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Nikole Hannah-Jones urges NC educators to fight against 'anti-history laws'

T. Keung Hui, Kate Murphy : 6-8 minutes : 10/26/2021

Nikole Hannah-Jones declines UNC's offer of tenured chair following controversy

Journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones tells Gayle King that she is declining the University of North Carolina's offer of a tenured Knight chair in journalism following months of controversy. She made the announcement during a interview on CBS This Morning.

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What is the controversy behind Nikole Hannah-Jones' tenure dispute at UNC?

Journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones tells Gayle King that she is declining the University of North Carolina's offer of a tenured Knight chair in journalism following months of controversy. She made the announcement during a interview on CBS This Morning. By CBS THIS MORNING

Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones urged supporters of public education in North Carolina on Tuesday to organize to fight "anti-history laws" being promoted by Republican lawmakers.

Hannah-Jones said the left hasn't gotten "mad enough" in opposing the "culture war that has been contrived by the right wing" that has led to laws banning schools from teaching things such as her 1619 Project.

She said at an online forum of North Carolina educators that people are living in "dark and scary times" where teachers are "afraid to even teach and talk about the experiences that their children are having."

"We're being outgunned right now and I think that's because this is not an issue that's getting enough of the people on the left angry," Hannah-Jones said. "People on the right are very angry and anger is often what inspires you to organize and to push for laws and to push for these changes."

Hannah-Jones was the keynote speaker Tuesday at [The Color of Education Summit](#), a two-day virtual event drawing 1,600 people "to engage in critical conversations centered on addressing issues of racial equity and education."

The summit is sponsored by the Public School Forum of North Carolina's Dudley Flood Center for Educational Equity and Opportunity, the Samuel DuBois Cook Center on Social Equity and the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University.

Leader of 1619 Project

Hannah-Jones is a staff writer at The New York Times Magazine focused on racial injustice best known for her work on [The 1619 Project](#). The project reframes the legacy of slavery and places the contributions of Black Americans at the forefront of the country's history and is often cited in the local, state and national [debate over teaching Critical Race Theory](#).

Hannah-Jones was named the Knight Chair in Race and Journalism at Howard University this summer after turning down a similar [position at UNC-Chapel Hill](#) that sparked national controversy. She was set to join the UNC-CH faculty this fall, but wasn't initially [granted tenure by the UNC-CH Board of Trustees](#). Some argued that decision, or lack thereof, was [rooted in conservative politics](#) and The 1619 Project.

She is a MacArthur "Genius" grant winner and was recently recognized as one of [Time Magazine's 100 most influential people](#).

1619 Project under attack

The 1619 Project has been cited by Republicans at the federal and state level to introduce legislation prohibiting Critical Race Theory from being taught in schools.

U.S. Senator Thom Tillis is among the sponsors of federal legislation to defund any school system that uses the 1619 Project as teaching materials, [The News & Observer previously reported](#).

"The 1619 Project is a racially divisive and revisionist account of history that threatens the integrity of the Union by denying the true principles on which it was founded," the federal legislation says.

Republican lawmakers passed legislation that they say would prevent North Carolina public schools from promoting Critical Race Theory. The legislation was vetoed by Democratic Gov. Roy Cooper, who said the bill "pushes calculated, conspiracy-laden politics into public education," [the N&O reported](#).

Opponents of Critical Race Theory have charged that it presents an overly negative view of the nation's history in which teachers say that white people unfairly get privileges due to their race.

Hannah-Jones said Critical Race Theory is only being taught in colleges. But she said "bad-faith actors" have redefined Critical Race Theory to target the American history, Black history and anti-racism texts being taught in K-12 public schools.

"You're teaching in a school district that was segregated by law," Hannah-Jones said. "To talk about that is to not teach about Critical Race Theory. That is to teach the history of our country and to help our students."

If these "anti-history laws" stand, Hannah-Jones said the nation is in danger of teaching students to support inequity in society.

Nation in 'dark and scary times'

Valerie Bridges, the superintendent of Edgecombe County Public Schools, asked Hannah-Jones how educators can empower parents who support mask mandates and support learning about all races. Critics of mask mandates and Critical Race Theory have [shown up at school board meetings across the country](#).

Hannah-Jones said educators need to show parents what's being taught as opposed to what the right says students are learning. She said parents and other education supporters need to organize to speak out at meetings and to write letters to the editors like the opposition.

"We pay attention to those who are the loudest when we need to pay attention to those who are the most rational and acting in good faith," Hannah-Jones said.

Hannah-Jones said the situation in North Carolina has gotten worse since she was a reporter at The News & Observer.

"We have to stop being so passive in believing that things are going to work out in the end," she said. "They are not. Trust me, as a student of history, we are actually in a very dangerous period."



Nikole Hannah-Jones John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation



T. Keung Hui has covered K-12 education for the News & Observer since 1999, helping parents, students, school employees and the community understand the vital role education plays in North Carolina. His primary focus is Wake County, but he also covers statewide education issues.