also imagined to be a new moral system, religion, or philosophy that has seized control of progressive politics. But it's none of those things. Wokeness is simply **critical consciousness**:

Becoming critically conscious is an ongoing process in which a learner engages in **reflective activities**⁷ to reach new levels of *awareness about oppression* and take action within their social reality.

That's what it means to be **woke**. The focus is systemic oppression: being aware of the racial hierarchy that exists in which “white” people, as a group, do better than “nonwhite” groups.⁸ It's the same framework that drives many Diversity, Equity & Inclusion efforts.⁹ It's generated by using Critical Theory: a “lens” through which we *reflect* on the world.¹⁰ Critical Theory is the first element in what can be described as **The Anatomy of Woke**:

Critical Theory is a lens to generate **critical consciousness** through *reflection*. It produces an awareness of **systemic oppression** causing *inequities*. We make them right through **equity** and **social justice activism**.

Understand this framework and you will understand what drives Oregon Education. It's both accurate and fair to say that ODE is an indoctrination¹¹ platform for wokeness. It permeates the curriculum at every level. The most notable is the Transformative Social Emotional Learning Framework and Standards (TSEL) adopted in 2023 to create “**equity-focused school cultures that support student and adult well-being**.”¹²

This is **NOT** an indictment of local schools, school boards, and classroom teachers. They are *required* to enforce ODE's woke agenda. While some embrace that role, others have quiet concerns and doubt its *efficacy* to improve student relationships and narrow racial outcome disparities — which is *an important concern*.

So how did **Woke** Education come to dominate K-12 schools, particularly in **Oregon**?



¹ See Oregon Education Project Investigation Ethnic Studies: How Oregon Education Went Woke.

² Critical Consciousness is a Marxist-inspired social and educational concept that leads students to “awaken” and act on social and political issues — “social justice”.

³ See Oregon Education Project Explainer Systemic Oppression.

⁴ See Oregon Education Project Broadside American Education.

⁵ See our ODE Report Card in the Oregon Education Project Information Brief.

⁶ See the Oregon Department of Education's 2024 Revised Social Science Standards and their Transformative Social Emotional Learning Framework and Standards.

⁷ “... empathizing with a range of identities and lived experiences,” Oregon TSEL Framework.

⁸ See Critical Race Theory: A Primer by Khiara Bridges.

⁹ See Politics Over Performance: Identity Politics Ideology in Oregon's K-12 Public Education System by Shawnn Hartley of the Oregon Association of Scholars.

¹⁰ Critical Theory is “theorizing about the world with the goal of liberating human beings from the circumstances that enslave them” (Max Horkheimer). It is an interpretive lens through which we frame the world as a conflict between oppressor and oppressed; a lens of grievance on behalf of the victims of oppression; an analytical framework that is used to explain or examine facts or events.

See Oregon Education Project Investigation Critical Theory.

¹¹ Indoctrination is the process of teaching a person to accept a set of beliefs uncritically. (That's a *description*, not a weapon.)

¹² See the Oregon Department of Education's Transformative Social Emotional Learning Framework and Standards.

The Critical Turn in Education

“To the question: ‘Where did all the sixties radicals go?’, the most accurate answer,” noted Paul Buhle in his classic *Marxism in the United States*, “would be: neither to religious cults nor yuppiedom, but to the *classroom*”.

The turn to critical Marxist thought is a defining moment in the past 40 years of educational scholarship, especially for educational scholars who identify as part of the political Left. It introduced the ideas and the vocabulary that continue to frame most conversations in the field about social justice, such as hegemony, ideology, *consciousness*, praxis, and most importantly, the word ‘critical’ itself, which has become *ubiquitous* as a descriptor for Left educational scholarship.

The critical turn *radicalized the field*.¹³

Paolo Friere’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970) is the most widely assigned book in U.S. schools training K-12 teachers today. It’s a central text in educational courses across the country.¹⁴ Friere was a Brazilian education theorist cited as introducing the concept of *critical consciousness* (“*conscientization*”) to American educators. His Marxist-inspired social and educational framework leads students to “awaken” and act on social and political issues — **social justice**. Students learn to think deeply about “inequitable power structures and systems”, feeling empowered to change them through political action. Friere is the *inspiration* for **Woke Education**.

Friere’s influence is foundational to Oregon Education. The ODE’s 2024 Revised Social Science Curriculum demonstrates its centrality in the opening statement:

“The ten Essential Disciplinary Practices outlined below provide a framework for teaching the social sciences. By emphasizing skills like chronological reasoning, seeking diverse viewpoints, combating digital misinformation, and *empathizing with a range of identities and lived experiences* {critical reflection}, the practices help students become informed and *empowered agents of change* {social justice}.

These practices, integrated with the grade-level standards, equip students with content knowledge and skills *to address systemic injustices, advocate for a more equitable world, and uphold the aspirational ideals* of our democratic society.”¹⁵

That’s a textbook description of Friere’s “Critical Pedagogy”, whose influence extends throughout the mandated curriculum standards in student requirements like this:

“Examine {critical reflection} the consequences of *power and privilege* on issues associated with poverty, income, and wealth accumulation”¹⁶ {equity}.

TSEL is now the preferred means of implanting critical consciousness in students. That involves “culturally responsive practices”¹⁷ and “systemic approaches”¹⁸ “providing students with opportunities to reflect upon {critical reflection} and understand the root causes of *emotions related to our biases, stereotypes, prejudices, and discrimination*” and “nurturing student agency and voice (including non-verbal ways) to communicate as necessary parts of the educational process, *supporting students to take actions that challenge and change systems*”¹⁹ {social justice}.

Foundational to this is a strong commitment to uphold “educational equity”:

“ODE is committed to upholding **educational equity** throughout Oregon’s public schools. This involves recognizing the historical *and ongoing* trauma inflicted specifically on Native tribes, Latino/a/x and Indigenous, Black, and Persons of Color through our nation’s education systems, and responding with conscious, persistent, and *collective actions rooted in equity, racial justice, and anti-racism*.”²⁰

This commitment places the “Equity Lens” at the center of Oregon Education.²¹



¹³ Quoted from *The Critical Turn in Education: From Marxist Critique to Poststructuralist Feminism to Critical Theories of Race* by Isaac Gottesman — a supporter of Critical Pedagogy (emphasis added). Reading Gottesman’s sympathetic account is essential if you want to understand how American Education — taken as a whole — has “gone woke” over the past few decades.

See *Yes, Critical Race Theory Is Being Taught in Schools* by Zach Goldberg, Eric Kaufmann

¹⁴ *ibid*.

¹⁵ 2024 Social Science Standards Essential Disciplinary Practice.

¹⁶ 2024 Social Science Standards 4.E.E.S.1, p. 25; and see 2.E.E.S.2; 5.E.I.C.9; 6/7. E.I.C.9; 8.E.E.S.6; 8.E.M.I.9; HS.E.ST.15.

¹⁷ See Oregon Education Project Explainer *Culturally Responsive Teaching*.

¹⁸ See Oregon Education Project Explainer *Systemic Oppression*.

¹⁹ Oregon’s Transformative Social Emotional Learning Framework and Standards (emphasis added).

²⁰ 2023-24 Report Card from the Oregon Department of Education (emphasis added).

It goes on to read:

“It also requires humility, acknowledging that Oregon is part of a global movement working to educate about the harmful impacts of anti-Blackness, white supremacy, systemic discrimination, and all forms of hatred that impact our students and communities.”

²¹ **Equity** is Distributive Justice. It’s about *redistributing* wealth, power, and opportunity to groups who have been impacted by systemic oppression — *getting equal outcomes*.

Equality is Procedural Justice. It’s about impartial processes that guarantee fair treatment in a merit-based culture — *giving equal opportunities*.

The Equity Lens

"This **equity lens** helps educators and decision-makers recognize *institutional and systemic barriers and discriminatory practices that have limited student success in the Oregon education system ... The focus of this equity lens is on race and ethnicity.*"²²

The underlying premise for using the equity lens is that persistent outcome disparities between "white" students and "students of color" are due to the ongoing presence of racial trauma and systemic oppression in our schools.

This is the basic *premise* of **Woke** Education. It needs to be challenged.²³ As Black Economist Thomas Sowell states in *Discrimination and Disparities*, *Nothing is easier to find than sins among human beings, but to automatically make those sins the sole, or even primary, cause of different outcomes among different peoples is to ignore many other reasons for those disparities.*

There are *better* explanations for such disparities. One example: studies show²⁴ Black kids study less and watch more TV than white kids, who study less and watch more TV than Asian kids. It should not surprise us that proficiency tests rate these three groups in that same order: #3 Black, #2 White, and #1 Asian. What a child *chooses* to do with their time *now* has much more affect on educational outcome than what happened to their ancestors decades or even centuries ago. That is, unless you want to deny the child's *agency* altogether — which is *exactly* what Oregon's **TSEL** Framework does. (Much more on that coming soon).

The underlying sentiment may be what social scientists call *educational romanticism*: the idea that every child can be anything they want to be. That's not true, actually. Children differ in their *ability* to learn and apply the things that schools teach. As Black comedian and social critic Chris Rock put it to his own children: "You kids can be whatever your *good* at; and it helps to know somebody."

These disparities have deep roots, going back hundreds, even thousands of years. **America's WEIRD mindset invented popular education.** It was the fruit of centuries building Western European civilization. "People of color" didn't benefit from that until they *assimilated* into it. The *overwhelming progress* made is the accurate benchmark. Much of that success took place under conditions of *measurable* discrimination. Are we *really* to believe that today's "students of color" can't do the same?

²² Oregon's Education Equity Lens published by the Oregon Department of Education.

²³ See Oregon Education Project explainer **Systemic Oppression** and other publications for a comprehensive rebuttal of these claims. Our goal is to identify *the actual causes* and apply *successful strategies for change*. The goal of this Broadside is to accurately describe ODE's position and provide a "taste" of our response.

²⁴ NIH Predicting children's media use in the USA: Differences in cross-sectional and longitudinal analysis. (There are many other studies like this.)

RESOURCES 4

The Critical Turn in Education:
From Marxist Critique to
Poststructuralist Feminism
to Critical Theories of Race
Issac Gottesman

Pedagogy of the Oppressed |
The Politics of Education |
Education for Critical
Consciousness
Paulo Freire

On Critical Pedagogy
Henry A. Giroux

Ideology and Curriculum
Michael W. Apple

Critical Race Theory in Education |
Culturally Relevant Pedagogy
Gloria Ladson-Billings

Why Race and Culture Matter
In Schools James A. Banks

Black Lives Matter At School
Denisha Jones & Jesse Hagopian

Fix Injustice, Not Kids
Paul Gorski & Katy Swalwell

Leading Anti-Bias Early
Childhood Programs
Louis Derman-Sparks
Debbie LeeKeenan
John Nimmo

The Critical Classroom: How
Critical Race Theory Undermines
Academic Excellence and
Individual Agency in Education
Burke, Butcher & Greene

Discrimination & Disparities |
Charter Schools and Their Enemies
Thomas Sowell

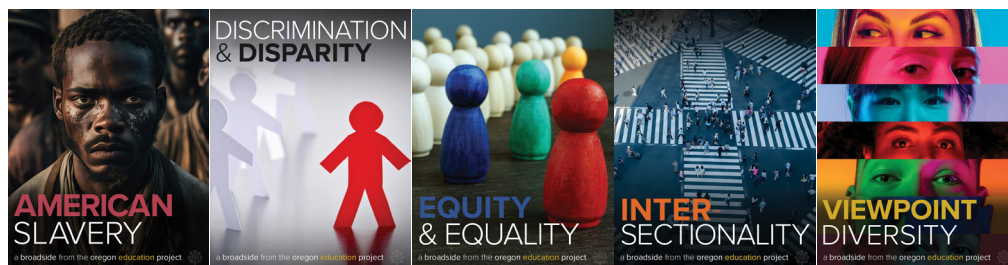
Real Education Charles Murray

Inequality: A Reassessment
of the Effect of Family and
Schooling in America
Christopher Jencks

The Weirdest People in the
World: How the West Became
Psychologically Peculiar and
Particularly Prosperous
by Joseph Henrich.

BroadSides Learn to Think Critically About the World

Approximately 2,000 words, these easy-to-read essays can be read in 15-20 minutes. They include links to online references, resources, and a basic bibliography (in the digital versions).



Rob Schlöpfer is a retired social science educator who spent over a decade conducting classes and community conversations to bridge our deep political divide.

A former pastor, professor, and publisher, for 40+ years his focus has been teaching critical thinking, culture, and civics.

Rob is the Creator and Director of the Oregon Education Project and is a member of the National Association of Scholars.