



Frequently Asked Questions

Factual Information from the District

In an effort to provide accurate and timely information to Columbia County School District stakeholders, the district has developed the FAQ resource. Questions and answers will remain on the website for a period of time and then archived in a manner easily accessible to our stakeholders.

Refocus Response: This resource is a response to the many examples of sexual content and Critical Race Theory concepts that have been found to exist in Columbia County School District. The administrators claim that these examples misrepresent them, yet they have refused to create policies or hold staff accountable for incorporating these concepts within the district. As is the common trend when facts cannot be refuted, these examples are now being labeled as “misinformation,” and resources such as this are CCSD’s plan to control the narrative for the population. To see examples of these ideologies in our schools, please visit our website at www.refocusededucation.com.

Why isn’t my question posted on the FAQ document?

Not all questions will be posted, only those that are posed from multiple community members indicating a need for further communication. Your child’s teacher, school support personnel, or principal is typically the best place to start.

Refocus Response: We agree. Always try to ask questions at the lowest level, beginning with the teacher.

Does the Columbia County School District teach Critical Race Theory (CRT) or the 1619 Project?

No. The Columbia County School District uses the Georgia Standards of Excellence in all courses to serve as the foundation for all instruction. You may visit www.georgiastandards.org for a full review of all K-12 standards.

Refocus Response: This answer is technically accurate in that CCSD does not formally have a curriculum that embraces Critical Race Theory or the 1619 Project. However, circumstantial evidence abounds that the district does, in fact, support these ideologies. Just a few examples are:

- The keynote speaker of the Peach State Summit teacher training was Ken Shelton, and avid CRT supporter. Ken Shelton has written a four-part series on how grading is a racist practice, and gave presentations which included CRT concepts.
- The Principal of North Harlem Elementary School presented a training entitled “Trauma Informed Schools and Racial Equity,” stating “the need for educators to strengthen their use of social-emotional, social justice, and culturally responsive practices.” The phrase “culturally response teaching” is a re-branding of CRT, created as a response to the public’s increasing awareness and dissatisfaction of CRT in schools. This presentation was approved by District leaders to be presented to CCSD teachers and staff.
- The original Social Emotional Learning page on the CCSD website was full of Critical Race Theory links and concepts. When asked, several district leaders claimed that they did not realize the content would be controversial and confirmed that the employee was not disciplined in any way for the content. Additionally, Associate Superintendent Michelle Sherman refused to issue a statement that the CCSD does not support CRT to ensure it would not reappear in the future, stating that it would cause a disruption to the district to take a stand on the issue. Since then, the original page has been removed, but the content was captured with screen shots and can be viewed on our website.
- Original content (including speaker slide shows) for these examples, along with many others, can be found on our website: www.refocusededucation.com.

Does the Columbia County School District utilize the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) framework?

No. DEI is a framework that encompasses programs and policies related to the representation and participation of different groups of individuals. While we do not use the DEI framework in our district, the Columbia County School District recognizes and celebrates that we serve a diverse group of students and families. We commit to providing equal opportunities to all students and employees who become a part of our school community. We seek to provide a welcoming environment in which all students, families, and teachers feel a sense of belonging and are challenged to reach their full potential.

Refocus Response: From the Heritage Action terms sheet posted at www.refocusededucation.com, “DEI initiatives are typically public commitments or departments tasked with closing outcome disparity gaps between various demographic groups through training, quotas, and cultural changes in an organization. DEI initiatives often lead to the categorization of individuals according to demographic groups and

adverse or advantageous treatment on the basis of membership in said groups. DEI is a marketing tool of CRT.”

At the working Board Meeting on January 25, 2021, Chief Human Resources Officer Anthony Wright stated that “we also want to increase the administrator diversity as well as the teacher diversity particularly with the males... studies have shown that teaching... kids getting taught by someone who looks like them... exponentially has a significant outcome on their success later in life, and we want to do better. It’s just the right thing to do. As our county changes, we need to reflect that in our school... teacher faculty staff.” (video posted on www.refocusededucation.com).

Given what we know about CCSD supporting Critical Race Theory concepts via their own Social Emotional Learning page (before its removal), along with this information from Mr. Wright, it seems a fine line for CCSD to state that they do not utilize a DEI framework, despite clearly supporting its surrounding concepts.

Does the Columbia County School District provide an equitable, non-discriminatory environment for students and employees?

Absolutely. We do this because it is the right thing to do for both students and employees. We have two policies to ensure that our actions reflect this belief. As indicated in Policy GAAA, “It is the policy of the Columbia County Board of Education not to discriminate on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, age, race, disability, religion, or national origin in its employment practices.” Students are addressed similarly in Policy JAAA, “It is the policy of the Columbia County Board of Education not to discriminate on the basis of sex, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity, age, race, disability, religion or national origin in its educational programs and activities or admissions to facilities operated by the Columbia County Board of Education.”

Refocus Response: We do not allege that the CCSD is discriminatory towards students or employees.

Does the school district provide pornographic material in classrooms or the media center?

No. We have recently revised Procedure IFAA to further protect our students from the possibility of inappropriate material inadvertently entering our classrooms. Further, we have very secure firewalls that prevent students from accidentally happening upon inappropriate sites or images while using technology.

Refocus Response: The CCSD provides books in its media centers that depict graphic sex scenes, scenes of child rape and sexual assault, bestiality, and other items that

meet the criteria of the Georgia obscenity laws. These books are not labeled in any way for the content within, so there is no way for students or parents to know that the content violates the definitions as defined within the Obscenity Law. The CCSD has been aware of this content since August 2021 but has defended it based upon the content being “diverse.” As public awareness of this has spread, the CCSD has weeded out some titles, but many still remain to include The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison, A Court of Mist and Fury by Sarah J. Mass, Beloved by Toni Morrison, and many others. A list of titles, to include sample content, can be found at www.refocusededucation.com.

Although the IFAA policy is an improvement, it falls short. Associate Superintendent Sherman has been asked to incorporate the following criteria in the IFAA policy which would specifically address explicit sexual content currently in our media centers: “Meet high standards of quality in content and presentation suitable for community values and follows similar CIPA (Children’s Internet Protection Act) guidelines and OCGA §16-12-103 namely visual representation or verbal description which depicts or describes sexually explicit nudity, sexual conduct, or sadomasochistic abuse which is harmful to minors.”

Additionally, in an effort to maintain transparency, the following request was made regarding the Appeal Process:

- The school board shall vote in a public meeting on the challenged material within 30 working days of the appeal, not to exceed two board meetings.
- Except for clearly documented extenuating circumstances, the challenged material committee will reevaluate a specific material no more than once in any given school year.
- If materials are deemed not harmful to minors and retained by the media center, a list of challenged books shall be made available in a prominent location on the school website for review by parents and copies of the book made available to parents.

What if my values are different than others and I want to protect my child even further from reading material that may not align with our family values?

As outlined in Procedure IFBD, parents have the right to opt-out of checking out any books. Simply send in the letter to your child’s school and the media specialist will be alerted and respond accordingly.

Refocus Response: The current opt-out policy does not fully protect students from content within the media centers or classroom libraries. The current opt-out option requires students to “opt-out” of ALL media center content or NONE of it. This means a

child essentially loses access to media center content with the exception of titles specified by parents. This is unreasonable and causes an undue burden on parents to provide every title that their child may have access to. A much more reasonable solution would be for parents to be able to opt-out of categories or genres of materials, such as “witchcraft” or “politics” or “religion,” to name a few examples. Additionally, the opt-out Option is limited in scope and does not protect children from harmful content in the following ways:

1. The opt-out option only includes books that are “checked out” from the media center. There is currently no opt-out option for books that are *read* within the Media Center and not *checked out*. Many teacher classes have reading time within the classroom, and therefore students will have access to material before parents are able to review it. Given that controversial, age-inappropriate, and sexually explicit material is not labeled, students have no way of being protected from such content.
2. Classroom Libraries are NOT included in the opt-out policy and therefore there is no current option for parents to opt-out their children from this content. The new IFAA Policy requires teachers to provide their classroom reading list within 10 days of request. Our current experience is that in some cases, those that have asked have been told the list is not available, even when requested via an Open Records Request.

Does the district teach Social, Emotional Learning concepts?

Not in the way that it is currently being portrayed in the media. However, the district does recognize that students have social, emotional, and mental health needs that must be addressed and works diligently to provide ways to do that.

Refocus Response: CASEL is the framework for which the CCSD SEL program was formulated and is still supported by CCSD leadership. CASEL now promotes, among other things:

- Academic content that integrates issues of race, class and culture.
- Prioritizing students’ individual and collective agency to take action for social justice.
- Enhancing and foregrounding social and emotional competencies needed for civic engagement and social change, such as reflecting on personal and social identities, examining prejudices and biases, interrogating social norms, disrupting and resisting inequities, and co-constructing equitable and just solutions.

Please view the Education Presentation at www.refocusededucation.com to view information regarding CCSD and CASEL.

How does the district provide for the social, emotional, or mental health needs of my child?

We offer a variety of resources to students and families who may need support in this area. We offer food, clothing, and shelter resources. We have support for families in transition and foster children. We offer individual and small group sessions to students and even have connections to professional mental health services. If you have a child who is struggling in school or at home, please reach out to your school counselor or your school social worker for help. We are here to support you!

Refocus Response: This answer provided by CCSD focuses on providing social services to struggling students and families. The Refocus on Education campaign supports these efforts as well, and firmly believes that guidance counselors play an important role in bridging the gap between families and these resources.

However, this is an example of how Social Emotional Learning is marketed in a way that hides the true purpose of the program. Many school administrators believe that SEL is the answer to rising student issues to include depression, anxiety, and suicide. They will quickly tell parents that removing SEL from schools will be detrimental to students' health and well-being. What parents and taxpayers must understand is that SEL has been compromised from its original intent. It is strategically marketed as meeting student needs, but in actuality is often used to teach ideologies that undermine parent and community values, while creating a generation of activist children. Supporting children's health needs can absolutely be accomplished without devoting academic time to following an emotions-based curriculum developed by politicized, for-profit companies.

What is Panorama and why is it controversial?

Panorama is a comprehensive behavior intervention program. It was initially selected to help identify students who may internalize behaviors through a quick survey and also to support students struggling with specific behaviors in class or at school. Though schools across the nation and our state utilize this program for this purpose, it was never used here for two reasons. First, with the challenges of COVID, the timing was not good to introduce another large initiative and second, but equally as important, we were unable to resolve an issue related to data.

Refocus Response: The CCSD signed an annual contract with Panorama on April 19, 2021 and paid \$105,980.00 of Columbia County taxpayer funds to Panorama, with an implementation date of September 2021. In August, a parent personally met with district leaders on several occasions and spoke at the CCBOE meetings expressing

concerns regarding data mining and concepts of Critical Race Theory which are embedded within the Panorama Platform. These concerns were initially dismissed by the CCSD leadership, but just weeks before implementation, the Panorama survey was placed on hold and eventually the contract was cancelled. In November 2021, Panorama refunded the CCSD \$89,150.00 of the \$105,980.00 contract.

Given that the contract between CCSD and Panorama was signed during the COVID pandemic and resources were allocated to support its implementation (as per published survey dates which can be viewed in the Education Presentation), this response from CCSD seems to be wholly inaccurate. Additionally, we have to wonder why it took a parent doing private research about the dangers of gathering student data to store in unprotected “mental health files” to get this contract cancelled. We have an expectation that our board members and administrators thoroughly research the benefits and risks of all third party, for-profit companies before signing large contracts at taxpayer expense.

How do we promote positive behavior in our schools?

We have been using Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS) for many years in our district. This framework focuses on the use of data to make decisions, implementation of preventative measures such as strong routines and procedures, and a multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) for students who are at risk.

Refocus Response: We are still researching the PBIS program, due to hearing mixed responses from students and teachers about the effectiveness of the program. Once our research is completed, we will post a product documenting our findings at www.refocusededucation.com.

Where can I go if I have questions about what my child is learning?

The school is always the best place to start. Teachers and administrators are happy to answer any questions parents or students may have. If they are unable to help, district office personnel are also eager to help. We recognize the student excels when the home and the school work closely together.

Refocus Response: We always recommend beginning with the teacher and principal of your school. If you are unhappy with the response, elevate your questions to district administrators and your district board member. A lot of great information can be found at www.refocusededucation.com, be we always recommend that everyone does their own

research as well. Please keep in mind that education programs and ideas are often marketed in one way, but often serve another ideological purpose.