

# Legislatures Address Racial Justice Curriculum and Standards

BY BENJAMIN OLNECK-BROWN

Recent protests and national conversations about racial justice have prompted policymakers to newly consider issues of race and inclusion in K-12 instruction. Some legislators are examining state standards to promote racial equity, reduce implicit bias, and encourage curricula that recognizes the contributions of minority groups and the complex history and impact of racism in the United States.

Many states already imbed racial justice issues or ethnic studies into their social studies standards. For example:

- [Nevada](#) requires its Council to Establish Academic Standards to establish standards of “content and performance for ethnic and diversity studies for pupils enrolled in high school.”
- [California](#) requires its Instructional Quality Commission to develop a model ethnic studies curriculum for use in public high schools.
- [Washington](#) recently required its superintendent of public instruction to make materials in ethnic studies available for use in K-12 schools.
- [Indiana](#) requires high schools to offer a one-semester elective course for “the study of ethnic and racial groups.”
- [Nebraska](#) requires that civics courses in all grades “include and adequately stress contributions of all ethnic groups to (a) the development and growth of America into a great nation, (b) art, music, education, medicine, literature, science, politics, and government, and (c) the military in all of this nation’s wars.”
- [Virginia](#) recently created a Culturally Relevant and Inclusive Education Practices Advisory Committee, tasked with providing standards that include slavery, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia “and other forms of historical dehumanizing injustice and dis-



crimination; the ignored and untold history of the indigenous people of Virginia and North America; and the untold histories of other groups historically underrepresented in American and world history.” The committee will also provide recommendations on anti-bias instruction for students and professional development for educators.

Pending legislation to update standards includes:

- [Massachusetts HB 581](#) requires including the events of Black history in instruction at schools and institutions of higher education, including the history of the African slave trade, slavery in America and the vestiges of slavery in this country.
- [Illinois HB 4954](#) amends the school code, adds certain commemorative holidays, and provides that teaching the history of the United States and Black history shall include the study of the American civil rights renaissance and the study of pre-enslavement history.

Some states require teaching historical events that connect to issues of bias and discrimination today. For example, at least [12 states](#) require teaching the Holocaust in K-12 schools, and state standards often require that this instruction be used as a tool to teach students about enduring issues of discrimination worldwide.

A [report](#) issued by the Teaching Tolerance project of the Southern Poverty Law Center found that curriculum on the history of slavery in the U.S. varies substantially from state to state, district to district, and classroom to classroom. The center issues [model standards](#) for anti-bias and diversity education in all grades and a [model framework](#) for teaching the history of American slavery and its legacy today.

Some states and districts incorporate discussions of equity, bias and discrimination into their teaching of civics. All but nine states have a civics requirement, and at least eight states require meaningful civics assessment. The [CivXNow coalition](#), a cross-partisan civic education advocacy group with which NCSL partners, offers a [policy menu](#) for legislators that focuses on meaningful civic education, which can [encourage civic participation](#) across racial and ethnic lines and reduce disparities in civic knowledge and participation. NCSL recently hosted a [virtual meeting](#) in which participants discussed the link between civic education and racial justice.

NCSL continues to [track legislation](#) related to racial justice and other education issues, and publishes timely information on pressing questions for state legislators on its [education webpage](#).

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