



ASHLEY WOO, SABRINA LEE, ANDREA PRADO TUMA, JULIA H. KAUFMAN, REBECCA ANN LAWRENCE, NASTASSIA REED

Walking on Eggshells— Teachers’ Responses to Classroom Limitations on Race- or Gender- Related Topics

Findings from the 2022 American Instructional Resources Survey

By spring 2022, 17 states had passed policies restricting how teachers can address topics related to race, gender, and “divisive concepts” in the classroom (Schwartz, 2021). Advocates of these policies purport that they prevent the indoctrination of students, allow families to have greater transparency into and control over the educational content to which their students are exposed, and reshift educators’ focus to core academic content like reading and math (Aldrich, 2021; Butcher and Burke, 2022; Izaguirre and Gomez Licon, 2022). Conversely, opponents of these policies are concerned that they deprive students of the opportunity to develop critical thinking skills and both learn about and interrogate our nation’s complex history (Wolfe-Rocca and Nold, 2022; Morgan, 2022; Waxman, 2021).

One in three public school teachers across the nation—that is, more than 1 million teachers—are working in one of the 17 states where restrictions on how teachers can address race or gender have been enacted (National Center for Education Statistics, 2021). (See the “How State Policies Limit Teachers’ Instruction” text box.) PEN America, a nonprofit organization, found not only that state legislators have accelerated the introduction of these restrictions over the past year but also that the bills proposed during the 2022 legislative session were even more punitive and expansive in nature than the bills introduced in the 2021 session. For example, they extended restrictions to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, questioning, and more (LGBTQ+) topics and beyond just classroom conversa-

KEY FINDINGS

- Teachers reported that state-level limitations on how kindergarten through grade 12 public school teachers can address topics related to race or gender were more common than district-level limitations.
- Roughly one-quarter of teachers reported not knowing whether they were subject to restrictions on how they can address topics related to race or gender, and only 30 percent of teachers in states with restrictions reported them as being in place.
- About one-quarter of teachers reported that limitations placed on how teachers can address topics related to race or gender have influenced their choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices. Teachers who perceived that their state or district had enacted limitations were far more likely to report that such limitations influenced their instructional decisions.
- Some teachers were more likely to be aware of or influenced by these limitations, including—unsurprisingly—those in states where such limitations had been set, as well as teachers of color, high school teachers, teachers serving suburban schools, and teachers more likely to encounter race- or gender-related topics in their subject areas.
- Restrictions infringed on teachers’ autonomy by constraining the topics they could address and their choice of instructional materials and discussion topics.
- Limitations stemmed from sources that have formal policymaking authority, such as states and districts, and other sources that have informal authority, such as families and communities, but teachers most commonly pointed to parents and families as a source of the limitations they experienced.
- Teachers perceived that limitations placed on how they can address race- or gender-related topics negatively affected their working conditions and worried about the consequences of such limitations for student learning.
- Teachers’ responses to enacted limitations ran the gamut from resistance against restrictions to changing their instructional practices to align with restrictions.

How State Policies Limit Teachers’ Instruction

Most of the state-level policies limiting how teachers can address race- or gender-related topics were enacted in spring and summer 2021, and most were enacted through the state legislature, although some were also passed through rules promulgated by state boards of education, opinions issued by state attorneys general, or governors’ executive orders (Schwartz, 2021; Gottlieb, 2022). Although not universally identical, many of the policies enacted by these different sources share similar language and content prohibiting the teaching of *divisive concepts*, such as the notions that one race or sex is inherently superior to another race or sex; that the United States is fundamentally racist or sexist; or that any individual is inherently racist, sexist, or oppressive, whether consciously or unconsciously. These policies also constrain educators’ ability to discuss racism or its historical roots, highlighting the concern that individuals may feel “discomfort, guilt, anguish, or any other form of psychological distress on account of his or her race or sex” (Pollock et al., 2022; Friedman, Tager, and Gottlieb, 2022).

tions and into other arenas like educator professional development (Young and Friedman, 2022; Pendharkar, 2022). Altogether, these developments suggest that policies and efforts to expand restrictions on teachers’ instruction are not likely to abate soon and that educa-

tors must increasingly contend with how to navigate their presence, even though the majority of American adults believe that students should have the opportunity to learn about many controversial topics, particularly at the high school level (Polikoff et al., 2022).

This report builds on prior RAND Corporation research, which found that, as of January and February 2022, one-quarter of kindergarten through grade 12 (K–12) public school teachers nationally were directed by their school or district leaders to limit discussions about political and social issues in class, even though a majority of teachers and principals oppose legal limits on how teachers can discuss racism, sexism, and other contentious topics (Woo et al., 2022). Yet, we know little about whether, to what extent, and how these restrictions are affecting teachers’ instruction across the nation in practice.

This report explores how teachers were making sense of and responding to these policies, one year since the first state-level action was taken in April 2021. We draw on data from the 2022 American Instructional Resources Survey (AIRS), which was administered in April and May 2022 to a nationally representative sample of 8,063 teachers teaching English language arts (ELA), math, and science. (For information on our methods, see the “How We Analyzed Our Data” text box.) About two-thirds of the elementary teachers in our sample taught multiple subjects, including social science. In addition, a small number of teachers in our sample identified their *main* subject assignment as social science (e.g., social studies, geography, history, government, or civics). In other words, these teachers whose main subject assignment was social science also taught ELA, math, and/or science and thus were captured in our survey sample; we refer to them throughout the report as *social science teachers*. We highlight the responses of these teachers in our reporting given the relevance of social science as a subject matter to our report topic but acknowledge that our sample of social science teachers is very small ($n = 65$)—less than 1 percent of our sample.

Drawing on our quantitative survey data, we first examine the following:

- teachers’ awareness of the existence of state- or district-level limitations on how they can address race- or gender-related topics in their instruction
- the extent to which teachers’ instructional decisions are influenced by these limitations.

Abbreviations

AIRS	American Instructional Resources Survey
CRT	critical race theory
ELA	English language arts
K–12	kindergarten through grade 12
LGBTQ+	lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, queer, questioning, and more

Then, we describe results drawn from a novel qualitative dataset containing roughly 1,500 open-ended responses from teachers across the nation whom we asked to “briefly describe how these limitations on race- or gender-related topics teachers can address have influenced your choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices.” Using these open-ended responses, we further explored

- the nature of the limitations placed on teachers’ instruction, including the content and instructional decisions targeted by the limitations and the sources from which the limitations stem
- the consequences that, according to teachers, these limitations have for teachers’ working conditions and students’ learning experiences
- the spectrum of instructional decisions that teachers made in response to the limitations.

Throughout the report, we use the terms *limitations* or *restrictions* interchangeably as a shorthand to refer to the policies or directives, explicit or implicit, that place constraints on how teachers can address topics related to race, gender, or other contentious concepts. Moreover, when we refer to *contentious* or *controversial* topics, we refer broadly to topics that people often disagree about, which include topics related to race and gender but, as we will discuss, encompass other topics as well.

How We Analyzed Our Data

In analyzing our quantitative survey data, we explored whether teachers' responses differed according to their demographic characteristics, their state policy context, their school context (e.g., school locale), or the characteristics of the students in their school. Unless otherwise noted, we reference only differences among teacher subgroups that are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$).

To examine differences by state policy context, we leveraged summaries of state policies in the 17 states that have enacted restrictions (Schwartz, 2021; Gottlieb, 2022). These states are Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kentucky, Mississippi, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, Oklahoma, South Carolina, South Dakota, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, and Virginia. All states enacted restrictions prior to the administration of the 2022 AIRS, which began in April 2022. We also leveraged data from some states for which we have teacher oversamples, which allow us to present state-representative data for select states that have enacted restrictions on teachers' instruction: Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, Tennessee, and Texas. (See the "Restrictions in Five States with Teacher Oversamples" text box.)

To analyze our qualitative data, a team of qualitative researchers coded each of the 1,452 responses using a coding scheme inductively developed by the qualitative lead. Given the broad nature of the open-ended question we posed to teachers, teachers provided us with a set of responses that also varied broadly in content and depth: Some teachers provided responses that consisted of just a few words, and other teachers wrote a sentence or two or even a short paragraph. Consequently, we designed our qualitative coding scheme such that we could capture broad themes and finer-grained subthemes to meaningfully describe the range of teachers' responses. The qualitative team met throughout the coding process to ensure reliability in applying the codes, resolve ambiguities, and discuss revisions to codes or the addition of emergent codes. In analyzing the coded excerpts, we examined whether there were substantive differences in teachers' responses by various teacher characteristics, such as their racial background, main subject assignment, grade level, and years of experience, and by school characteristics, such as the proportion of students experiencing poverty, the proportion of students of color, urbanicity, and state policy context. Where we observed notable differences, we have described them in the text.

When we discuss the open-ended data, we use *majority* to refer to at least one-half of respondents in an applicable group and *most* to refer to at least three-quarters of survey respondents in an applicable group. We use *few* to refer to fewer than one-quarter of survey respondents in an applicable group and *some* to refer to more than one-quarter but fewer than one-half of survey respondents in an applicable group. Where appropriate, we also provide frequency counts (e.g., "about 20 teachers," "about 300 teachers," or "one-fifth of teachers") to provide readers with a sense of how frequently some themes arose in our analysis process, especially because our coding scheme often captured themes that were drawn from fewer than one-quarter of our sample of 1,452 teachers. However, we also note that one of the primary goals of our qualitative analysis was to understand the many ways that teachers' instruction might be affected by policies to limit the discussion of certain race- or gender-related topics in the classroom rather than to determine the prevalence of different kinds of responses. We stress that, given the broad nature of both the open-ended question and teachers' responses as well as the nonrepresentative nature of our qualitative sample, the perspectives expressed by the teachers in our sample may be more or less prevalent in the general population of teachers than our data currently suggest. More details about our methods are provided in the How This Analysis Was Conducted section.

To What Extent Were Teachers Aware of and Influenced by Limitations on Their Instruction?

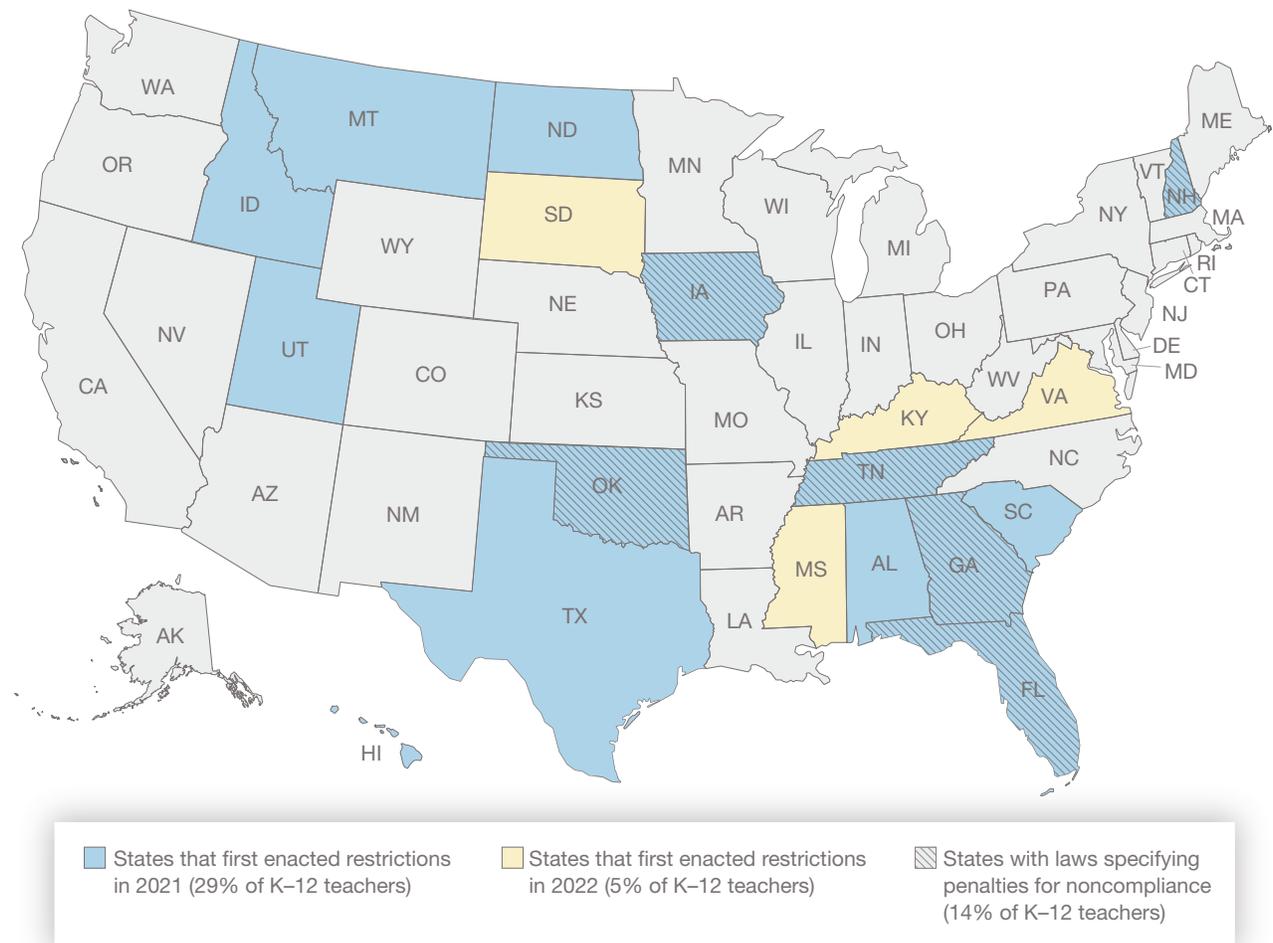
Teachers Reported That State-Level Bans Were More Common Than District-Level Bans

We asked teachers, “Has your state or school system recently placed limitations on how K–12 public school teachers address topics related to race or gender?” Twelve percent of surveyed teachers reported that their state had put in place limitations on how K–12 public school teachers can address

topics related to race or gender, and another 5 percent reported that their school system (i.e., district) had put such limitations in place. Only 1 percent of teachers reported that their state *and* district had enacted a restriction. As we discuss in further detail, we stress that these percentages reflect teachers’ *perceptions* about whether their state or district had enacted restrictions rather than the proportions of teachers subject to such restrictions.

Notably, in both the set of 17 states that had enacted restrictions prior to the administration of the 2022 AIRS (see Figure 1) and in the set of states that had *not* enacted any restrictions at all, teachers were equally likely to report that their districts had placed limitations on how they can address topics

FIGURE 1
States That Have Enacted Restrictions on How Teachers Can Address Topics Related to Race or Gender



Restrictions in Five States with Teacher Oversamples

The 2022 AIRS has teacher oversamples in several states, five of which have enacted state-level restrictions. These states are Florida ($n = 411$), Kentucky ($n = 405$), Mississippi ($n = 428$), Tennessee ($n = 426$), and Texas ($n = 428$). Teacher oversamples allow us to present state-representative results for each state. To accompany our reports of state-level results from these five states, we summarize the policy context in each state below.

- **Florida:** In June 2021, the Florida state Board of Education approved a rule prohibiting schools from teaching about critical race theory (CRT) and the 1619 Project. In March 2022, the state legislature passed House Bill 1557/Senate Bill 1834, known in the media as the “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which prohibits instruction about “sexual orientation or gender identity” in grades K–3 and to students in grades 4–12 in a manner that is “not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate” (Gottlieb, 2022). Then, in April 2022, the state passed another law, which “prohibits lessons or training that teach that individuals are inherently racist or sexist because of their race or sex, that people are privileged or oppressed due to their race or sex, and other related concepts” (Schwartz, 2021). Both laws name penalties for noncompliance (Gottlieb, 2022).
- **Kentucky:** Kentucky passed a law in April 2022, a few days before the administration of the 2022 AIRS (Gottlieb, 2022). The law requires that instruction be consistent with the notion that “defining racial disparities solely on the legacy of [slavery] is destructive to the unification of our nation” and that “any instruction . . . on current, controversial topics related to public policy or social affairs” be “relevant, objective, nondiscriminatory, and respectful to the differing perspectives of students” (Senate Bill 1, 2022).
- **Mississippi:** Mississippi passed a law in March 2022 that “bars public K–12 schools and colleges from compelling students to affirm or adopt certain ideas related to race, sex, or other characteristics” or from making “a distinction or classification of students on account of race” (Gottlieb, 2022).
- **Tennessee:** Tennessee passed a law in May 2021 that prohibits public schools from promoting certain concepts, such as the notion that the United States is “fundamentally or irredeemably racist or sexist,” or the notions of privilege and unconscious bias (Senate Bill 623, 2021). It instead allows for the “impartial discussion of controversial aspects of history” or “impartial instruction on . . . historical oppression” (Senate Bill 623, 2021). The state commissioner of education is required to withhold state funds from schools or districts in violation of the law (Senate Bill 623, 2021).
- **Texas:** Texas first passed a law in June 2021 that was later replaced by another law passed in September 2021. The most recent law “prohibits compelling a teacher . . . to discuss a widely debated and controversial issue of public policy or social affairs but requires a teacher who chooses to do so to explore the issue objectively and in a manner free from political bias” (Senate Bill 3, 2021). The law also prohibits schools and teachers from giving students grades or course credits for engaging in activities “relating to lobbying or policy advocacy” (Senate Bill 3, 2021). In addition, the law prohibits district, school, and state agency staff from including “inculcation” of specified divisive concepts related to race or gender in courses and from “training or instructing staff, teachers, or administrators” in these divisive concepts (Senate Bill 3, 2021).

For a summary of the policies in each of the 17 states that have enacted restrictions, please see Gottlieb, 2022, and Schwartz, 2021. As noted in the text box “How State Policies Limit Teachers’ Instruction,” most of the policies prohibit the teaching of “divisive” topics, and several explicitly name CRT and specific instructional materials, such as the 1619 Project (Gottlieb, 2022). Although Florida’s House Bill 1557/Senate Bill 1834 is currently the only law that explicitly targets LGBTQ+ topics, other states have unsuccessfully attempted to pass similar pieces of legislation (Young and Friedman, 2022).

related to race or gender, with just 5 percent of teachers reporting the existence of district-level limitations in both sets of states. Thus, teachers perceived that

district-level limitations on race- or gender-related topics were relatively rare across all states, regardless of whether their state had passed limitations.

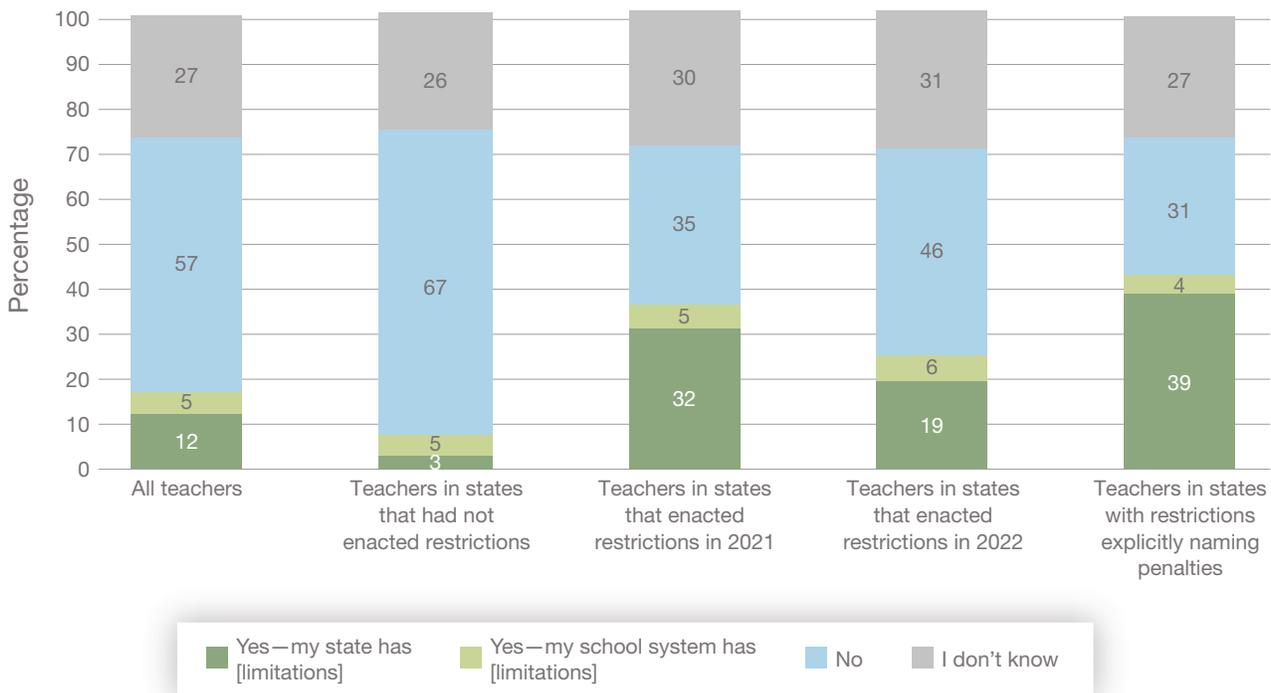
Roughly One-Quarter of Teachers Reported Not Knowing Whether They Were Subject to Restrictions on How They Can Address Topics Related to Race or Gender, and Only 30 Percent of Teachers in States with Restrictions Reported Them as Being in Place

Although 57 percent of teachers reported that their state or district had not placed any limitations on how teachers can address race- or gender-related topics, our data suggest that many teachers were unsure about whether their state or district had enacted a ban. More than one-quarter of teachers reported that they did not know whether their state or district had enacted a restriction (see Figure 2), which could reflect that—as prior research has sug-

gested (Pollock et al., 2022)—teachers find these limitations confusing or difficult to interpret.

In addition, many teachers appear to be unaware of the existence of restrictions in their state. Thirty-four percent of surveyed teachers were located in one of the 17 states that had enacted restrictions on how teachers can address race- or gender-related topics, but only 12 percent of teachers reported that their state had enacted such a restriction. Within the 17 states that had enacted restrictions, only 30 percent of teachers reported that their state had placed limitations on how teachers can address topics related to race or gender. Thirty percent did not know, and 37 percent reported that their state or district had not put in place any such limitations.¹

FIGURE 2
Proportion of Teachers Reporting That Their State or School System Has Placed Limitations on How Teachers Can Address Topics Related to Race or Gender in the Classroom



NOTE: This figure displays teachers' responses to the question, "Has your state or school system recently placed limitations on how K-12 public school teachers address topics related to race or gender?" Columns do not sum to 100 because teachers were able to respond that their state *and* their school system had enacted such limitations. The first column displays the responses of all teachers in our sample. The second column displays the responses of only teachers in states that have *not* enacted any state-level restrictions. The third and fourth columns provide the responses of teachers who were in states that first enacted restrictions in 2021 and the responses of teachers who were in states that first enacted restrictions in 2022, respectively. The column on the far right provides the responses of teachers who were in states that explicitly named penalties for noncompliance. *N* all teachers = 7,775; *n* teachers in states that had not enacted restrictions = 5,352; *n* teachers in states that enacted restrictions in 2021 = 1,547; *n* teachers in states that enacted restrictions in 2022 = 872; *n* teachers in states with restrictions explicitly naming penalties = 1,004.

Teachers' awareness of the restrictions passed in their states may be linked to various aspects of their state policy context, including how long the restriction in their state has been in place or whether the restriction in their state explicitly specifies enforcement mechanisms or penalties for noncompliance (see Figure 1). When we examined the responses of teachers located in states that had enacted restrictions—or their first restriction, for those states with multiple policies—in 2021, 32 percent of teachers reported that their state had placed limitations on how they can address race- or gender-related topics in their classrooms, in comparison with just 19 percent of teachers located in states that had enacted restrictions in 2022 (see Figure 2). These results suggest that teachers in states that had enacted restrictions earlier were more likely to be aware of those restrictions than teachers in states that had enacted restrictions more recently, possibly because it may take time for teachers to become aware of restrictions' existence.

Additionally, 39 percent of teachers in states that enacted restrictions with explicit penalties for noncompliance reported awareness of the restrictions in their state, in comparison with 24 percent of teachers in states that enacted policies lacking an explicit penalty. These penalties included civil suits by the attorney general, a private right of action, professional discipline, or withholding of state funding from schools that do not comply with the law (Gottlieb, 2022). However, because all the states that enacted restrictions with explicit penalties were also states that passed restrictions in 2021, it is difficult to clearly determine whether it is the punitive nature of states' policies or the passage of time that has driven greater awareness among teachers. Moreover, there was wide variation in awareness of state restrictions among both states that enacted restrictions with explicit penalties and states that enacted restrictions in 2021, suggesting that individual state context may still play a strong role in the salience of state-level restrictions. For example, in Florida, restrictions have been enacted through two pieces of legislation passed in spring 2022 and a state board of education rule passed in June 2021, and both laws specify penalties for noncompliance. Perhaps as a result of the Florida state context, 65 percent of teachers in Florida

reported that their state had enacted a restriction. In comparison, Tennessee and Texas both enacted restrictions in 2021, but the legislation in Tennessee specifies penalties for noncompliance, whereas the legislation in Texas does not. In Tennessee and Texas, 31 percent and 27 percent of teachers, respectively, reported that their state had enacted a restriction. For further comparison, in Kentucky and Mississippi, where restrictions were passed in spring 2022 shortly before the administration of the AIRS, a much lower percentage of teachers reported that their state had enacted restrictions—15 percent and 19 percent, respectively.

About One-Quarter of Teachers Reported That Limitations Placed on the Topics Teachers Can Address Have Influenced Their Choice of Curriculum Materials or Instructional Practices

Twenty-four percent of teachers overall—regardless of what state they were in—reported that limitations placed on what topics teachers can address have influenced their choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices to a slight, moderate, or large extent; 11 percent of teachers reported that these limitations have influenced their choices to a moderate or large extent. Unsurprisingly, teachers in states that enacted restrictions were more likely to report that such limitations have influenced their instructional choices to a slight, moderate, or large extent (28 percent) than teachers not in those states (22 percent), although this trend appeared to be driven largely by the responses of teachers in states that had enacted restrictions in 2021 as opposed to teachers in states that enacted restrictions in 2022.

Teachers' *perceptions* about whether their state or district had enacted limitations appeared to be strongly associated with whether they reported that such limitations have influenced their instructional choices. Fifty-two percent of teachers reporting that their state had enacted limitations said that such limitations have influenced their choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices to a slight, moderate, or large extent, in comparison with 20 per-

cent of teachers who did not report that their state had enacted restrictions.

Our data suggest that district-level bans might be even more salient for teachers, potentially because of their more local nature or districts' ability to more easily monitor teachers' instruction. Sixty-three percent of teachers who reported that their districts have enacted a ban reported that such limitations have influenced their instructional choices to a slight, moderate, or large extent, in comparison with just 22 percent of teachers reporting that they were not in a district that had enacted restrictions. This finding suggests that, as teachers become increasingly aware of the existence of the limitations in their state or district, these limitations might also have an increasingly stronger impact on teachers' instruction.

Teachers of Color, High School Teachers, Teachers Serving Suburban Schools, and Teachers More Likely to Encounter Race- or Gender-Related Topics in Their Subject Areas Were More Likely to Be Aware of or Influenced by Limitations

Both awareness and influence of these limitations were uneven among different groups of teachers. When we examine only the responses of teachers in the 17 states that have enacted restrictions, we observe differences in awareness of state-level restrictions among different categories of teachers, which could be an indicator of how salient these topics are for some types of teachers (see Figure 3). Teachers who were more likely to address race- or gender-related topics or other controversial topics given their subject area and grade level were also more likely to report awareness of their state's restrictions. For instance, teachers whose main teaching assignment was ELA were more likely than teachers whose main teaching assignment was math, science, or elementary education to report awareness of their state's restrictions, potentially because ELA teachers may be more likely to encounter these topics in the texts they use for instruction (Woo et al., 2022). Similarly, high school teachers were more likely than elementary school teachers to report awareness of their state's restrictions, possibly because teachers might be more

likely to engage in discussion about such complex topics as race and gender with older students.²

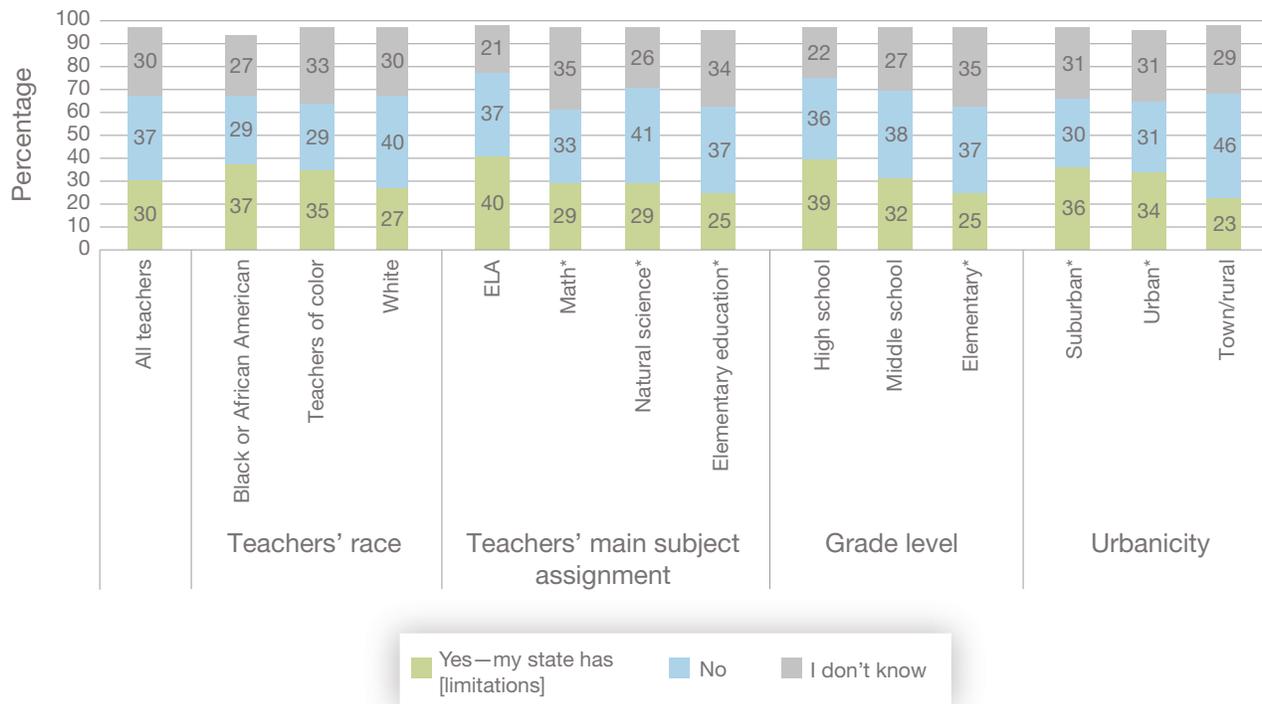
Teachers serving suburban and urban areas were also more likely than teachers in rural areas to report awareness of states' restrictions, before and after controlling for an array of school- and teacher-level characteristics. Before controlling for these school- and teacher-level characteristics, we also observed that teachers of color, and especially Black or African American teachers, were more likely than White teachers to be aware of the limitation in their states,³ but this difference was no longer significant after controlling for urbanicity. These results align with prior research, which found that campaigns against CRT were more likely to emerge in suburban districts than districts in other locales (Pollock et al., 2022).⁴

Similar patterns emerged when we looked at the influence of limitations on teachers' instruction. Black or African American teachers, ELA teachers, social science teachers, and high school teachers were more likely than their counterparts to indicate that limitations placed on the topics they can address have influenced their choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices to a slight, moderate, or large extent.⁵

To determine whether these patterns held in different policy contexts, we also examined teachers' responses within and outside the 17 states that have enacted restrictions on how teachers can address race- or gender-related topics. We found that subject differences did hold across the two groups of states, although differences by teacher race were present only in states that had enacted restrictions. In addition, in states that *had* enacted restrictions, teachers serving suburban schools were more likely than teachers serving rural schools to report that restrictions on their classroom instruction influenced their choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices. More high school teachers than elementary teachers reported that limitations had influenced their instructional decisions, but these differences were not statistically significant after controlling for school- and teacher-level characteristics (see Figure 4).

FIGURE 3

Proportion of Teachers Reporting That Their State Had Enacted a Limitation, in the States That Have Enacted Limitations



NOTE: This figure displays teachers' responses to the question, "Has your state or school system recently placed limitations on how K–12 public school teachers address topics related to race or gender?" For various teacher subgroups, we display the percentage of teachers who reported that their state had recently enacted such limitations, the percentage of teachers who reported that neither their state nor school system had enacted such limitations, and the percentage of teachers who reported that they did not know whether their state or school system had enacted such limitations. These percentages include only the responses of teachers in the 17 states that had enacted restrictions prior to the administration of the 2022 AIRS. Columns do not sum to 100 because teachers were also able to respond that their school system had placed limitations on how K–12 public school teachers can address topics related to race or gender. *N* all teachers = 2,419. *Teachers of color* is defined as teachers who did not self-identify exclusively as White.

* denotes statistically significant differences at $p < 0.05$ before and after controlling for school- and teacher-level characteristics. The following subgroups are used as the reference group for significance testing: ELA, high school, and town/rural.

What Kinds of Limitations Did Teachers Experience?

In the following sections, we focus on teachers' response to an open-ended survey item, "Please briefly describe how these limitations on race- or gender-related topics teachers can address have influenced your choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices." Only teachers who reported that limitations on the topics teachers can address have influenced their choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices to a slight, moderate, or large extent—about one-fifth of our total sample of respondents ($n = 1,732$)—were presented with this open-ended survey item. Altogether, we drew on the

responses of 1,452 teachers who chose to answer the question and who provided a response that was clear enough for us to interpret and code.

Restrictions Infringed on Teachers' Autonomy by Constraining the Topics They Could Address and Their Choice of Instructional Materials and Discussion Topics

Our survey item specifically asked teachers about the limitations placed on how they can address topics related to race or gender. Indeed, teachers most commonly described limitations as targeting race- or

FIGURE 4

Proportion of Teachers Reporting That Limitations on What Topics Teachers Can Address Have Influenced Their Choice of Curriculum Materials or Instructional Practices to a Slight, Moderate, or Large Extent

Teacher characteristics	Across all states	
All teachers	24%	
Teachers reporting that their district had enacted limitations	63%	
Teachers reporting that their state had enacted limitations	52%	
	In a state that has enacted restrictions	In a state that has not enacted restrictions
All teachers	28%	22%
Black or African American	41%	23%
White	28%*	21%
Social science ^a	50%	38%
ELA	39%	33%
Natural science	24%*	12%*
Elementary education	27%*	19%
Math	19%*	15%*
Suburban	32%	22%
Urban	30%	21%
Town/rural	23%*	21%
High school	30%	26%
Middle school	30%	23%
Elementary	26%	19%

NOTE: We asked teachers, “To what extent have the limitations placed on what topics teachers can address influenced your choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices, regardless of where you teach?” These percentages reflect the proportion of teachers who responded “to a slight extent,” “to a moderate extent,” or “to a large extent.” Teachers were also able to respond, “Not at all” or “N/A: I am not aware of limitations placed on race- or gender-related topics by states or school systems.” Darker shading across the grid represents higher values, while lighter shading across the grid represents lower values. *N* all teachers across all states = 7,768; *n* = all teachers in a state that had enacted restrictions = 2,414; *n* all teachers in a state that had not enacted restrictions = 5,350.

* denotes statistically significant differences at $p < 0.05$ before and after controlling for school- and teacher-level characteristics. Tests for statistical significance were conducted separately for teachers in states that had enacted restrictions and teachers in states that had not enacted restrictions. The following subgroups are used as the reference group for significance testing: Black or African American, ELA, and suburban.

^a We present these results because social science teachers may be especially affected by these restrictions given the content taught in their subject, but we note that the samples of social science teachers are very small, and, consequently, results should be interpreted with caution. There were only 15 social science teachers in our sample located in states that had enacted restrictions and 48 social science teachers in states that had not enacted restrictions. After controlling for school- and teacher-level characteristics, the difference between social science and science teachers was statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ for teachers in states that had not enacted restrictions.

gender-related content, such as topics perceived as related to CRT, gender disparities, or gender identity. For instance, about 70 teachers mentioned limitations targeting CRT, but a few of these teachers expressed frustration about misconceptions around CRT,

noting that they do not teach CRT but were worried that they might be falsely accused of teaching CRT when talking about issues related to race, figures who are people of color, or history.

We were told not to teach critical race theory—no one was. The past two years have made me nervous about teaching Frederick Douglass because I don't think the people in my community know the difference between teaching [Black] history and teaching critical race theory.

— Middle school ELA teacher

Although we asked respondents about limitations around race- or gender-related topics, teachers also mentioned feeling restricted across a variety of related subject areas. For instance, about 70 teachers in our sample also mentioned encountering restrictions regarding LGBTQ+-related issues. They described experiencing complaints or feeling greater hesitancy about exposing students to the notion of same-sex marriage and different kinds of family structures, using instructional content that featured characters who identify as LGBTQ+, and displaying

LGBTQ+-affirming symbols like pride flags in their classrooms. See the “Additional Topics Subject to Limitations” text box for more examples of restricted content named by teachers.

Restrictions on the content that teachers were allowed to address affected both teachers’ choice of instructional materials and topics for classroom discussion. Nearly one-fifth of the teachers in our sample reported experiencing restrictions around how they could discuss or engage in conversations related to race, gender, or other contentious topics. They described being cautious in their choice in wording or phrasing and described “soften[ing]” their language and avoiding potential buzzwords like “critical race theory” or even “gender.”

Roughly one-third of teachers described ways that restrictions influenced their choice of instructional materials, including textbooks; texts; videos; and, in a few cases for math and science teachers, datasets (see the “Texts Subject to Limitations” text box for examples). These teachers chose to or were directed to omit the use of certain materials because they might be considered controversial or potentially offensive. They also described directives to remove books from their libraries or the need to be more cautious about the texts available in their classroom libraries. Even when using school- or district-required or -recommended materials, a few of these teachers had to rework their use of curricula to remain in compliance with limitations.

Although most teachers in our sample expressed that their inability to speak about contentious topics restricted their instructional choices, a small number of teachers—only about ten—expressed that greater sensitivity or attention to race- or gender-related

Additional Topics Subject to Limitations

Beyond race-, gender-, and LGBTQ+-related topics, teachers reported that they encountered restrictions regarding topics they considered controversial, political, or sensitive, such as the following:

- topics related to current or historical events and social studies, such as immigration, voting, elections, vaccines, climate change, gun safety regulations, slavery, civil rights, and, broadly, aspects of history that might be considered “offensive to some populations”
- scientific topics, such as biology, the reproductive system, genetics, evolution, and natural selection
- religion
- social and emotional learning.

Texts Subject to Limitations

Teachers mentioned a wide variety of instructional materials or texts that became subject to heightened scrutiny or removal. Some examples mentioned included:

- *To Kill a Mockingbird*
- the Declaration of Independence
- *The Hips on the Drag Queen Go Swish, Swish, Swish*
- *The Hate U Give*
- *All American Boys*
- *A Raisin in the Sun*
- *Maus*
- *Romeo and Juliet*
- *Brave New World*
- literature by Oscar Wilde
- current events articles
- literature by or about people of color
- “controversial selections” in their school- or district-required or -recommended materials, such as MyPerspectives or Amplify
- primary texts derived from historical or contemporary figures, such as Native American figures; Martin Luther King, Jr.; and Kamala Harris

topics has limited their classroom instruction or use of instructional materials. These teachers were unable to use certain books that used racially insensitive terms, resulting in “the dropping of some classic books from the curriculum because everyone is scared to teach them.” A few of these teachers also felt that the emphasis on diversity and ensuring that materials are representative of the student population placed limitations on their instruction. As one high school ELA teacher said, “I feel the pressure to teach certain race or gender-related material, not because the material was strong and applicable, but simply because they wanted diversity.” One teacher expressed that such a “positive limitation” still involves curtailing of instructional autonomy.

Finally, not all teachers felt that restrictions limited their instructional choices. Indeed, a few teachers—about 20 teachers, three-quarters of whom were elementary school teachers—expressed that they had no desire to address topics related to race or gender in the classroom because they felt that such conversations should be left to parents; questioned whether such conversations were age appropriate; and preferred to focus on what they perceived as core academic skills, such as reading and math.

Teachers Named States and Districts as Sources of Limitations, but Expressed That State- and District-Level Policies Lacked Clarity

Although we did not explicitly ask teachers about the sources of limitations they experienced, roughly one-fifth of teachers who responded to the open-ended question—slightly over 300 teachers—named specific actors or entities that either enacted restrictions on their teaching choices or actively supported such restrictions. These teachers mentioned sources that had the formal authority to enact limitations—in other words, the authority to encode limitations in state, district, or school policy or practice—and sources that had more-informal sources of authority, such as pressure from families or community members. Among teachers who did mention who or what they perceived as the source of the limitation they were experiencing, the majority (i.e., roughly six in ten) mentioned sources with formal policymaking authority.

Among teachers who mentioned experiencing limitations from formal policymaking entities, about 100 teachers mentioned limitations stemming from state policies and leaders—the most commonly

While it was never explicitly stated by my district not to discuss gender or race-related topics in the classroom, I know that my district would not have my back should I choose to add instruction on these important issues. They would be quick to defend their practices and blame me—that I veered away from the curriculum and what is supposed to be taught.

— Middle school ELA teacher

I would feel more confident if I had materials and . . . curricula suggested and vetted by my district. If a parent complained, I could direct them to the curriculum materials and to my district curriculum supervisor.

— Elementary teacher

mentioned formal source of limitations. Unsurprisingly, more than three-quarters of these teachers were located in one of the 17 states that had enacted policies to restrict how teachers can address topics related to race or gender. A few teachers who were not in those states mentioned that their state was attempting to pass legislation restricting classroom instruction and that even the specter of that potential legislation made them nervous about teaching about contentious topics.

School or district administrators—referenced by about 70 teachers—were teachers’ second most common formal source of restrictions. These teachers relayed incidents in which school- or district-level leaders (such as their coaches, curriculum directors, department chairs, and principals) directed them to avoid controversial topics; disallowed the use of students’ preferred pronouns; or limited their instructional autonomy by restricting the kinds of instructional materials they could use, requiring them to adhere strictly to their main curriculum or (when using materials outside the approved curriculum) requiring them to obtain approval for other supplemental materials or novels. Nearly 40 teachers in our sample described how their schools or districts instituted more-comprehensive, sometimes burdensome vetting processes or protocols for obtaining parental permission for the materials they want to use, including directives to notify parents about classroom materials or to allow administrators or parents to engage in classroom “audits.”

When discussing limitations from formal authorities, a small number of teachers—about 15—expressed that they were unsure about how to interpret the restrictions in place, what materials or practices would be acceptable, or how to respond to students’ questions. They felt that the state laws or guidelines restricting classroom instruction were vague and unclear, leaving them uncertain and uncomfortable with addressing contentious topics in the classroom when they do arise in the moment. Moreover, they worried that the policies’ vagueness would allow parents or administrators to accuse them of teaching off-limits topics or to “push out anyone who challenges the way they think schools should work.” In the case of district-level limitations, about 25 teachers expressed that the messages they received

from school or district leaders were sometimes implicit, lacking, or unclear; these teachers reported that their school or district leaders did not issue explicit guidance or resources, such as an endorsed set of materials, leaving race and gender issues “ignored.” Even in a few cases in which teachers did not explicitly state that their school or district leaders placed limitations on their classroom instruction, teachers nevertheless had doubts about whether their school or district leaders would “back [them] up” in the event that family or community members complained.

However, this was not always the case. About ten teachers in our sample described instances in which their school or district leadership or school board resisted state guidance on limiting the content of classroom instruction. Nevertheless, teachers still described feelings of hesitancy due to the potential for community pushback. As one teacher said, “I am really proud of how my district does not bow or cater to the special interest groups that want to push or redact race or gender related topics in school. Though this is true, I am still cautious of what and how I represent any of this information to students, simply because I know the social climate is highly charged.”

Another roughly 20 teachers described how their school or district provided supports to help them manage conversations about race or gender, such as books with diverse characters to support “equitable literacy,” encouragement and guidance on teaching about acceptance and inclusion, professional learning that clarified how they can talk about contentious topics, opportunities for collaboration with

other staff, and reviews of curriculum materials to ensure that they represent diverse perspectives and are culturally relevant. Notably, almost none of the teachers who described school or district supports for managing race- or gender-related conversations were in states that had enacted restrictions, and more than two-thirds of these teachers were in schools in which students of color comprised the majority of the student population (See the “Examples of District-Level Policies That Teachers Named as Restricting or Supporting Their Instruction About Race- or Gender-Related Topics” text box).

Teachers Most Commonly Described Parents as the Source of Limitations

Although states and districts are important actors in crafting and enforcing—or, at times, resisting—limitations, teachers most commonly pointed to pressure or complaints from parents and families as the source of the limitations they experienced; indeed, about 125 teachers in our sample explicitly named parents or families as a source of limitations, which was higher than the number of teachers who explicitly named state- or district-level actors as a source of limitations. Of these teachers, roughly two-thirds taught in schools in which a majority of the student population was White, and more than three-quarters taught in low-poverty schools. Although we are not able to ascertain the racial backgrounds of the families mentioned by teachers or the number of families applying such pressure in teachers’ school communities, this finding suggests that race- or gender-related

Examples of District-Level Policies That Teachers Named as Restricting or Supporting Their Instruction About Race- or Gender-Related Topics

Policies restricting teachers’ instruction about race- or gender-related topics:

- requiring teachers to adhere strictly to school- or district-required curricula
- restricting teachers’ use of instructional materials and choice of discussion topics
- requiring teachers to obtain approval from administrators or parents for use of materials

Policies supporting teachers’ instruction about race- or gender-related topics:

- resisting state-level limitations or community pressures to constrain teachers’ instructions
- providing guidance, professional development, and opportunities for teacher collaboration on how to talk about contentious topics
- providing instructional materials featuring diverse perspectives

I am extremely cautious. Not because of my school district but because of the parents and their social media reactions. They can ruin a teacher's reputation in a single post.

— Special education teacher

topics may be more locally contested in majority-White, more-affluent communities.⁶

Teachers who mentioned parents as a source of the limitations they experienced described incidents in which they faced increased scrutiny from parents and in which parents complained about their lessons or use of materials, therefore making them more cautious or reluctant to address contentious topics even in the absence of formal limitations from their state or district. Teachers' responses about families also demonstrate the power of community and parental influence over the decisions of school or district leaders and school board members—even when, as teachers described, such influence stems from a vocal minority of parents. About 25 teachers expressed that their school or district administrators either discouraged teachers from discussing contentious topics in the classroom due to parental pressure or would not support teachers' decisions in the face of parental opposition. Even when teachers did not explicitly describe incidents in which they encountered parental opposition, about 150 teachers nevertheless reported that the potential for parental complaints and backlash drove them to avoid or be more cautious about addressing contentious topics in the classroom. As one teacher said, "I feel like I have a sword over my head and any parent is able to cut the string if they disagree with the curriculum, for legitimate reasons or not."

What Did Teachers Perceive as the Consequences of Limitations on Their Working Conditions and Student Learning?

Teacher Perceived That Restrictions Negatively Affected Their Working Conditions

Although our open-ended survey question focused on how limitations on how teachers can address race- or gender-related topics have influenced teachers' instructional choices, a few teachers in our sample—about 25—shed light on how these restrictions are affecting their working conditions and even, in some cases, their intentions to leave. While these themes were only mentioned by a small proportion of our total sample, since our open-ended question did not explicitly ask teachers about the impacts of restrictions on their work environments, it is possible that these perspectives may be more widely shared.

These teachers—most of them ELA or elementary education teachers—described how having to navigate these restrictions has made carrying out their jobs more difficult. Some of these teachers described how the restrictions on their instruction created more work and placed more responsibility on them, at times because they made curriculum "harder to find" when options for instructional materials were taken away. Other teachers felt that the restrictions made teaching academic content or their particular student population more challenging. They described how simply teaching the content in their standards or units in their curricula touching on historical events has become more stressful, fear inducing, and difficult. Among these teachers who described limitations' impacts on their working conditions, a few teachers who described themselves as serving diverse student groups felt it was difficult for them to approach instruction from an unbiased or "neutral" perspective given their students' backgrounds.

Teachers' responses also indicate that these restrictions may be having negative impacts on their perceptions about their school climates—for instance, the extent to which they feel as though

they belong in their schools or feel safe in their jobs. Responses from a very small number of teachers who identify as LGBTQ+ indicated that these restrictions may have an impact on their ability to fully share their identities with their students and thus act as a positive role model for students. As one elementary teacher said, “I am a gay woman, and I do not discuss my wife, although my coworkers who are heterosexual are free to [discuss] their spouses.” Moreover, about one in ten teachers in our sample—about 170 teachers—expressed that they experienced anxiety, nervousness, worry, and fear that they might lose their job or license or face formal complaints or legal action for raising race- or gender-related topics in the classroom.

Finally, about five teachers in our sample expressed that these restrictions have led them to consider leaving their jobs to teach elsewhere, to consider leaving the profession altogether, or to question whether they can remain in the profession under these working conditions. One teacher, describing the compounding challenges wrought over the past three years by both the pandemic and the tensions arising from navigating politicized topics, explained, “Most educators I work with are absolutely exhausted.”

Teachers Worried About the Consequences of Restrictions for Student Learning

Roughly 35 teachers in our sample described how the restrictions could have detrimental consequences for student learning and the positive development of students’ identities.

These teachers—the majority of whom were in states that had enacted restrictions—described how these restrictions hampered their ability to select materials that connect to students’ backgrounds and to maintain learning environments that help students feel safe, welcomed, and “seen.” These teachers felt that the effects of these limitations would be especially detrimental for students from historically marginalized backgrounds, such as students of color or students who identify as LGBTQ+, as teachers perceived that these restrictions might impede students’ opportunities to “see themselves” in their

This situation created by the state . . . makes teaching even more difficult and less attractive as a profession.

— Elementary teacher

We work in an atmosphere of fear and paranoia to even teach the content contained in our standards.

— High school science teacher

I feel more vulnerable approaching these topics now than I ever have in my entire ten year career teaching high school. I don’t know how much longer I can continue to teach under these constraints.

— High school ELA teacher

Teachers are supposed to be able to be shoulders for students to lean on . . . now I feel like some of my [lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, and more] students are knowingly suffering & there is nothing I can do about it without risking my job.

— Middle school science teacher

As a [Black] male, it is difficult to help younger [Black] males see their place in society in the larger context, without resources that discuss race and gender.

— High school ELA teacher

instructional materials; indeed, more than one-half of the teachers who expressed this concern worked in schools serving a majority of students of color. Although ELA teachers were most heavily represented among these teachers, teachers from an array

of other subjects—such as science, math, and elementary education—expressed these concerns as well.

These teachers also expressed that restrictions on their instructional autonomy and ability to address contentious topics would have negative impacts on student learning from both an academic and social and emotional perspective. From an academic standpoint, these teachers reported that such restrictions made it more difficult for them to develop students' critical thinking skills; expand students' views and understanding of the world, including both historical and current events; and expose students to high-interest instructional materials that could better engage them in their learning. One teacher also pointed out how restricting students' ability to engage in deep, thoughtful discourse could lead to negative impacts on students' academic development, stating, "I used to include a variety of topics to challenge my students to use critical thinking skills, but now I'm too scared to veer from the textbook topics. And my scores have reflected this." Two teachers also expressed that, to the extent that they engage in controversial topics with students, they do so only with their advanced students, pointing to a potentially concerning divergence in the level of academic rigor to which students on different tracks might be exposed as teachers make sense of how to navigate these restrictions in their classrooms.

Teachers' concerns were not only limited to students' academic learning but also extended to students' social and emotional development. Among teachers who expressed concern about the impact of these restrictions on student learning, a few also expressed concern about building students' capacity for empathy and acceptance of others. One ELA teacher, summarizing the connection between student engagement, representation of diverse groups, and the development of students' social and emotional skills, stated, "The [need] for students to learn about diverse group[s] of people is more important now more than ever. Students need to see themselves in books in order to feel as if their existence is [validated], in order to be engaged in text, in order to learn and empathize with others and to learn that we are more alike than unlike."

How Did Teachers Respond to Limitations on Controversial Topics in the Classroom?

Teachers' Responses to Enacted Limitations Ran the Gamut from Resistance Against Restrictions to Changing Their Instructional Practices to Align with Restrictions

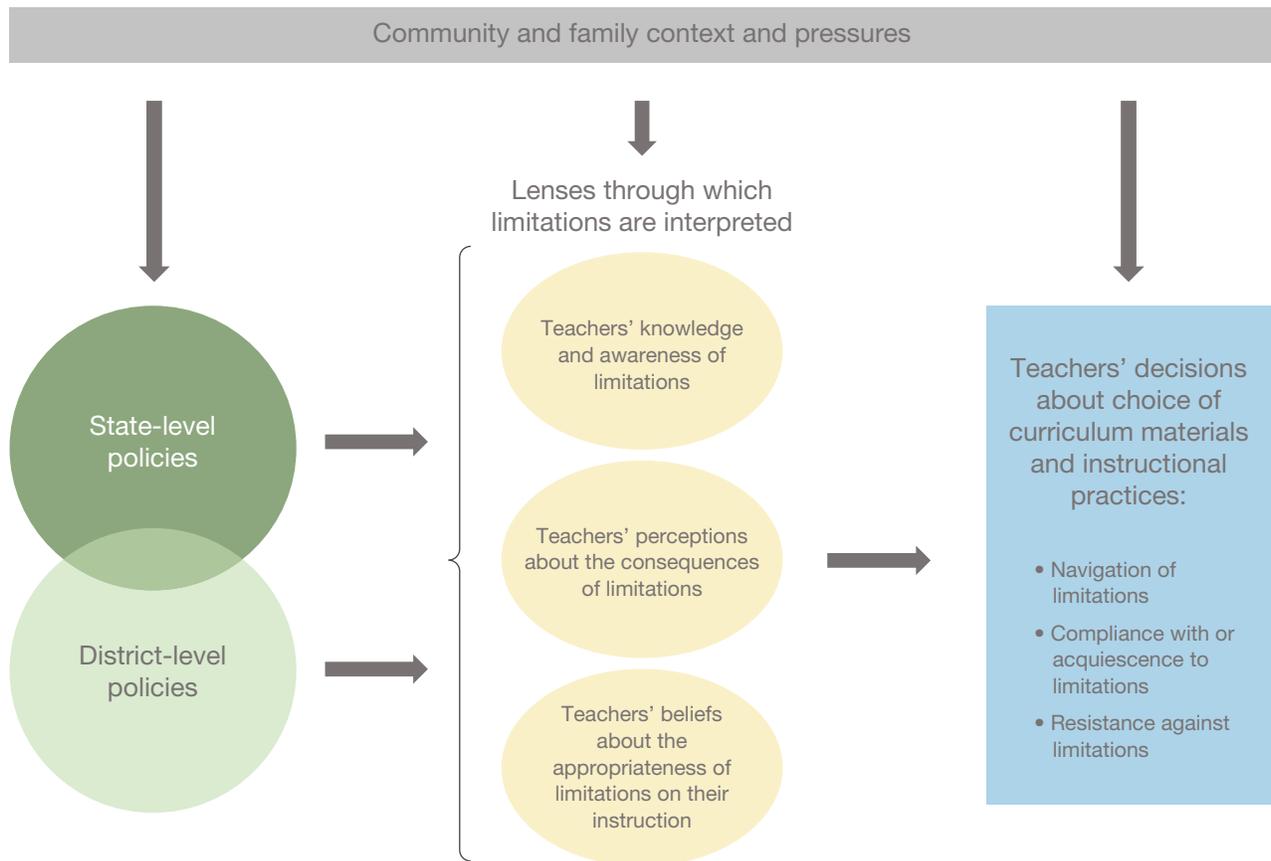
Although our quantitative data provide a sense of the magnitude of the impact of these restrictions, our qualitative data demonstrate that *how* teachers are responding to these limitations is nuanced and complex, in part because teachers' responses are likely influenced by many factors, such as the nature of policies enacted by states and districts, family and community sentiment, teachers' awareness and

knowledge of limitations, their assessment of the impacts of these limitations on students, their perceptions about the repercussions of violating these policies, and their beliefs on the appropriateness of the limitations (see Figure 5).

Even though this report focuses on a highly politically salient topic, we acknowledge that teachers' sensemaking of these emerging policies may be aligned with how they process, make sense of, and implement other kinds of educational policies and initiatives. To put our findings into context, even in the implementation of other less politically and emotionally charged policies, teachers are unevenly aware of and knowledgeable about policies and construct and impose their own interpretations and understandings about the messages that policies send; consequently, policies in other contexts also face resistance, transformation, and interpretation in

FIGURE 5

Teachers' Sensemaking and Implementation of Limitations on How They Can Address Race- or Gender-Related Topics



If I choose to give students access to race- or gender-related topics, they will be the ones leading the conversation. I paint my use of these texts as a chance to practice a certain standard-based skill.

— Middle school ELA teacher

the implementation process (Coburn, 2001; Cohen and Ball, 1990). Therefore, in the section that follows, we further examine the spectrum of teachers' instructional responses to limitations on how they can address contentious issues. As noted in Figure 5, teachers' responses ranged broadly from the navigation of limitations to compliance with, acquiescence to, and even resistance against limitations.

Teachers Engaged in Numerous Strategies to Navigate Restrictions

Roughly one-third of teachers who responded to the open-ended question described how they navigated the presence of limitations; they often engaged in strategies to protect themselves from scrutiny or, at other times, to balance their attempts to address race- or gender-related topics in class in a way that might feel more acceptable and within the confines of the enacted restrictions.

As an example of how teachers worked to protect themselves from scrutiny and backlash, a majority of these teachers—over 300—described how they approached these issues more carefully and cautiously. Although they did not explicitly describe concrete shifts away from addressing these topics in their classrooms, they mentioned that they were more

mindful or aware of how they broached contentious topics with their students, of the words and language they used, or of the materials they selected. They also described “second guessing” their choices or reviewing materials more closely so that they were aware of controversial content ahead of presenting them to students. Even teachers who stated that their curricula do not address race- or gender-related topics felt that they had to “[err] on the side of caution.” As one teacher relayed, “it feels like teachers are constantly walking on egg shells.”

Some of these teachers also described the different ways they modified their teaching practices to protect themselves and/or engage in controversial topics in class in a less contentious manner (See the “Examples of How Teachers Reported Navigating the Existence of Limitations on Classroom Instruction” text box.). For example, to help legitimize their teaching choices or limit the amount of backlash that they might experience, teachers most commonly described using materials approved or reviewed by their school or district leaders or ensuring that their instructional choices are tied to standards. In a few cases, teachers sought out the approval or consultation of another individual, such as a supervisor or principal, or decided to adhere strictly to materials already approved by the district or school board. However, one teacher pointed out that running materials by others for approval did feel “a little limiting,” even though such a requirement was framed as “protection for [teachers].”

To balance their attempts to provide students with a safe and welcoming environment without violating the limitations imposed by their state, district, school, or community, about 30 teachers described focusing more on a perspective that emphasizes inclusivity, acceptance, empathy, and respect for all. This strategy allowed teachers to avoid addressing contentious topics explicitly or to address them in a way that felt more acceptable or innocuous. One teacher noted, “No direct teaching on race or gender is done. We need to focus more on “global topics” of being a kind, respectful person to everyone.”

Even when touching on topics that might be considered controversial, teachers used several strategies to ensure that their instructional choices would not be considered objectionable. For instance, about

Examples of How Teachers Reported Navigating the Existence of Limitations on Classroom Instruction

Teachers reported using various strategies to navigate the existence of limitations on their instruction. The following list of strategies is ordered from most common to least common. The most common strategy was mentioned by roughly 50 teachers, whereas the least common strategy was mentioned by fewer than ten teachers:

- leveraging materials that have been approved by leadership or seeking out the approval of leadership to use materials or engage in discussions
- actively anticipating the objections of others, such as parents and students, and informing parents about instructional content ahead of time to preempt objections
- striving to keep their instruction “neutral” and exposing students to multiple perspectives
- focusing on a perspective that emphasizes inclusivity or acceptance for all
- leaning more on student discourse or student choice
- offering alternative texts or assignments
- working collaboratively with their team members to decide on acceptable materials

20 teachers described shifting toward a greater focus on student-centered discourse and student choice; almost all teachers who mentioned this strategy were middle or high school teachers. They leaned more on “student input” to address sensitive topics and provided students the space to express their opinions, find evidence, ask questions, discuss among themselves, and draw their own conclusions. In this way, teachers hoped that they could maintain a neutral presence as a “facilitator” or “moderator.” Similarly, to avoid the perception that they were imposing their own beliefs on students or promoting a particular viewpoint, about 35 teachers described how they strove to keep their instruction “neutral,” “balanced,” and “objective.” A few teachers also mentioned how they were careful to provide students with multiple perspectives and to encourage students to be respectful of different beliefs and opinions.

Finally, roughly one in five teachers who answered the open-ended survey item—about 300 teachers—reported that they avoided or were now more hesitant and less willing to engage in controversial topics with students. Our analysis suggests that the punitive nature of limitations might play a significant role in dampening teachers’ ability to address race- or gender-related topics in the classroom. Of the teachers who reported that they were more hesitant to address contentious topics or shifted their instruction to avoid contentious topics altogether, roughly one-third mentioned that they were wary

The constant reminders at department and staff meetings about the vicious social media posts on a community Facebook page and how it could affect our school’s public image and ultimately our employment has made me less courageous to embrace these topics during instruction. I am not in a financial position to be brave about this at the current time.

— High school math teacher

of or experienced backlash from others, including parents, administrators, and those on social media. One-fifth of these teachers also reported that they felt anxiety, worry, or fear of repercussions, such as loss of employment, as a result of these limitations.

A Few Teachers Described How They Continue to Address Race- or Gender-Related Topics in Their Classrooms, at Times Despite the Presence of Restrictions

Nearly one in five of the teachers who responded to our open-ended question reported that they have continued to touch on topics related to race or gender in their classrooms, without any reference to how they were modifying their instruction to make these topics more acceptable or less contentious. A majority of these teachers discussed how they strove to emphasize inclusion, tolerance, and empathy in their classrooms. They also described how they aimed to bring diversity into the classroom by exposing their students to diverse characters and perspectives, including those of people of color, women, people who identify as LGBTQ+, and other underrepresented groups to help students connect more deeply

The limitations in other states have strengthened my resolve to teach race and gender related topics to my students. My license and professionalism empower me to make educationally sound decisions to grow compassionate human beings.

— Elementary teacher

to classroom content. Even though a few teachers expressed feeling nervous about bringing these perspectives into their classrooms given the politically charged nature of their work, these teachers felt it was important to consider the identities of the students in their classroom when choosing materials and instructional content to ensure that their classrooms felt “safe” for all students. One teacher summed it up, “Ensuring all students feel welcomed and loved has impacted the way I plan and the lessons I find.”

Moreover, of the teachers who reported that they continued to address topics related to race or gender in the classroom, roughly a third—accounting for about 70 teachers—reported that they continued to address topics related to race or gender or more heavily emphasized such topics because or in spite of the limitations that have been put in place. When we examined the responses of such teachers who were in a state or district that had enacted a restriction, most expressed that they refused to comply with the limitation, refused to change their teaching practices in response to the limitation, or felt it was even more important to teach about these topics to support student learning and to connect classroom content to students’ backgrounds. They described how they continued to seek out instructional materials that represent diverse populations or allow students to engage in discussions about topics that might be perceived as controversial. As one teacher said, “I refuse to comply. You must teach the past, so we can improve the future.” Another teacher, highlighting the risk that teachers take when resisting the restrictions put in place by their state or school system, said, “My students are more important than any board policy. If I get in trouble, then it would be worth it.”

Even teachers who reported that they were not in a state or district that had enacted restrictions expressed that the presence of limitations in *other* states or districts influenced their decision to discuss race- or gender-related topics in their classrooms. Echoing the sentiments of teachers who resisted such restrictions from their states or districts, these teachers felt that the existence of such limitations in other places highlighted the importance of creating safe and affirming environments for their students. These teachers also felt that the existence of limitations in other places underscored

the importance of having the professional autonomy to engage in discussions about race or gender with their students, with the goal of creating students who are “open-minded,” “compassionate,” and able to “think critically.” As a result, these teachers described being more deliberate about choosing diverse materials or materials that have been banned or deemed “dangerous” elsewhere. A few teachers expressed relief that their state was not among the states that had enacted restrictions, and a few felt that they had to engage in these discussions while they were still allowed to.

Summary and Implications

To our knowledge, this report is the first description of nationally representative survey data from teachers about how limitations on the way they can address contentious topics in the classroom are influencing their instruction. To shed light on teachers’ experiences, we drew on survey self-reports from roughly 8,000 U.S. K–12 public school teachers, including over 1,000 open-ended responses. Through teachers’ open-ended responses, we were able to gain a glimpse into the nature of the limitations that teachers were facing as well as how teachers were navigating the existence of such limitations. We found that these limitations were multifaceted in numerous ways; for instance, teachers experienced limitations originating from a variety of sources, including state, school, and district leaders and family and community members, around a wide span of topics, including but not limited to race- or gender-related topics, and through a multitude of pathways that infringed on their instructional autonomy. Altogether, the multifaceted nature of these limitations highlights how teachers exist in an increasingly complex policy environment in which they must consider and weigh not only their own perspectives but also the perspectives of multiple stakeholders along with numerous messages and directives from a variety of sources about what and how to teach.

Not only are teachers having to seek ways to navigate this increasingly complex and contentious policy environment, but our data also suggest that limitations placed on how teachers can address con-

tentious topics may be leading to consequences for teachers’ working conditions and for student learning. Teachers described working in conditions filled with worry, anxiety, and even fear. They perceived that carrying out the core function of their roles—teaching students—has become more difficult, as restrictions on their classroom instruction limited their ability to engage students in learning, support students’ critical thinking skills, and develop students’ abilities to engage in perspective taking and empathy building. Especially concerning is the potential for these limitations and their politicized nature to lead teachers to consider leaving their jobs or the teaching profession altogether. Addressing these concerns about working conditions is especially important in a time when schools are struggling to fully staff their schools as they strive to recover from the impacts of the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022).

Moreover, our data suggest that these limitations are even more salient for some teachers than others. For limitations to affect teachers’ decision-making processes, teachers must first be aware of the existence of limitations, and our data suggest that teachers of color, high school teachers, suburban and urban teachers, and ELA teachers were especially likely to be aware of the existence of limitations in their state. In addition, although one-quarter of the teachers in our sample reported that these limitations have affected their instructional choices to a slight, moderate, or large extent, this percentage rose to 41 percent among Black or African American teachers residing in one of the 17 states that had enacted a restriction before the administration of our survey. This survey finding raises the possibility that these limitations may be affecting teachers of color, and especially Black or African American teachers, even more strongly than their White counterparts, which could eventually lead to detrimental consequences for the diversity of the educator workforce given the concerns that teachers have raised about these restrictions. Indeed, with many states making strides to increase racial diversity in their educator workforce (DeRamus-Byers, 2021), further examination of how these policies are affecting the experiences of teachers of color would be a critical and valuable line of inquiry for further research.

Despite these concerns, the contentious nature of debates about whether conversations related to race, gender, or other controversial topics are appropriate for school is not likely to dissipate in the near future. In fact, research from others and our own research suggest that these debates might continue to intensify, as teachers become increasingly aware of the limitations that exist in their states and as state legislatures and other policymakers continue to propose and support the passage of more and increasingly punitive policies restricting classroom instruction (Young and Friedman, 2022). Policymakers and education leaders should therefore consider ways they can both promote safe and supportive environments for teachers and students and ensure that students have access to learning opportunities that fully support their academic and social development. Thus, our recommendations are as follows:

State and district leaders should collaborate with teachers when crafting local policies and guidance and integrate their perspectives and concerns to ensure the health and diversity of the workforce.

In an era of pervasive staff shortages (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2022), teachers' concerns about their working conditions should not be taken lightly. To ensure that teaching remains an attractive profession, state and district leaders should collaborate with teachers to ensure that the policies they promulgate do not result in negative consequences for teachers' working conditions and students' learning opportunities. Indeed, policies that lack local buy-in from teachers are unlikely to be implemented as intended. Therefore, state and district leaders should consider the concerns expressed by teachers and integrate their input when crafting guidance on the implementation of these restrictions. State and district leaders should also ensure that, when obtaining input from teachers, they are seeking input from a diverse set of teachers, including teachers of color, particularly Black or African American teachers, and teachers who are especially likely to encounter contentious topics in their instruction, to better integrate and consider multiple perspectives that can support all types of teachers in the workforce. Ultimately, creating policies and providing guidance with teachers' perspectives and needs in mind might help to alleviate the strain that these restrictions are placing on teachers' working

conditions and might therefore also support teacher retention in the long term.

School and district leaders should provide teachers with the appropriate guidance, resources, and supports to address contentious topics in the classroom and message their support for teachers. School and district leaders play an important role in guiding and protecting teachers and supporting their instructional decisions. Yet, some teachers in our sample felt that their district did not issue guidance or resources on how to navigate the existence of limitations placed on their instructional practices. Several teachers expressed that they lacked approved materials or practices to address these topics or training to engage in these topics with students, even though such resources would be helpful. Conversely, a few teachers described how they received support and guidance from their school or district administrators on how to engage with students about complex but important topics that might be perceived as contentious.

School or district leaders might consider how they could provide similar supports, such as endorsed instructional materials that appropriately address race- or gender-related topics, professional development, or opportunities for teachers to collaborate or share best practices (as an example, see Maine Department of Education, undated). Such guidance or resources from schools and districts might be helpful to teachers, to the extent that such guidance and resources are created with teachers' perspectives in mind, do not further infringe on teachers' instructional autonomy, and are supportive of students' learning opportunities. In addition, many teachers worried that their school or district administrators would not support them in the face of parental opposition, and school or district administrators, particularly in communities where these topics are more contested, could help alleviate this worry by explicitly and clearly messaging their support of teachers.

Yet it may be difficult for schools and districts to provide adequate supports to teachers alone, especially given the politically contentious environment in which many schools and districts find themselves. Entities that support schools and districts—whether they be state education agencies, regional education agencies, or technical assistance providers—might consider how they can support schools and districts

in these endeavors. Such support might also take the form of providing school and district leaders the opportunity to network and collaboratively problem-solve. Future research on how district and school leaders are navigating the presence of these limitations, especially in their particular state contexts, might also shed light on the kinds of technical assistance and support they might find most useful.

School and district leaders and educators should strive to engage families in productive conversations about race and gender. One clear implication of our data is that shifts in formal policy at the state or local level alone will not lead to the abatement of these limitations on classroom instruction. Instead, our findings suggest that some parents and families—particularly those of students in majority-White and more-affluent schools—play a significant role in exerting pressure on teachers directly and also indirectly by voicing their concerns to more-formal sources of authority, such as school boards and school and district administrators. Many teachers expressed challenges with navigating conflict with parents, at times even expressing fear or anxiety about parental objections. These findings underscore the need to (1) intentionally build trust and relationships with families to temper the possibility of conflict and create opportunities for civil and productive discourse and (2) clarify the messaging around the purpose for having discourse about contentious topics in classrooms, particularly in communities where contentious topics are more likely to cause tension.

Family engagement is critical for student learning and can enhance teachers' job satisfaction (MetLife, 2012; Darling-Hammond and Cook-Harvey, 2018; Thapa et al., 2013; Baker et al., 2016). School and district leaders and teachers could engage families in discourse about their shared goals for their students' learning and seek opportunities to listen to parents' concerns, resolve conflict, and find common ground. To the extent that families have concerns about the content to which their students are exposed, school and district leaders, in collaboration with teachers, could take care to communicate the rationale behind teachers' instructional decisions and emphasize their academic value or value to shaping a school or classroom climate in which all children can feel safe, accepted, and validated.

Policymakers and education leaders should consider ways they can both promote safe and supportive environments for teachers and students and ensure that students have access to learning opportunities that fully support their academic and social development.

School, district, and state leaders should tie potentially contentious topics to concrete learning objectives and emphasize their educational benefits for students. Through their open-ended responses, teachers expressed concern about how these restrictions might hamper student learning by limiting students' exposure to high-interest texts and reducing opportunities for students to engage in complex topics and multiple perspectives that might support the development of their critical thinking skills. Teachers should be able to access materials that support students' academic and social development—without encountering barriers or hurdles that might add to their already busy workloads.

To support teachers' access to materials that they feel would best support student learning, leaders at the school, district, and state levels might help teachers tie the use of potentially controversial materials to learning objectives that will highlight

School and district leaders and teachers could engage families in discourse about their shared goals for their students' learning and seek opportunities to listen to parents' concerns, resolve conflict, and find common ground.

their educational benefit. For example, education leaders might make more explicit the connection between instructional materials on possibly contentious topics and teachers' academic standards and, accordingly, the skills and content that students are expected to learn. These might range from historical or scientific content to academic skills, such as discerning point of view, drafting argumentative essays, or understanding and interpreting trends in data. Moreover, administrators and teachers might leverage existing academic materials or resources that address contentious topics to create more legitimacy around the inclusion of such topics in students' educational experiences (for examples, see the History and Social Science Framework for California Public Schools [California Department of Education, 2017] adopted by the California State Board of Education in 2016; classroom resources from Learning for Justice, some of which are linked to academic standards; or the Stanford History Education Group). This might serve two benefits: (1) to communicate the purpose behind the use of such materials to external stakeholders, such as

families and community members; justify their use; and allay fears about their use in the classroom and (2) to bolster teachers' confidence in the using these materials for their academic instruction.

Research Limitations

This report provides an in-depth look at how teachers are experiencing limitations on how they can address race- or gender-related topics and other topics perceived as controversial in the classroom. However, there are several caveats that readers should consider when interpreting the results we presented in this report. First, our analysis of teachers' responses to close-ended survey items relies on teachers' self-reports on the existence of limitations at the state or district level and teachers' perceptions about the extent to which these limitations have influenced their choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices. These self-reports should be interpreted with caution, as they rely on teachers' perceptions and, specifically, teachers' knowledge, recollection, and awareness of the existence of limitations, which may be incomplete.

Second, our analysis is driven primarily by interpretations of sample means, without controlling for potential confounders. Therefore, the findings represent purely descriptive characterizations of teacher responses and should not be interpreted as causal relationships.

There are also several caveats to our analysis of teachers' responses to the open-ended survey question, which limits its generalizability to teachers nationally. Teachers self-selected into our sample of open-ended responses by providing a response to the question, as not all teachers who were presented the question opted to provide a response. In addition, our findings of teachers' responses to an open-ended question may not be representative as they are limited to the teachers who chose to provide a response that was clear enough for us to interpret and code. Although we drew on the responses of a large number of teachers, teachers provided only a single response to an open-ended question, rendering the nature of our qualitative data broad but relatively shallow. Because teachers provided us with a one-time response, we were unable to probe on how contextual or demographic factors, such as the demo-

graphics of teachers' schools or teachers' own race or gender, might have influenced responses.

In the 2022 AIRS, we asked teachers to describe how limitations on race- or gender-related topics have influenced their choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices. However, in our reporting, we present findings on teachers' perceptions about numerous facets of the restrictions they were facing, including, for example, their perceptions of the actors enacting these limitations, the content and topics targeted by the limitations, and the consequences of such limitations. Although themes on these topics arose from our analysis, the survey question presented to teachers did not explicitly ask teachers about these topics; as a result, there may be perspectives on these topics that we did not capture, or the perspectives expressed by the teachers in our sample may be more or less prevalent than our data currently suggest. Altogether, these caveats may limit the generalizability of findings drawn from teachers' open-ended responses.

How This Analysis Was Conducted

In this report, we used responses from 8,063 teachers from the 2022 AIRS to examine how teachers were experiencing limitations on how they can address race- or gender-related topics in the classroom. We focused our analysis on the following three survey items.

A close-ended item relating to whether teachers' states or school systems enacted limitations on how they can address topics related to race or gender. This item from the 2022 AIRS asked teachers the following question: "Some states and school systems have recently placed limitations on how K–12 public school teachers address topics related to race or gender. Has your state or school system recently placed limitations on how K–12 public school teachers address topics related to race or gender?" Teachers were able to respond, "Yes, my state has," "Yes, my school system has," "No," or "I don't know."

A close-ended item relating to the extent to which limitations have influenced teachers' instructional choices. We asked teachers, "To what extent have the limitations placed on what topics teachers can address influenced your choice of cur-

riculum materials or instructional practices, regardless of where you teach?" Teachers were able to respond, "not at all," "to a slight extent," "to a moderate extent," "to a large extent," or "N/A: I am not aware of limitations placed on race- or gender-related topics by states or school systems."

An open-ended item asking teachers to describe the influence of limitations on their instruction.

Finally, we asked teachers to respond to the following open-ended item: "Please briefly describe how these limitations on race- or gender-related topics teachers can address have influenced your choice of curriculum materials or instructional practices." Only teachers who responded "to a slight extent," "to a moderate extent," or "to a large extent" to the above question were presented with the open-ended survey item. A total of 1,720 teachers provided a response to this question; our analysis was limited to the responses of 1,452 teachers who provided a response that was clear enough for us to interpret and code.

Additional information about each of these items is included in the AIRS Technical Documentation (Doan et al., 2022).

Analysis of Close-Ended Items

Throughout this report, we describe samplewide and subgroup-specific means and proportions of variables of interest weighted using a set of nationally representative weights described in further detail in the AIRS Technical Documentation (Doan et al., 2022). To compare responses for teachers in schools with different demographic profiles, we matched AIRS responses to school-level data from the 2020–2021 Common Core of Data. We explored whether teachers' responses differed according to their demographic characteristics, their state policy context, their school context (e.g., school locale), or the characteristics of the students in their school. We used the percentage of students enrolled in free or reduced-priced lunch (FRPL) as a proxy for student poverty levels and characterized schools with at least 50 percent student enrollment in FRPL as "high poverty" and schools with lower than 50 percent student enrollment in FRPL as "low poverty." We grouped teachers into three grade bands based on the grades they reported teaching (i.e., elementary school [K to grade 5], middle school [grade

6 to 8], and high school [grade 9 to 12]. To support the interpretability of our findings, when conducting subgroup analyses by grade level, we omitted reports regarding the small number of teachers (about 4 percent of our sample) who taught across grade bands, allowing us to compare the responses of elementary, middle, and high school teachers. Unless otherwise noted, we reference only differences among educator subgroups that are statistically significant ($p < 0.05$). We tested the robustness of significant differences across teacher subgroups to adjust for observable school-level characteristics (e.g., poverty level, student racial and ethnic composition, locale) and educator-level characteristics (e.g., race, gender, and grade level). We note where teacher subgroup differences are no longer significant after controlling for school-level and teacher-level characteristics. These regression analyses are useful for understanding the drivers of differences, but we do not present regression-adjusted statistics because we believe that these teacher subgroup differences remain notable even if they could be driven by multiple underlying factors. Moreover, we did not make statistical adjustments for multiple comparisons because the intent of this report is to provide exploratory, descriptive information rather than to test specific hypotheses or causal relationships.

Qualitative Analysis of Open-Ended Items

We conducted an analysis of teachers' responses to an open-ended survey item that asked them to describe how limitations on race- or gender-related topics have influenced their choice of curriculum materials and instructional practices. A total of 1,720 teachers provided a response to this open-ended item, and 1,452 teachers provided a response that was clear enough to interpret and code. One qualitative lead read through a sample of 75 responses to identify emergent codes and create an initial coding scheme, with input from two qualitative experts. The qualitative lead then met with a team of three additional qualitative analysts and one of the qualitative experts to review the coding scheme and clarify definitions for each code. All analysts, including the qualitative lead

and one qualitative expert, coded the same sample of 25 responses to ensure that they were applying the codes reliably and to clarify any discrepancies. The qualitative team then divided the remaining responses among the five analysts and coded all remaining responses.

The qualitative team met throughout the coding process to ensure that the five analysts were consistently and reliably applying the codes. During the team meetings, the qualitative team resolved ambiguities and made decisions to revise and add new codes. Once all responses were coded, two analysts developed inductive second-level codes, where appropriate, to analyze themes under each code. In surfacing themes for each code, the two analysts examined whether there were substantive differences in teachers' responses by various teacher characteristics—such as teachers' racial background, main subject assignment, grade level, and years of experience—and by school characteristics—such as the proportion of students experiencing poverty, the proportion of students of color, urbanicity, and state policy context. Our findings related to this question may not be representative of teachers nationally as they are based only on the individuals who chose to provide an interpretable response to the open-ended survey item.

Notes

¹ Although we are unable to examine this line of inquiry, this finding may also suggest uneven knowledge about district-level restrictions; consequently, teachers' reports of district-level restrictions may be lower than the actual prevalence of district-level restrictions.

² We refer to *elementary education* teachers as teachers whose main subject assignment is general elementary education; often, these are elementary teachers who teach multiple subjects. We distinguish elementary education teachers from *elementary school* teachers who teach elementary grades (e.g., grades K–5), regardless of main subject assignment. Eighty percent of elementary school teachers in our sample were multiple-subject elementary education teachers, while the remaining elementary school teachers named a specific subject, such as ELA, math, science, or social science, as their main subject assignment. In comparison, most middle and high school teachers—roughly 90 percent—named ELA, math, science, or social science as their main subject assignment.

³ When examining differences by teacher race, we conducted two sets of analyses; we compared White teachers with teachers of color (i.e., teachers who do not exclusively self-identify as White), and we compared the responses of Black or African American teachers, Hispanic/Latino teachers, White teachers, and teachers of other races.

⁴ CRT is framework that puts forth the notion that racism is embedded in social structures and institutions, such as policies and legal systems, rather than expressed only through individuals' racist or prejudiced attitudes, mindsets, or beliefs (Sawchuk, 2021). However, as prior research has demonstrated, CRT has been distorted by its opponents into a “caricatured catch-all term used to target the activity of educators, schools, districts, and professional development related to race and diversity” (Pollock et al., 2022, p. 3).

⁵ The difference between high school teachers and elementary teachers was no longer statistically significant at $p < 0.05$ after controlling for school- and teacher-level characteristics.

⁶ A *low-poverty school* is defined as one in which a majority of the student body is not eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, whereas a *high-poverty school* is defined as one in which a majority of the student body is eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

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About This Report

In this report, drawing on the spring 2022 American Instructional Resources Survey via the RAND American Educator Panels (AEP), the authors examine teachers' awareness of and responses to limitations on how they can address race- or gender-related topics in their instruction. The AEP are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country. The panels are a proud member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative. For more information about any one of the survey panels, visit www.rand.org/aep.

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