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## Curriculum Censorship Harms Us All. This Brief Explains Why.



A [legal brief](#) filed last week by the National Academy of Education contends that an Oklahoma law restricting curricula related to race and sex is limiting the ability of the state's schools to fully prepare students for college, careers, and participation in civil society.

“The robust body of interdisciplinary research evidence is clear that *all* students learn best and are best prepared to participate in a diverse and multicultural democracy with inclusive curricula and pedagogy,” said NEPC Fellow and Academy member [Amy Stuart Wells](#), Chief Research Officer of the Bank Street Graduate School of Education in New York, who led the effort to produce the brief. “The research was so vast that space limitations precluded us from including all of it. This powerful brief reminds us all of why we do the work we do—and why it matters now more than ever.”

Under the law that is the subject of the suit, colleges and universities cannot require students to complete diversity training. The law also places limits on K-12 curricula related to race and sex. For example, it includes a vague and overbroad ban on lessons that could lead a student to “feel discomfort, guilt, anguish or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex.” Since 2021, 19 additional states have adopted similar measures that impact K-12 education, [according to Education Week](#).

The Oklahoma law, the brief asserts, “denies the next generation of Oklahomans access to a curriculum that furthers . . . their successful cognitive, social, and emotional development, and strongest academic achievement, including preparation for democratic civic engage-

ment.” Drawing upon research evidence, it explains that, relative to the narrower approach proscribed by the law, an inclusive curriculum leads to measurably higher level of student engagement, confidence, emotional resilience, and the “ability to deliberate across perspectives.”

The brief also contends that preventing students from accessing accurate histories that reflect their communities’ experiences “impede[s] all students’ academic, social, and emotional development, and erode [s] the democratic values schools are charged with protecting.” The brief concludes:

Policies that narrow curricula to exclude race, culture, or difficult history disregard the preponderance of social science research about how students learn. Narrowing curricula limits the development of critical and independent thought—skills necessary for navigating rising misinformation, political polarization, and declining trust in democratic institutions.

Contemporary curricular restrictions mirror historical patterns of exclusion that weaken democracy. Oklahoma’s restrictions undermine informed citizenship and perpetuate systems of inequality by denying students access to the full scope of history and culture. By excluding discussions of how race, culture, and power operate in society, these policies erode the very foundations of democratic life. When curricular restrictions suppress discussion of controversial issues, they deny students opportunities to practice democratic dialogue, leaving them less prepared to confront disagreement and polarization in civic life. Students then leave school without the tools necessary to evaluate contemporary social and political challenges, weakening democracy itself.

The brief’s sponsor, the National Academy of Education, is a nonpartisan, nonprofit organization whose members are elected on the basis of their record of producing high-quality education research to improve education policy and practice. In addition to Wells, Academy members who contributed to the brief include NEPC Fellow [Janelle Scott](#) of the University of California at Berkeley. Written with pro bono assistance from Holland and Hart, the brief was filed with the Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit in support of the plaintiffs in [Bert v. Drummond](#), a 2021 lawsuit opposing [House Bill 1775](#). The plaintiffs in that suit are a multiracial consortium of organizations, teachers, and students.

## NEPC Resources on Legal Issues

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