

# How Ibram X. Kendi's Definition of Antiracism Applies to Schools

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“In no other capacity is a problem solved by not talking about it,” Kendi said. “And yes, it’s extremely hard to treat racism. It’s extremely painful. Just like it’s extremely hard to treat cancer.”

He argues that, like his cancer, racism exists in every part of the American system. The country was founded upon racism and its effects can be seen in everything from housing to economic inequality to education. He says the “treatment” for racism is similar to the one he received for cancer. Scan the body to see where the tumors (or racist policies) are, surgically remove them, then flood the whole body with medicine to make sure even the invisible tumors are treated. That systemic treatment prevents a recurrence of the cancer. Then watch the body closely for signs of new tumors and treat quickly if there are signs the cancer is returning.

"Americans want to heal America of racism without pain. That’s impossible," Kendi said. He fought his cancer diagnosis despite feeling despair. Now Americans must fight racism by becoming what he terms “antiracists.”

His contribution to the current conversation around racism is a deceptively simple one.

“I define an antiracist as someone who is expressing an antiracist idea or supporting an antiracist policy with their actions,” Kendi said. “And I define an antiracist idea as any idea that says the racial groups are equal.”

In *How to Be An Antiracist*, Kendi writes:

"To be antiracist is to think nothing is behaviorally wrong or right -- inferior or superior -- with any of the racial groups. Whenever the antiracist sees individuals behaving positively or negatively, the antiracist sees exactly that: individuals behaving positively or negatively, not representatives of whole races. To be antiracist is to deracialize behavior, to remove the tattooed stereotype from every racialized body. Behavior is something humans do, not races do."

In this sense Kendi seems to agree with teachers who prefer to focus on helping the individual students in front of them, no matter who they are. But, he doesn't let people off the hook so easily. Becoming antiracist requires every individual to choose every day to think, act and advocate for equality, which will require changing systems and policies that may have gone unexamined for a long time.

In a [Twitter thread](#), high school English teacher and [a founder](#) of the [#DisruptTexts](#) Twitter chat and movement Tricia Ebarvia distilled the central argument of *How To Be An Antiracist* and its application to education. Ebarvia writes:

We usually think that racist ideas lead to racist actions.

But according to Kendi, racist policies came before racist ideas.

Those in power act out of self-interest. Thus, they enact racist policies (slavery, immigration, redlining) to maintain that power...

These policies then result in racial inequities (lack of wealth or education)...

Which lead to the development of racist ideas by others who see these inequities and need a reason to justify why these inequities exist (example: [Black, Indigenous, People of Color] must be 'less than').

Educational achievement is a good example of the destructive cycle Kendi describes and that Ebarvia synthesizes so neatly. Kendi reminds readers that the standardized IQ test was a tool [developed by eugenicists](#) in the early 20th century. Even the definition of intelligence, and [the tests and assumptions](#) based upon that definition, exist within a [racialized context](#).

Kendi lays out how racist ideas and policies are perpetuated in education: Achievement in this country is based on test scores, and since white and Asian students get higher test scores on average than their black and Latinx peers, they are considered to be achieving on a higher level. And then because we connect achievement to intelligence,

we think that white and Asian students are intellectually superior to black and Latinx ones. People who think this way then point to the test scores as empirical evidence of their claim.

“We’re fundamentally saying that the problem is the test takers, as opposed to the test,” Kendi said about that argument. “And we’re completely ignoring things like the multibillion-dollar test prep industry that’s concentrated in white and Asian neighborhoods. We’re completely ignoring the massive amount of disparities between schools in terms of resources. And that’s why more and more educational scholars are talking about the opportunity gap instead of the achievement gap.”

Tricia Ebarvia sees the interplay between racist policies and the ideas in the curriculum that schools teach. [Ebarvia tweets](#):

How books became "canonized" is directly related to racialized power.

Those in power—predominantly White men who had access to and control of the academy—enacted policies to maintain their power, just as almost any dominant power does.

She goes on to explain that those policies kept women and people of color out of spaces of intellectual and creative power. And because they were not there, racist ideas sprung up to explain their absence.

Women & BIPOC must be "less than": not "literary" or "rigorous" enough.

This racist, sexist thinking is just used to justify the absence of women & BIPOC writers.

This viewpoint is ignorant of the racist, sexist powers and policies that excluded them in the first place.

Fast-forward and teachers and students socialized in this "canon" of work have internalized these racist, sexist ideas about what constitutes "literary value" — and they reproduce it in curricular choices, year after year.

For Ebarvia, Kendi’s emphasis on racist policies provides the key to moving forward. She points out curriculum is policy, and it’s an easy place for teachers to start acting like antiracists.

## HOW TO BE AN ANTIRACIST

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For Kendi, there’s no middle ground. Actions, ideas and policies are either racist or not. He points to the fact that racist has a dictionary definition, one that should be applied evenly to anyone, of any race, who expresses racist ideas or who supports racist policies.

He contends that white supremacists have won the rhetorical battle by successfully positioning the term “racist” as a personal attack, that being racist makes you a bad person.

“We should not be saying this is who a person is,” Kendi said. “We should be saying this is what a person is doing in the moment. And the reason that’s critical is because when you study the history of racist ideas and antiracist ideas, you find the same person saying both racist and antiracist ideas in the same book, in the same speech, in the same article. So then, how would you define that person in a general sense?”

Kendi holds himself to this same standard. He admits that when he was younger he professed racist views. In high school, he gave a speech condemning black youth for not valuing education, for getting pregnant and not making something of themselves.

“I reproduced these ideas and spent my senior year thinking the problem was black people -- as a black person -- as opposed to racism.”

He continued to believe that black people were the problem when he got to college, where he saw white police officers and poll workers preventing black people from voting in the 2000 election. That made him think there was something wrong with both black people and white people.

“But eventually, I began to see that the problem wasn’t actually a group of people. The problem was racist power and policy,” Kendi said.

He’d like to move the conversation about racism away from being perpetrator and intent-focused to being victim and outcome-focused. He’s less concerned about who is saying the racist comment than on the fact that the comment is being made at all.

“When we stop being so intent- and perpetrator-focused, and start being more outcome- and victim-centered, then we are able to decenter whiteness,” Kendi said. “Then we are able to put the victims of racism at the center of our analysis.”

It boils down to this: If one thinks the fundamental racist problem in society is “those bad people,” then one can essentially do nothing. But if racism is bad policies, then “you need a collective effort to change those policies.”

“Once we get over our denial, and once we admit the ways in which we’ve consumed racist ideas, then we next try to adopt antiracist ideas,” Kendi said. “There’s nothing wrong with any racial groups.”