

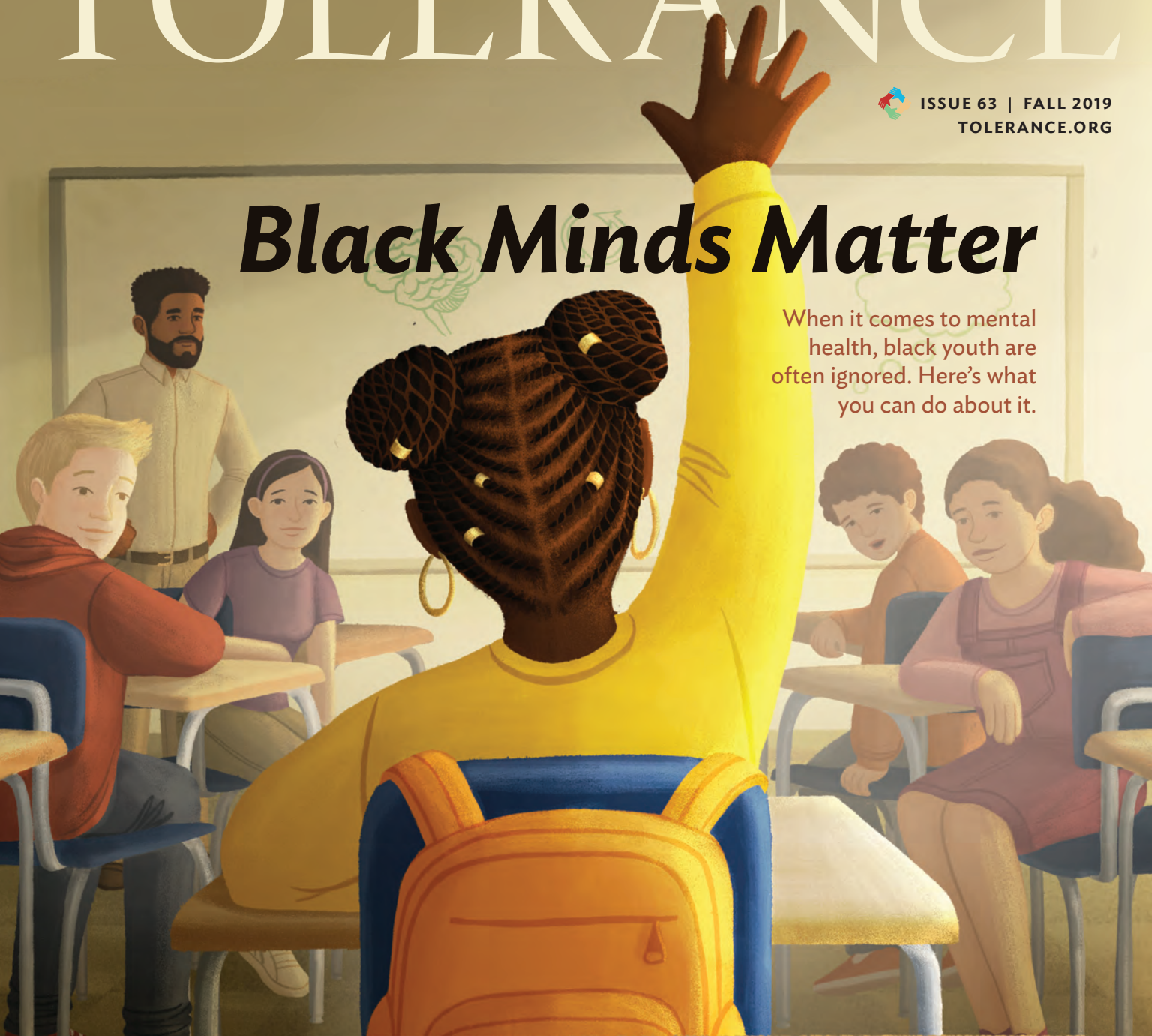
# TEACHING TOLERANCE



ISSUE 63 | FALL 2019  
TOLERANCE.ORG

## *Black Minds Matter*

When it comes to mental health, black youth are often ignored. Here's what you can do about it.



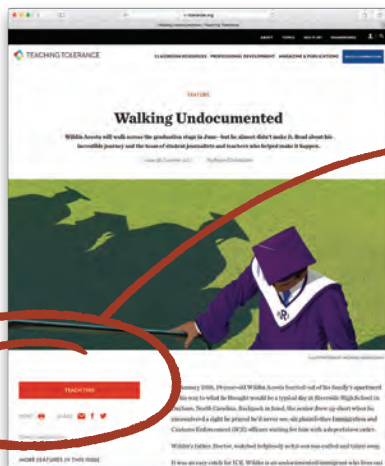
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### **ONE SURVIVOR REMEMBERS**

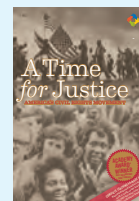
Gerda Weissmann Klein's account of surviving the Holocaust encourages thoughtful classroom discussion about a difficult-to-teach topic. *Grades 6-12*

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### **VIVA LA CAUSA**

An introduction to lessons about struggles for workers' rights—both past and present. *Grades 6-12*



### **A TIME FOR JUSTICE**

Follow the civil rights movement from Emmett Till to the passing of the Voting Rights Act. *Grades 6-12*



### **MIGHTY TIMES THE CHILDREN'S MARCH**

The heroic story of the young people in Birmingham, Alabama, who brought segregation to its knees. *Grades 6-12*



### **BULLIED**

A STUDENT, A SCHOOL AND A CASE THAT MADE HISTORY. One student's ordeal at the hands of anti-gay bullies culminates in a message of hope. *Grades 6-12*



### **AN OUTRAGE**

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# TEACHING TOLERANCE

ISSUE 63 | FALL 2019

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*As politicians and policymakers place long-overdue focus on the mental health of black children, educators and school leaders must ask themselves how they're supporting the children in their care.*

ILLUSTRATION BY **ALLEANNA HARRIS**

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Watch this story come to life with our video.  
[t-t.site/songs-of-zion](http://t-t.site/songs-of-zion)



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# TEACHING TOLERANCE

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**THE MISSION** OF TEACHING TOLERANCE IS TO HELP TEACHERS AND SCHOOLS EDUCATE CHILDREN AND YOUTH TO BE ACTIVE PARTICIPANTS IN A DIVERSE DEMOCRACY.



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## Perspectives

**“I get angry about things,  
then go on and work.”**

— TONI MORRISON



**IT'S SEPTEMBER 2019.** Exactly 40 years ago, I stood nervously behind a lectern with a roll book open to 125 carefully handwritten names. I was preparing to meet my first-ever students.

I didn't think about teaching the 1980 presidential election. In the spring I could teach about the primaries, and I looked forward to it. Nor did I think about the Census scheduled for the coming April. My mother had worked proudly as a Census taker when I was a child and told us it was an important civic duty. In 1980, I filled out the form for my own household for the first time. I was a little excited about that, too.

Coshandra Dillard, is about changing the way we see black youth so that educators can support them in getting the mental health care they need despite glaring disparities in access to care. We're also featuring stories about people in schools who are standing up in the face of injustice, despite the risks. In this issue, for example, Cory Collins profiles educators who stood up for their LGBTQ students when a powerful hate group targeted their school. Ayesha al-Shabazz explains how to work for change with second-graders, and Dillard also shows how teachers are organizing to resist laws calling for them to be armed.

TT is working to change what our students learn about slavery, and we've just introduced a few new resources, including a K-5 framework, to our Teaching Hard History initiative. I hope you'll take a look at what's new and think about ways to incorporate it into your own practice.

In 2016, we wrote two reports detailing how presidential politics was showing up as hate and bias incidents in schools. In the spring of this year, we issued a report, *Hate at School*, that painted a vivid picture of the harassment and hostility too many students still encounter at school—a place that should be promoting their well-being, not their maltreatment. School leaders bear the greatest responsibility for school climate, but our new initiative USvsHate lifts the voices of students fighting against hate in their own schools. We think nothing is as powerful to young people as knowing that their voices matter.

Stay strong and remember why you chose this profession. We'll be here when you need us.

—Maureen Costello

Now, few educators can be so blasé. The 2016 presidential campaign became an ongoing reality TV show, and classroom discussions mutated into political cage fights, challenging educators in ways they'd never seen before. Most teachers I know are bracing for another rough year.

In the past, educators readily taught about the Census to explain the process and generate some excitement about being counted. They understood the economic and political benefits of ensuring a full count and saw little downside. This year, many will question whether they can, in good conscience, encourage students and families to participate.

In 2016, many teachers we surveyed told us they would skip teaching about the election that year. Not only did the campaign rhetoric make immigrant students anxious; it also made partisans unusually combative. Worse, while educators were prepared to teach about the process and the issues, few had lessons ready to tackle sexual harassment, name-calling and Twitter storms. This year, how many will opt again to avoid all the negative consequences and teach neither the election nor the Census?

If they do, it will be at a great cost. Most students get their largest dose of civics during presidential election years, and they get—at most—four of these between kindergarten and high school graduation. What happens to democracy if they miss two of those elections, just because that year's campaign is closer to a natural disaster than to a national civic event?

And what happens to the very idea of equal representation if students don't learn about the Census at least once while they're in school and recognize how important it is to ensuring that their voices and interests matter?

This summer the 31 members of our Teaching Tolerance Advisory Board convened in Montgomery. While they were here, they worked in groups to respond to the prompt “I wish I had known ...” and generated messages for educators new to the profession.

Me? I'm glad I didn't know 40 years ago how tough being a teacher would become. But I will still offer some advice: Stand strong, find your allies, and do what is brave.

We'll be here with strategies to help you recognize and stand up to injustice. Our cover story, by TT Staff Writer

**DO YOU HAVE A GREAT IDEA FOR A PROJECT? DON'T JUST THINK IT—DO IT!**



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## **SOCIAL JUSTICE EDUCATOR GRANTS**

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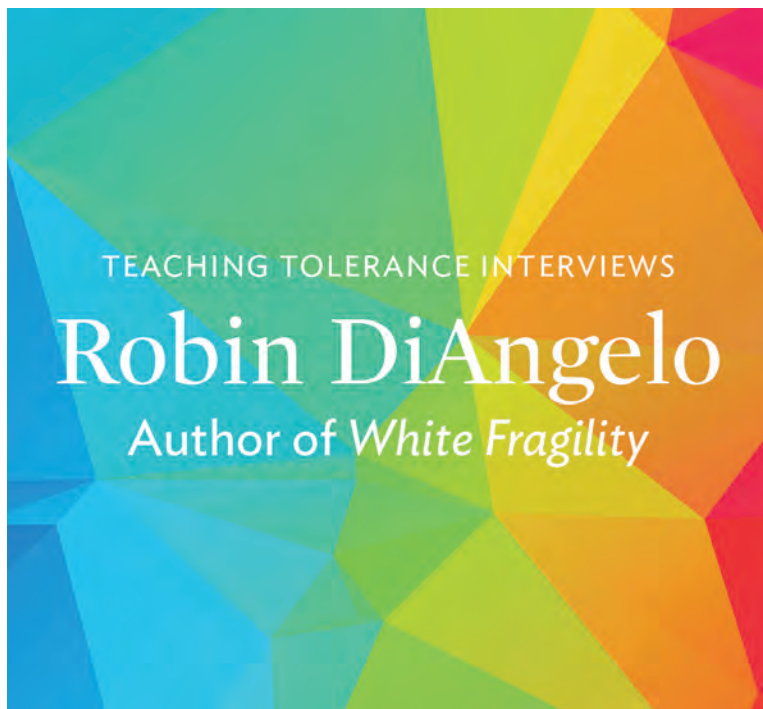
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# FIRST BELL

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## Reader Reactions

In our online Summer issue, we shared a Q&A with Robin DiAngelo, author of the bestselling *White Fragility: Why It's So Hard for White People to Talk About Racism*, that received a lot of attention online. If you'd like to read the feature for yourself—or watch the accompanying video—visit [t-t.site/white-fragility](http://t-t.site/white-fragility).

*White Fragility* is one powerful read. If you haven't read it, read it. It's like a shot of espresso—straight, powerful and to the point. Check out this interview with author Robin DiAngelo.

@BGARAYUAT  
VIA TWITTER

Social class. Everything isn't about race. There is a history of racism. There are also white people who live under bridges in cardboard boxes and eat out of dumpsters. SOCIAL CLASS. Acquaint yourself with the concept.

—CHRIS UNDERWOOD  
VIA FACEBOOK

*We're always glad to hear from the Teaching Tolerance community—in person, online and even in the rare, occasional paper letter. We appreciate your feedback, and we hope you'll let us know your thoughts!*

## SHARING TEACHING TOLERANCE

[TT] is a great resource for teachers, especially to share with other educators and colleagues who may or may not have education or background knowledge in cultural and racial issues and topics. Thank you.

—CHRIS LYNNE  
VIA FACEBOOK

I'm a college professor. Even though TT's resources are geared primarily to K–12 teachers, its materials also work very well in the college classroom. Its discussion of race—particularly whiteness and privilege—are extremely useful in my first- and second-year courses.

—REBECCA SAULSBURY  
BRAVARD  
VIA FACEBOOK

## ON-DEMAND WEBINARS

Just finished the webinar from @Tolerance\_org on #AAPIHM [Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month]! It was so amazing! I will definitely be creating more culturally relevant resources for teachers. I can't wait. Thank you so much [Sarah-SoonLing Blackburn] and [Jonathan Tobin] for your facilitation. #AAPI

—@THEBLACKAPPLE  
VIA TWITTER

**SOCIAL JUSTICE 101**

Having attended SO many professional learning opportunities, it is clear to me that this is one of the best (if not THE best). I cannot wait to share what I've learned with my students and faculty. I also can't wait to practice in my own life. THANK YOU for the tools, resources, support, EVERYTHING you do for educators. What a powerful day of learning.

—ANONYMOUS PARTICIPANT

TEACHING TOLERANCE WORKSHOP, PHILADELPHIA

*Editor's note: Want to know when TT will be coming to a town near you? Learn more about our open-enrollment workshops at [tolerance.org/workshops](http://tolerance.org/workshops).*

**DIGITAL LITERACY**

Thank you for *The Mind Online* podcast. Episode 3, "Did You Google It?" was really powerful. I think many teachers and students are woefully unaware of and unprepared for the bias that is rampant on the internet, including Google search. There is definitely a need to better recognize and understand internet bias, especially its effects on students. Thanks for helping educators navigate these very challenging topics.

—JACK GANSE

VIA EMAIL

*Editor's note: Download our podcasts The Mind Online, Queer America and Teaching Hard History: American Slavery at [tolerance.org/podcasts](http://tolerance.org/podcasts).*



**WHEN SCHOOLS CAUSE TRAUMA**

This made me think hard about some of the practices I have failed to question, and it challenges me to be a better teacher. Thank you for this!

—@SYRINGA\_X

VIA TWITTER

We are doing things in our schools that hurt kids. Let's talk honestly together, not to induce shame, but to create helpful change. We can make a big difference, especially when we work together collectively. Let's do this!

—JEN ALEXANDER

VIA FACEBOOK

**IT'S TIME TO TALK ABOUT DR. SEUSS**

I am disgusted by the recent analysis of Dr. Seuss, the *Little House on the Prairie* series by Laura Ingalls

Wilder, and others and the rejection of their validity as writers of their times. ...

As with any literary work which has stood the test of time, there are bound to be cultural anomalies which cause us to cringe. Rather than "throwing the baby out with the bath water," let us, as educators, engage in those conversations about race, bigotry, changing values, etc. Let us use a teachable moment, instead of throwing it away, to

enlighten and teach our children. I can't think of a better way to change the way it was to present day values.

—MEG SCATA

VIA EMAIL

**IS "QUEER" OK TO SAY?**

I speak here as a student: Queer is a very important word for me. It helped me when I was still closeted and didn't really understand my identity. I knew I wasn't straight, and not even bisexual—queer fit me just fine at that point in my life. It felt good, it embodied how I felt about myself in a positive and freeing way. It helped me to feel safe within my own skin until I could finally say I was a lesbian. ... I hope my two cents are valuable to those who needed to know.

—CAADAM

VIA TEACHING TOLERANCE MAGAZINE ONLINE

**TELL US WHAT YOU THINK!**

Have an opinion about something you see in *Teaching Tolerance* magazine or on our website? Email us at editor@tolerance.org with the subject line "Letter to the Editor." Or mail a letter to 400 Washington Ave., Montgomery, AL 36104.



In response to our Spring 2019 cover story, "Equity, Period."



Thank you so much for addressing this issue. It is one that I wish would be addressed in every Health class in middle and high school.

@LUEVANOSRUTH VIA INSTAGRAM

## Ask Teaching Tolerance



### Q. What are my rights and responsibilities as an educator confronting racism in my school?

At a minimum, our role as educators is to provide students with adequate educational opportunities in a healthy learning environment. We are responsible for creating a classroom environment that is conducive to the learning needs of all students. To allow all students a safer environment, we are responsible for interrupting racist speech, practices and policies in our classrooms and school communities. While teachers have the right and responsibility to discuss and address learning conditions, there are potential risks to practicing accountability with our students. Some educators fear or experience administrative or family backlash when confronting racism. TT encourages educators to

take this intentional risk. In our guide *Speak Up at School*, we offer tools to support this necessary practice, including tips for working within challenging power dynamics.

#### What is cultural appropriation?

The use of the term “cultural appropriation” began in the late 1970s in academic discussions of colonialism and Western imperialism. Contemporary uses of this phrase often pull from this historical critique of colonial power and oppression of the Global South, but what is and isn’t cultural appropriation can vary depending on the context. A helpful starting place comes from *Everyday Feminism*, which states that cultural appropriation is a “power

dynamic in which members of a dominant culture take elements from a culture of people who have been systematically oppressed by that dominant group.” In the classroom, educators and students can utilize resources such as the PBS *Origin of Everything* episode on cultural appropriation to discuss and understand what is and isn’t cultural appropriation. Additionally, self-reflective guiding questions can support a nuanced and thoughtful understanding of the cultural appropriation power dynamic. For example, does the dominant culture receive praise for an element of culture while the non-dominant culture is villainized or discredited for it? Cultural appropriation is an evolving and expansive term

to describe the relationship of power between dominant and non-dominant cultures. Ultimately, we should follow the lead and respect the needs and wants of the people whose culture is being accessed by those outside of their cultural group.

#### What is anti-racist curriculum?

The terms “anti-bias” and “anti-racist” are often used interchangeably. However, clarifying and understanding the difference between these curricular models and their practices is critical to creating an equitable learning environment for all students. Anti-bias curriculum helps students recognize, understand and accept race, class, gender and other differences. Anti-racist curriculum invites both educators and students into a practice of disrupting white supremacy and structural oppression in their classroom, school and community. A quote attributed to abolitionist scholar Angela Davis summarizes the importance of anti-racist curriculum: “In a racist society, it is not enough to be non-racist; we must be anti-racist.” Anti-racist education equips educators and students with the necessary tools to transform the conditions and outcomes in their community.

#### ASK TEACHING TOLERANCE!

Need the kind of advice and expertise only Teaching Tolerance can provide? Email us at [editor@tolerance.org](mailto:editor@tolerance.org) with “Ask TT” in the subject line.



ARTICLE 3.21.19 // RACE & ETHNICITY

# What Is the Model Minority Myth?

BY SARAH-SOONLING BLACKBURN

The myth of the model minority is based in stereotypes. It perpetuates a narrative in which Asian American children are whiz kids or musical geniuses. Within the myth of the model minority, Tiger Moms force children to work harder and be better than everyone else, while nerdy, effeminate dads hold prestigious—but not leadership—positions in STEM industries like medicine and accounting.

This myth characterizes Asian Americans as a polite, law-abiding group who have achieved a higher level of success than the general population through some combination of innate talent and pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps immigrant striving. ...

... While most people agree that negative stereotypes of Asian Americans are harmful, some still question the harm of the model minority myth. What could be so bad about being part of a group that's seen as being successful?

### And a reader replied...

Make [Sarah-SoonLing Blackburn's] analysis of the harm perpetuated by the racist Model Minority Myth your must-read this weekend. (...looking forward to sharing this with the #AsAm Ss club at my school—thanks, Sarah!).

READ THE FULL ARTICLE HERE:

[t-t.site/model-minority](http://t-t.site/model-minority)

### ARTICLE SPOTLIGHT

Check out some of our most talked-about posts. Search for these headlines at [tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org).



**Teaching Juneteenth**  
BY COSHANDRA DILLARD



**Intersectional Identities: Do Educators Empower or Oppress?**

BY MARYAM ASENUGA



**Teaching First-Graders About Microaggressions**

BY BRET TURNER



**Arthur's Gay Teacher and Other Stories Schools Won't Tell**

BY CORY COLLINS

### DID YOU KNOW?

*Sixty percent of Boston's schools are "intensely segregated," as predominantly black and Latinx students make up at least 90 percent of seats. Twenty years ago, that number was only 42 percent.*

— The Boston Globe

## Why I Teach

*Ayesha al-Shabazz teaches second grade at Southview Elementary School in Tuscaloosa, Alabama.*



# Believing Change Is Possible

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. Elementary school teachers get tons of them from students. But let's face it: Most of them end up getting chucked into "file 13"—the final resting place for students' notes and drawings. But a few years ago, a student gave me a picture that hangs above my desk to this day. It is the cutest picture of me drawn as a "Super Teacher." Underneath, she wrote the words "I love you. Your a hero." But the spelling doesn't bother me. I kept this particular picture because it's a reminder that this job isn't about me. It's about these children. It symbolizes overcoming obstacles, finding hidden strength and

assisting in the evolution of some of my more challenging students, like the one who drew me as a superhero.

Imagine being told to "shut the f--- up" by a 7-year-old. Imagine having to empty your entire classroom because one student won't stop throwing linking cubes, pencils and chairs—tearing up in minutes what took you days to organize and decorate. Needless to say, I spent more than a few nights stressed, and to be honest, I even questioned my future in education more than once. But this wasn't my first rodeo, I reminded myself. God placed me in this profession to not only educate minds but also to heal broken spirits, so I pushed on.

Fourteen years of experience told me that this child was suffering. I had to find the root of her behavior. So, I met with her mom and voiced my concerns. She didn't seem surprised but said she'd talk to her daughter. Then I asked about the child's father. With a slow, deep breath and downcast eyes, she told the heartbreaking story of her domestic abuse. My student's father was now in jail, and my student had witnessed everything. It all made sense now. This baby had seen and heard way too much. It became my mission to help her heal.

So I worked on building a better relationship with her and equipping

## SHARE YOUR STORY

What motivates you to get up each morning and serve students in our nation's schools? We want to hear from you. Send your 600-word submission for the "Why I Teach" column to [submissions@tolerance.org](mailto:submissions@tolerance.org).

her with tools she needed. Every day I pulled her aside and told her how much I loved and cared about her, that I'd never give up on her. I asked about her likes, dislikes and interests and worked those into lessons when I could. She loved frogs, so I had a friend bring some in as we learned about life cycles. She was often my special helper, and I showered her with praise at the slightest signs of cooperation or changed behavior. I used lots of visual and verbal cues to help prepare her for transitions. For example, she had a visual schedule and sticker chart to help her own her behaviors. We used emojis and drawings when she shut down verbally. That evolved into using guided breathing techniques and meditation to calm down. I reassured her that "it's OK to feel angry," and whenever she felt she was getting upset, she could sit in the "chill zone." Journaling and frequent visits to the school's counselor helped her communicate and get along with others, too.

It took time and it wasn't easy, but she soon began to transform into someone who used her words instead of throwing chairs. She took self-regulated timeouts instead of screaming and fighting, and she drew pictures of me as a superhero instead of cursing at me. Students like this have taught me that change is possible, even in the most difficult cases. I persevere in hopes of changing the world, one child at a time. It's this belief and these success stories that continue to drive me and give my life meaning.

ARTICLE 3.26.19 // BULLYING &amp; BIAS

## Equity Work Should Start From the Top

BY LAURYN MASCAREÑAZ, RODNEY TRICE

We believe that equity work is non-negotiable and must be part of the DNA of any school or district. It doesn't matter whether we call it equity; diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI); or another title. As leaders, we must all commit to this work. We must face the reality that we are in an ongoing fight to disrupt inequity wherever it exists.

In our district, we accomplish this by setting the conditions that encourage and inspire other educators to lead equity work: intentionally creating opportunities for new learning around equity challenges, changing attitudes and mindsets regarding equity challenges, and partnering with students and families who are closest to the opportunity gaps.

Equity leadership is among the most challenging work educators can engage in. Years of experience, advanced degrees and professional affiliations don't prepare someone to dismantle inequities in our schools or society. ... To lead diversity, equity and inclusion work, we must be strategic and focused on our pursuits of systemic change. Focusing on large-scale school and district inequities can be exhausting and stressful, but we have to keep this in mind: We are fortunate enough to have the opportunity to work every day for all our students.



### And a reader replied...

To be effective, leaders have to truly believe that anti-racism and equity work are fundamental to achieving social, emotional and academic goals. And those beliefs must spark action.

[READ THE FULL ARTICLE HERE](#)
[t-t.site/equity-work](https://t-t.site/equity-work)

### DID YOU KNOW?

#### DID YOU KNOW?

*Black and Latinx children and young adults are about half as likely as their white peers to receive outpatient mental health care.*

— International Journal of Health Services

*Like districts nationwide, Boston Public Schools faces a significant "diversity gap." In the 2016–17 school year, 62 percent of the district's educators were white, compared with 14 percent of students.*

— Boston Public Schools

*Both the National Education Association and the American Federation of Teachers have consistently opposed allowing guns in schools, stating it would pose an unnecessary risk to law enforcement, students and the school community.*

— The Associated Press

# Reimagining Texts

As a teacher librarian, Julia Torres collects and shares resources, develops and leads professional development for educators, collaborates with teachers, encourages student literacies and advocates for school libraries.

## How did you become a teacher librarian?

I am an English teacher serving as a librarian, which is very different from someone who has a master's degree in library science. We had no library on campus for several years, so, to meet my students' needs, I developed a classroom library that was really strong and robust with diverse titles to pique their interest. In time, kids from different classes would come into my classroom to borrow books. I then started to get grants to inject more life into my classroom library through the addition of more (and better) titles.

One day, a friend from district library services came to visit my classroom and was impressed with what she saw. In short, my dedication and passion for matching students with just the right books came to their attention. It was revealed to me eventually that many people within the district, together with community members, had been working hard behind the scenes to get our library back. So, it was natural that I would be asked to be the teacher librarian on campus. I already knew the conditions under which our students and staff were operating.

## What are your recommendations for building a classroom library?

I think we build libraries through the lens of our own experience. So right now it's very trendy and popular for teachers to build libraries with



*Julia Torres is a teacher librarian in Denver Public Schools and a co-founder of #Disrupt Texts, which aims to create "a more inclusive, representative and equitable language arts curriculum."*

culturally diverse texts. However, that means different things to different people. For some folks, it's going to mean buying any book with a child of color on the cover in order to have the appearance of "representation." For some, it's going to mean buying anything that was positively reviewed by educators of color. For others, that's going to mean buying exclusively #OwnVoices texts. ...

I personally do not want texts in my library that are written about the lives of people of color, featuring

protagonists who are people of color, that are written by white authors unless I know the author, their process and background. I've read too many books where authors don't have language or other details right because they're writing from outside a culture or specific lived reality. The fact that someone has researched a specific identity extensively does not mean you know what it is to live in that skin. We are doing our students an injustice if we don't think that they can identify the details that are missing or incorrect.

## Student Reads

The Teaching Hard History Text Library includes more than 100 student texts aligned with the Key Concepts of the *Teaching Hard History* frameworks. Each includes a set of text-dependent questions.

### Meet Frederick Douglass (K-2)

In “Meet Frederick Douglass,” students learn about Douglass’s amazing journey from slavery to freedom and how he committed his life to fighting for the liberty of others. [t-t.site/frederick-douglass](http://t-t.site/frederick-douglass)

### Nat Turner, Freedom Fighter (3-5)

Students discover how Nat Turner used code to lead other enslaved people during a rebellion in Southampton County, Virginia, in “Nat Turner, Freedom Fighter.” [t-t.site/nat-turner](http://t-t.site/nat-turner)

### The North Star Tea Party (6-8)

By reading the poem “The North Star Tea Party,” students gain an understanding of how some enslaved families followed the North Star and navigated the Underground Railroad to freedom. [t-t.site/north-star](http://t-t.site/north-star)

### Letter to Reverend Samson Occum (1774) (9-12)

Enslaved poet Phillis Wheatley discusses slavery and civil and religious liberties in her letter to Mohegan minister Samson Occum. [t-t.site/samson-occum](http://t-t.site/samson-occum)

All teachers are pressed for time. I get it. But this is not work that can be done quickly or passed off to someone else. It is past time for us to become accustomed to asking ourselves how we are going to advocate for the inclusion of a text if it has been selected simply on the basis that it’s from a text list.

### How is your work as a teacher librarian different from that of a teacher?

A lot of my work is helping folks understand how to do the work of disruption or reimagining. I prefer to call it reimagining these days. #DisruptTexts is a movement I’m a part of, a co-founder with Tricia Ebarvia, Lorena Germán and Dr. Kim Parker. I’m very proud of the work that has been done through that organization and movement because the community has changed the way people think and the actions they take regarding text selection and curriculum implementation.

In addition to participating in online communities and conversations that push thinking and practice, we have to consider ways we can reimagine how to do work within whatever context we are in, because there is something that can be done in wherever we are, and from any role in which we might be serving. What has been really great is that lately, teachers have started to come to me and say, “I’m not feeling this book that I’ve been told by the district I have to use. So what are my choices? How can we collaborate, language arts teacher

and librarian, to assign something better? Because the response that I was getting from the students, whether it’s because of my teaching or because of the book, didn’t work.” I see this as an incredible opportunity for teachers and librarians to work together, leveraging the strengths of people in both roles to think in new ways and transform the way we think about what texts are worthy of academic study.

### What’s the best part of your work?

The best part of my day is to book-talk books to kids. I basically sell without the exchange of money. If there is an exchange, it’s love for books and the development of a relationship with words, language, art. I sell books to kids all day, and I’m one of millions of librarians around the country that does that. I’m honored to be able to link arms with them because I feel like that’s the best job in the world. When I see a child book-talking the book that they just finished reading to another kid, that’s a heart-opening experience.

It’s so exciting when a book written by an author that represents voices that have been marginalized, underrepresented [or] discounted finds its way into the hands of one of my students and they feel seen. Let me tell you: There is no child thirsty for reading like one who has been denied the simple pleasures of a beautiful, culturally responsive, well-run library for as many years as our kids have been denied.

## FREE STUFF!

These web resources support and supplement anti-bias education—at no cost!

To experience a “museum without walls,” visit the **Learning Together** site from the Smithsonian Asian Pacific American Center. The center brings art, history and culture to students through resources like an interactive Culture Lab Playbook and much more.

[t-t.site/apa](http://t-t.site/apa)

**Rights. Respect. Responsibility (3Rs)** is a K-12 curriculum providing honest sexual health information for all youth. With lessons on good communication, safety in relationships, and growth and development, 3Rs strives to create health equity for all.

[t-t.site/3rs-curriculum](http://t-t.site/3rs-curriculum)

Although it is geared toward parents, this podcast from NPR is beneficial for educators looking to answer students’ toughest questions. Child development experts from *Sesame Street* discuss topics like magic, race and death on **Parenting: Difficult Conversations**.

[t-t.site/difficult-conversations](http://t-t.site/difficult-conversations)

The **STEM Role Models** poster set was crafted by various illustrators. The colorful posters, showcasing famous women in STEM like Dr. Hayat Sindi and Mae Jemison, are available to download and print in eight languages.

[t-t.site/stem-posters](http://t-t.site/stem-posters)





## DIVERSITY

## Digging Deep Into the Social Justice Standards

The Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards are the anchor standards and learning outcomes created to guide teachers in curriculum development and to make schools more just, equitable and safe. Our standards are designed to be used alongside state and Common Core State Standards in all content areas to reduce prejudice and bias and advocate for collective action.

These standards are divided into four domains: Identity, Diversity, Justice and Action. In a series that began in the Spring 2019 issue of *Teaching Tolerance*, PD Café will walk through each domain to help you understand and apply each to your practice so that students have the skills they need to make their schools and communities safe places for all.

## Practicing Diversity

Diversity is a beautiful thing. It should be explored and celebrated in classrooms. After we have come to better understand our individual identities, we can begin to examine the ways in which they do and do not overlap with others' identities and lived experiences. There are many ways, large and small, to introduce concepts around diversity into your classroom and make it a welcoming place for all students. One strategy, focused on honoring student experience, is featured in our publication *Critical Practices for Anti-bias Education*, available online at [tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org). It's important to create a classroom culture that values students' lives and identities by creating a space that's open, avoids stereotypes and lets students define their own identities. *Critical Practices* features strategies for making this happen, such as using texts that reflect the demographics of your classroom and sharing personal stories.

Another way to look at diversity with your students is to facilitate discussions about it. The way language is used in your classroom is an important component in how students will discuss not just curriculum and content but their experiences and relationships. Looking more closely at our critical practices around classroom culture, you'll find five common characteristics of a classroom based on shared inquiry and dialogue: listening, respect, humility, voice and trust. Humility is critical when learning about diversity because it pushes us to recognize that our own ideas and opinions are only part of the story and that other people may have access to pieces of the puzzle that we don't know about.

For more activities related to language and sharing lived experiences, you can also check out our online professional development module "Unpacking Diversity" at [tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org).



## Exploring Diversity

### Classroom Activity

When discussing diversity with students, a good starting place can be having them share their own identities so they can affirm who they are while also hearing about the differences in the identities of their peers. A great way to do this is through having students create identity boxes.

Have each student bring a shoebox (or box of similar size) to school, and have extra boxes available for students who may need them. Students should decorate the outside of their box with images, words or phrases that represent their culture and community. Examples can include things like "French ancestry," "family of musicians" or "first-generation American citizen." Inside the box should be four or five objects that they feel have shaped them and represent their unique background and experiences. If an object is too large to fit in the box, they can put a picture or description of the object and its significance inside the box.

## Understanding Diversity

### What is Diversity?

➤ The condition of having or being composed of different elements; variety, especially the inclusion of different types of people (as people of different races or cultures) in a group or organization.

*Webster's Dictionary*

Students should share either as a class or in small groups about the outside and inside of their boxes. After sharing, have students answer the following questions:

- What did you learn about your classmates that you did not know before they shared?
- What do you have in common with your classmates?
- How are you different from your classmates? How are they different from each other?
- Did you learn anything about them that might affect how you interact with or treat them? Why?

The great thing about this activity is that even if you teach in a fairly homogenous environment, students will still find diversity in the lived experiences of their peers. Consider making a box for yourself and sharing with students to model before having students make their own boxes.

# Diversity Standards

## Anchor Standards 6–10 of the Social Justice Standards

6. Students will express comfort with people who are both similar to and different from them and engage respectfully with all people.
7. Students will develop language and knowledge to accurately and respectfully describe how people (including themselves) are both similar to and different from each other and others in their identity groups.
8. Students will respectfully express curiosity about the history and lived experiences of others and will exchange ideas and beliefs in an open-minded way.
9. Students will respond to diversity by building empathy, respect, understanding and connection.
10. Students will examine diversity in social, cultural, political and historical contexts rather than in ways that are superficial or oversimplified.

### Scenario #1

As children are funneling into her classroom on a Monday morning, Ms. Franklin overhears a conversation between two students:

“What did you do last weekend?” Kevin asks Lisa.

“My moms took me to the zoo!” Lisa replies.

“You have two moms? Do you call both of them Mom?”

“I call them Mama Kendra and Mama Sam,” Lisa says.

- Think about Kevin and Lisa’s story. Which of the five Diversity anchor standards are demonstrated?
- What do we know about Kevin’s understanding of the diversity around him, based on this exchange with Lisa?

### Scenario #2

Ms. Ramirez has divided her class into small groups for a mapping activity. As the students are gathering to begin work, she overhears one student, Joao, tell the others that he doesn’t want Jonah, a classmate who uses a wheelchair, in his group. Just as Ms. Ramirez is about to intervene and facilitate a discussion with Joao and the rest of the group, she hears another student say, “Joao,



Jonah has a lot to share with our group. It’s important for us to all work together. You shouldn’t think that his physical disability makes him a less important member of our group.”

Think about Joao’s story. Which of the five Diversity anchor standards are demonstrated?

## Essential Questions

One final way to incorporate the Diversity standards into your classroom practice is through writing essential questions for your units of study. Below are two examples from different content areas.

### Sixth-Grade U.S. History

D.10: How was the experience of westward expansion different for white people, people of color and Indigenous peoples?

**Sample Answer:** *Students can explore how things like power, privilege, socioeconomic status and colonialism had different effects on particular people or groups during the period of westward expansion in the United States.*

### 10th-Grade ELA

D.8: How did the lived experience of Starr Carter in *The Hate U Give* shape her perspective on race in America? Why did her white friends have a different perspective? Were her friends justified in seeing things differently?

**Sample Answer:** *Students can discuss how Starr and her friends had different experiences because of race and socioeconomic status and how these experiences shaped their world-views. They can also debate the justification for those different perspectives based on the environments that different characters experienced and moved through on a daily basis.*

Now you try! Write an essential question based on one of the five Diversity standards for your grade level and content area.

You can't tell the story of the United States  
without talking about lynching.

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RECOMMENDED  
FOR GRADES

9-12

# AN OUTRAGE

A FILM BY HANNAH AYERS AND LANCE WARREN

## VIEWER'S GUIDE NOW AVAILABLE

*Download the accompanying viewer's guide for activities and lessons that support teaching about this difficult subject matter.*

OUR 33-MINUTE DOCUMENTARY, *AN OUTRAGE*,  
IS AVAILABLE TO SCHOOLS EXCLUSIVELY  
THROUGH TEACHING TOLERANCE.

For decades following the Civil War, racial terror reigned over the United States, claiming thousands of black lives. Lynching—an extralegal system of social control—left in its wake a pain that still lingers. Help your students understand how this terrible legacy affects individuals, communities and institutions today.

AVAILABLE FOR STREAMING ONLY AT [TOLERANCE.ORG/OUTRAGE-FILM](https://tolerance.org/outrage-film)

BLACK EDUCATORS, BLACK STUDENTS,  
STONEWALL JACKSON SCHOOL

ONE OF THESE DOES NOT BELONG.



ILLUSTRATION BY CARLOS BASABE

BY **GREGG SUZANNE FERGUSON**

**MY HEART SANK** a little and my stomach churned every time I entered Stonewall Jackson Middle School for work—this campus in the heart of the black community on the west side of Charleston, West Virginia. As I entered each day, I glanced at the walls of the great foyer for artifacts of the school’s namesake, Stonewall Jackson (or his claim to fame), and saw nothing that would explain to the community who he was or why the school is named after him. Although excited to work with urban Appalachian youth—I call us “Urbalachians”—as a descendant of enslaved people, I could not quell my visceral reaction upon walking into that school, going to a sporting event or passing its curbside marquee, which emphasized “Respect and Responsibility.”

As a critically thinking African American teacher, the question for me became “Respect for whom and responsibility for what?” From that perspective, what I had learned about the Civil War and its competing armies could not justify valorizing the Confederates in general, much less forcing black students and black teachers to sanctify the names of Confederate heroes in more than 100 American public schools.

That is why I recently conducted a study through Marshall University that illustrates the tension black educators across the country grapple with when confronting vestiges of white supremacy disguised as nostalgia. In three focus groups over a two-week

period, I interviewed 17 black educators who had worked in schools from Harlem to the hollers of Appalachia, and from Atlanta to San Francisco. For them, schools named to memorialize Confederates are inextricably tied to both historical and revived white supremacy movements across the globe—and they anchor these racist ideals into the daily environments and consciousness of the communities these teachers serve.

Educational leadership programs stress our ethical responsibility to interrogate the systems, organizational frameworks and leadership theories by which we make decisions for our students. The systems and theories that gave rise to the Confederate-named schools that so many of our students attend reveal inherent contradictions between those theories and our responsibilities to students. The naming of these schools was part of a campaign by the United Daughters of the Confederacy to recast the Civil War narrative as the “Lost Cause” (especially in Southern schools), marginalize black history and resist the civil rights movement.

The black educators in the study were gracious enough to acknowledge the trauma that white Americans experienced during the Civil War for four years. But they also acknowledged a broader, national failure to recognize the terror and multigenerational trauma that American norms and laws

unleashed on black people for four *centuries*. By not conceding this vast disproportion, our educational systems are tacitly endorsing the white supremacist agenda that sustained American slavery and continues to deprive students and educators of the respect and dignity they deserve.

### **Confederate-named Schools and Symbolic Capital**

Because most public schools are the hubs of their communities, not only for educational engagement but also civic and political activity, they are a sacred public trust where Americans become socialized and develop their sense of belonging, identity and purpose. In essence, public schools hold immense symbolic capital.

Symbolic capital, a term coined by sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, is the distinction and status that names bring to places and the people associated with them. But symbolic capital can simultaneously function as symbolic violence—also coined by Bourdieu—for stakeholders who remember the context of a place name differently, as is the case with Confederate namesakes for those in black communities. The educators in the study saw Confederate names as a symbolic trifecta for white supremacy. These names amplify racial inequities in society, the opportunity gap for black and Latinx populations, and the white privilege that allows many educators to remain oblivious to the suffering of students and colleagues of color.

More to the point, the study revealed that black educators were disturbed by schools named for Confederates: “I think a school named after a Confederate could only be used as a negative role model for black students—or any student for that matter—of what *not* to do,” said one participant.

University of Tennessee cultural and historical geographer Derek Alderman builds on Bourdieu’s work to engage with “regional symbolic capital.” In his 2008 essay “Place, Naming and the Interpretation of Cultural Landscapes,” he explains that names evoke powerful images and connotations that contribute to a sense of place in geography, history and society. They even reflect larger social disputes about who has the authority to create, define, interpret and represent collective pasts through place. While Confederate-named schools exist around the United States, they are most certainly meant to evoke images of a particular place and time.

Again, the simultaneous symbolic capital and violence associated with these namesakes trouble black educators who must work in them each day. One educator in the study noted the irony of these public memorials: “What I don’t understand about Stonewall, [and others] in the Confederacy, is since they lost the war, how can their flags be put up in a country in which they lost?” For this educator, teaching lessons on the Confederacy’s pro-slavery stance and secession from the United States at a school named for a Confederate hero created a moral dilemma.

For another teacher, these namesakes clearly speak to the idea of the symbolic trifecta that arose from the study: that these public school names highlight society’s racial inequities and the white privilege that allows these memorials to remain in place. “They were Confederates and they weren’t fighting for us. ... I think they should

be removed, but it’s ingrained in the system,” he said. “As a black man in America, we know what’s happening. It’s no surprise to us as a people. We see it every day: shootings, nobody getting convicted. This is the country we live in. ... This is the system we’re a part of.”

### **Coping With the Symbolic Violence of Confederate-named Schools**

From my discussions with these educators, developing pride in all of their students—especially those of color—is a cornerstone of their teaching philosophy, and schools named for Confederates deprive them of that opportunity. One participant pointed out the disconnect between the principles of these namesakes and what educators hope to instill in their students: “White supremacists and Confederates were aligned with racist ideals—for others being less than them and hate for others that aren’t their race. Their ideals can’t be incorporated into school-wide programs like [other role models].” Another educator noted the impact of a lifelong affiliation with one of these schools for educators *and* students. “I don’t want my Teacher of the Year Award to have my name tied with a white supremacist,” the participant reflected. “Just think of all the African American student diplomas under the banner of a Confederate for a lifetime.”

This lack of perception in our educational systems allows the symbolic violence of these schools to usurp opportunities for all our teachers and communities, but especially those of black people, to promote Confederate namesakes as valuable symbolic capital that instills national and cultural pride in their students.

Many black educators, like myself, contend with not only our own direct experiences of racism but also the stories of our enslaved ancestors conveyed by family griots at our kitchen tables.

## ***Renaming Schools: Success Stories and Possibilities***

In October 2017, a Falls Church, Virginia, high school named for Confederate General J.E.B. Stuart over 60 years ago had its name changed to Justice High School after a long local battle led by students and actor Julianne Moore, who had attended the school under its former name. The price tag to change uniforms and signage was in the hundreds of thousands, money raised mostly by families and private donors. But for the students, the name change gave them a priceless boost in pride.

Cost-saving measures taken by other schools include rebranding, such as the Robert E. Lee High School in Texas, which used the name as an acronym: Legacy of Educational Excellence (L.E.E.). This change allowed the school to continue using its uniforms and newly turfed field. Other schools have changed names to more suitable honorees, like an Oklahoma elementary school did in renaming Lee Elementary after philanthropist Adelaide Lee.

Students at Stonewall Jackson Middle School in West Virginia have used the moniker “The Wall” as resistance, and in an ongoing local debate, some suggest retaining the abbreviation SJMS for a new generation as the Social Justice Middle School.

## **“I DON’T WANT OUR KIDS TO GO THROUGH WHAT WE WENT THROUGH. ... I DON’T THINK THIS GENERATION NEEDS TO BEAR THAT BURDEN.”**

We use a variety of mechanisms to downplay the symbolic violence of schools named for Confederates so that we can serve our communities. We emphasize “the greater good,” for example, that comes from *all* students learning from diverse role models. “If it’s not us, who?” one educator noted. “That’s why I felt when I went to Stonewall Jackson, I could push up the kids: give ‘em motivation. ... That’s why we do what we do. We want to push our people up. It is what it is—God’s gonna take care of us.”

Others may ignore or minimize the harm in order to get the job—and get the job done. “You don’t go in when you get interviewed for a job and say, ‘Oh no, I can’t work at Robert E. Lee ‘cause it’s named after a Confederate general,’” one teacher explained. “You say, ‘What days do I get paid? The 10th and the 25th.’ I show up. I do my thing. ... The only thing for you to do is regroup as the teacher. But you’re the grown person and you took the job, took the training. Take the money. Straighten out your act and do the best you can.”

The overwhelming majority of the educators in the study were forced to accommodate the mental and emotional effects of working in these spaces—what many of us know as racial microaggressions—as part of their work experiences. One participant observed, “[In] particular, as a black public servant, that assignment at a school named after a Confederate in my county is one of only a handful where you can impact the lives of black students in a black community. ... It’s humiliating.”

The study suggests that the continued existence of white supremacist and Confederate names on public schools counteracts social justice and

equity programs within the American public educational system and sends confusing messages to *all* students and educators about who is worthy of celebration in our country. And while the participants expressed their own struggles with the ironies of teaching in these spaces, some questioned whether black students would be served well by discussing these contradictions in class.

It’s important to note that students at colleges and universities across the country have led demonstrations against the sanctioning of white supremacy in building names on their campuses. But, for some of the study participants, the idea of rectifying the naming problem in our K–12 public schools through student-centered approaches raised concerns about the effects on black children, whose youth may leave them more vulnerable than those in college. Some educators felt that making an issue of this symbolic violence with students who may already have distrust of our American agencies (like law enforcement) may be more damaging than beneficial.

Although admitting the potential benefits of developing critical thinking and civic engagement by raising this topic with students, one educator stressed that they might not be enough to mitigate the potential disruptions to learning and wellness. “When my cousin and I went to schools named after Confederates in the ‘80s, we would have kicked butt if we heard them say [the n-word] but didn’t know what ‘the *Dukes of Hazzard* flag’ stood for or who our school was named for. ... I felt betrayed [when I found out],” he said. “I don’t want our kids to go through what we went through in terms of being

exposed to how harsh and insensitively they’re being treated. I don’t think this generation needs to bear that burden or even ponder on that. So, in my opinion, we need to just wipe the names out with no explanation.”

### **Why Renaming These Schools Matters**

With over 27,000 black students and hundreds of thousands of others attending schools that pose symbolic violence through their names, would awakening them to what these people actually represented in American history undermine the work we do in schools to unite around common moral values? As educators, we have a delicate balance to strike. Some localities, such as the Houston Independent School District, have decided to rename all Confederate-named schools to reflect our more inclusive society. Others, such as the Fairfax County Public School District in Virginia, have addressed the issue only as community members have raised concerns, voting to change the name of J.E.B. Stuart High School, for example, while retaining Robert E. Lee High School.

Whatever the approach, we must raise our voices against the ongoing symbolic violence that these schools inflict on black students and educators. We have a responsibility as educators and leaders to give our students the most respectful environment possible.

A war was already fought and settled to ensure that, wasn’t it? ♦

*Ferguson, a K–12 counselor and university lecturer, is the president of Mothers of Diversity America and a member of the Marshall University Graduate Humanities Program’s West Virginia Activist Archives Project.*





A new program lifts the voices of students fighting hate in their communities.

BY ADRIENNE VAN DER VALK ILLUSTRATION BY SHANNON ANDERSON

**WALKING THROUGH THE HALLS** of Bonita Vista High School in Chula Vista, California, it's clear the school and its students have a message to send: Hate has no place here. 🏳️‍🌈 The classroom windows and bulletin boards display posters with slogans like “Stand strong for others” and “Humanity is bigger than borders.” Students’ binders and water bottles are plastered with stickers declaring, “When you fight for equality, fight for everyone.”

It's not just the tone that distinguishes these posters and stickers from typical hallway decor; although they are professionally produced, the artwork was made by students. These inspiring words aren't being forced on kids by adults. They are messages *to* young people *from* young people.

A few years ago, these messages weren't visible at Bonita Vista. They later appeared as part of a multi-district curricular intervention called #USvsHate, which originated out of the UC San Diego Center for Research on Educational Equity, Assessment and Teaching Excellence (CREATE). Mica Pollock, a professor at UCSD and the director of CREATE, describes #USvsHate as “a vehicle for young people to engage the issues of our time and to publicly put

forth their perspective and proactively message against hate.”

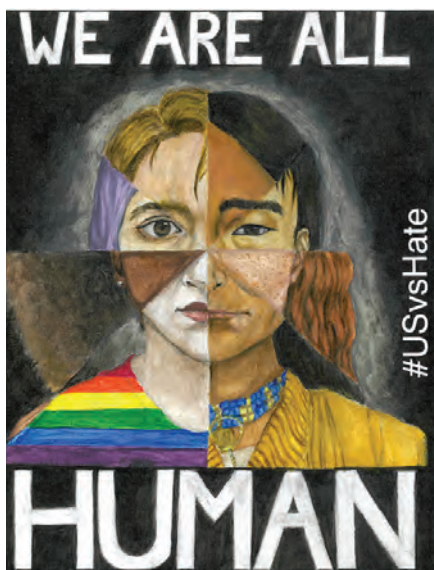
“This is an initiative that invites student voice,” says Pollock, who led the design of the #USvsHate pilot in collaboration with San Diego educators, UC San Diego doctoral student Mariko Cavey and CREATE Digital Specialist Minhtuyen Mai. “Kids are given an invitation to message and speak their perspective. Teachers are being invited into a collective effort to work on the

issues of our society rather than pretend the world doesn't exist.”

Kalie Espinoza, a veteran 10th-grade English and International Baccalaureate teacher at Bonita Vista, was part of the development team that piloted #USvsHate. Like many of her fellow educators, Espinoza had seen a spike in anti-immigrant hostility after the 2016 election and felt a growing sense of hopelessness after the deadly Unite the Right riot in Charlottesville, Virginia. Chula Vista is part of the San Diego metropolitan area that sits at the border between the United States and Mexico. Seventy percent of her students are Latinx.

“We've had students chanting in the hallways, ‘Build a wall!’ We've had students make comments in classes, in passing,” Espinoza says. “I'd had a couple of years to get familiar with the community before the election, and seeing that uptick ... was really disappointing.”

Espinoza was one of 10 educators from across three San Diego school districts originally recruited to co-create #USvsHate with Pollock and other members of the CREATE team. The goal: Support teachers *and* students in resisting hate—at school and beyond—by offering an easy-to-implement curricular



Want to bring #USvsHate to your classroom, school or district? Stay tuned! Teaching Tolerance will be launching this initiative nationally in 2020.

option that resulted in authentic, shareable, student-driven work.

The intervention consisted of four steps:

1 Select and teach anti-hate lessons based on local needs.

2 Ask students to create anti-hate messages based on their learning.

3 Share the messages across the school and publicly.

4 Extend the learning by asking, “What’s next?”

The team launched a website to support the project. It houses the lesson portal, the professional development (PD) resources, and a platform for teachers to share students’ artwork and even enter it in a messaging contest. Contest winners and finalists are shared online, and a subset of messages are produced as free posters and stickers for participating classrooms.

Patrick Leka of San Diego High School joined the #USvsHate pilot as a relatively new teacher without much experience discussing racism and other types of bigotry with students. He decided to start with an anti-bullying lesson he felt confident he could implement, then gradually move into more challenging topics as he gained more knowledge, in part by accessing the PD materials on the #USvsHate website.

“Once you get your toe in the water, it allows you to feel comfortable exploring other areas that are really important to your students,” says Leka, who teaches ninth- and 10th-grade English and AVID. “The most exciting thing for me was just to know and feel from [students] that we’re doing something that is a direct, real-world connection for them.”

Espinoza agrees that the success of #USvsHate is fundamentally tied to student engagement. Part of that success was due to the lessons she chose—activities and readings about refugees, immigration and other topics that directly affect her students’ lives (all aligned to the Common Core, the Teaching Tolerance Social Justice Standards and her district’s instructional standards). Another

part was the opportunity for students to have their messages and artwork reproduced and to know that students across multiple districts would see it and vote on their work as part of the contest.

“I definitely found students become more empowered,” Espinoza says. “They were so excited with their work; they were very proud of it and happy to have other people see it, and they were shocked when they went to the website and were like, ‘Oh, my work’s on the website?’ [It] was a really cool thing to see them celebrate that.”

Over the course of the pilot, Espinoza and Leka both observed their students becoming more thoughtful in their discussion of identity and less inclined to make insensitive jokes or comments. In interviews and surveys throughout the pilot, students, too, reported their attitudes changing. One 10th-grade student said about observing their peers’ work, “It makes you think, ‘When someone was working on this, what were they thinking? Why were they doing this?’” Said another, “Seeing it physically in the classroom, especially because [the] poster is right in front of me every day, you can just have that reminder of how to be more open-minded to certain topics, especially if they cause controversy.”

For Leka, participating in #USvsHate didn’t just engage his students and improve his school culture; he says it made him a more courageous teacher.

“It’s something that now I’m planning on doing every year for the rest of my career,” he says. “I’m planning a unit right now for the novel *Night*, and I went right to the #USvsHate website to find things that tie into what’s going on today with antisemitism and how can I talk to my students about that. It’s something that I don’t necessarily have experience with myself, but I now feel more prepared to talk about it.” ♦

*van der Valk is a former Teaching Tolerance staff member and currently serves as the communications director for the Center for Genetics and Society.*

## Art (and Competition!) as Inspiration

Posters and stickers weren’t the only media through which students communicated their anti-hate messages. As the project grew—eventually expanding to educators in more than a dozen districts—so did the opportunities for students to make, share, view and vote on different forms of art.

“I had a student do a seven-minute-long spoken word this year, and every single one of my classes wanted to hear it. I’ve had students who have made videos, who have written speeches, who have written poems. Some of the schools have done performance art or a comic book,” says Kalie Espinoza, adding that, from a curricular point of view, the expanded options allowed her to teach about how to match message to medium. “It was such a quality piece of learning alongside the social justice aspect of it.”

Sarah Peterson and Kim Douillard are the regional directors for the California Reading and Literature Project and San Diego Area Writing Project, respectively. They both encouraged teachers in their networks to participate in the pilot, witnessing firsthand the power of the contest and how voting on messages extended the opportunity for students to use their voices.

“[Teachers] heard about it, they had tons [of] examples, the kids had started seeing lots of images by voting, and they were telling each other about it. It was pretty neat to see,” Peterson says. “I’m just thinking of a video of a teacher that I work with in my network. When her students won, it was as if they won the lottery. She took a video of them learning that they won—they were screaming.”

That teacher later reported to Peterson that winning the #USvsHate messaging contest had been a turning point for her classroom.

“I hope for more kids to be screaming and excited and pumped to share their messages and read the messages of their peers around the nation,” she says.



# They Didn't Back Down

How Pasco County Schools in Florida stood up for their LGBTQ students and against hate.

BY CORY COLLINS ILLUSTRATION BY ZOË VAN DIJK

**FOR 17 YEARS**, the office of Jackie Jackson-Dean has featured a familiar ornament of welcome: a safe space sticker, adorned with stars, a rainbow motif and an implicit message. ¶ “I want these kids to be able to come to school,” she says, “and feel like at least one person here is safe to talk to.” ¶ Jackson-Dean serves as a school psychologist and the LGBTQ liaison for Pasco County Schools in Florida. As a registered mental health counselor intern and member of the district’s crisis team, she knows better than most straight, cisgender allies what LGBTQ students face. She knows firsthand that safe spaces can be compromised. She *also* knows they can be reclaimed.

When Pasco County’s LGBTQ-inclusive guidelines became news fodder in the fall of 2018, Jackson-Dean suddenly became a target for those who opposed them. Strangers found her social media profiles, her personal website and phone number. Hateful messages rolled in.

“I hope you die,” some said. “I hope you get cancer.” “Kids would be better off if you were dead.” Eventually, she removed her contact information from the internet. She locked down her profiles. She stopped reading comment sections.

At home, the landline rang day and night. Jackson-Dean never answered.

“I became concerned about my personal safety,” she says. She wondered if the people sending messages would find her address and show up at her home.

But the sticker remains in her office. As the threats increased, as the media attention and scrutiny came crashing in, Jackson-Dean held on to reminders of why she does the work.

“When I would get letters from kids saying, ‘Thank you for standing up for me and who I am,’ I thought, *OK, yes*,” she says. “*I can keep doing this, and I don’t really care what these people are saying.*”

But these people had not arrived in her inbox by chance. Jackson-Dean was

not picked at random by a movement that lost control. She was chosen.

And at the root of that campaign was Liberty Counsel.

### What Happened in Pasco County?

According to Jackson-Dean, Pasco County Schools formed an LGBTQ advisory group as early as 2013. It included school nurses, psychologists, social workers and counselors. With everyone already shouldering full-time responsibilities, they didn't make much headway changing policies or practices. But the conversation had begun.

Three years later, the district named Jackson-Dean as their LGBTQ liaison, offering one half-day a week to devote to the work. She began fielding questions, phone calls and emails from school leaders and educators across the district.

The answers she found led Jackson-Dean and a committee of educators to craft a districtwide best practices guide for supporting LGBTQ students. The guide was reviewed by the superintendent's staff and the school board's attorney. It went into effect, at first, with no incident.

In the fall of 2018, the first rumblings of a controversy began. That September, Jackson-Dean received a phone call. District policy did not require parents or guardians be informed when students join clubs, but a parent was concerned students could attend Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) meetings without their parent or guardian's knowledge or consent.

Then, within two weeks, a P.E. teacher at Chasco Middle School in Port Richey refused to supervise the boys' locker room after class. He felt uncomfortable supervising a space where a trans boy might change clothes. Despite school leaders' attempts to handle the issue internally, the story made news.

"Everything kind of blew up after that," Jackson-Dean says.

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Principal Brandon Dahlin-Bracciale describes Chasco Middle

School—located roughly 40 miles northwest of Tampa—as a caring and increasingly diverse student community.

He never expected that his school would end up at the center of a coordinated misinformation campaign and the resulting media maelstrom. Dahlin-Bracciale had spoken with the transgender student about where they'd change when they signed up for P.E. This was the first time a trans student at Chasco Middle requested such access, but the district's guidance was clear: Students had that right.

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**“We are who we are, we're proud of who we are, and we're going to fight back about this.”**

—JACKIE JACKSON-DEAN

The P.E. teacher sought outside help, saying he believed his job to be in jeopardy. His call was answered by Liberty Counsel, a nonprofit that professes to focus on cases of religious liberty in its pro bono litigation, policy and education work.

Dahlin-Bracciale says he never suggested the P.E. teacher's job was in danger. In fact, the school arranged for other staff members to supervise the locker room.

“I felt like we also took care of the needs of the employee at that point,” Dahlin-Bracciale says.

But the misleading narratives got repeated through Liberty Counsel's online articles, emails and podcasts.

Liberty Counsel's version of events spread to right-wing news sites. Then, on November 20, Fox News host Shannon Bream invited Liberty Counsel's founder and chairman, Mat Staver, and the P.E. teacher to appear on her show. Both men repeatedly misgendered the

trans student, and Staver echoed claims that the teacher feared for his job.

Liberty Counsel also submitted public records requests to Pasco County Schools. They wanted to see emails and the best practices guide. Simultaneously, they and their supporters probed Jackson-Dean's professional and personal life. They pointed to details like her LGBTQ lending library as evidence of a biased agenda, despite the library being at her home and self-funded.

Pressure came on all fronts. Liberty Counsel threatened lawsuits unless the district rescinded certain LGBTQ-inclusive policies. The story stayed in the news, constantly casting doubt on Jackson-Dean's credentials and how to weigh the rights of queer students against the wishes of unaccepting families. At school board meetings, Liberty Counsel supporters denounced and delegitimized trans students' identities.

“We had a lot of students who were incredibly scared about the implications of all of this,” says Jackson-Dean, who, in her role as a psychologist, checked in with many LGBTQ kids as the controversy unfolded. Trans kids across the district had been using restrooms and locker rooms that corresponded with their gender identity for years without incident, she explains.

Suddenly, that sense of security felt tenuous.

### What Educators Need to Know About Liberty Counsel (and similar groups)

The Southern Poverty Law Center—Teaching Tolerance's parent organization—lists Liberty Counsel as a designated hate group due to the rhetoric it uses in justifying its lawsuits, policy proposals and public stances. This includes linking gay and transgender people to pedophilia and using pseudoscience to back up claims in favor of conversion therapy or against comprehensive sex education.

Liberty Counsel takes special interest in schools, where they perceive

LGBTQ-inclusive policies and LGBTQ educators as threats to Christian child-rearing. They claim that parents have a constitutional right to know if their children identify as LGBTQ; to prevent LGBTQ children from seeking community or counseling related to their identity; to opt kids out of LGBTQ-inclusive instruction; and to keep transgender students from sharing restrooms or changing spaces with their peers.

“Liberty Counsel believes the United States Constitution affords parents the right to prevent their children—even LGBTQ children—from ever learning the truth about LGBTQ people and their lives,” explains Diego Soto, a staff attorney for the SPLC’s LGBTQ Rights and Special Litigation team. “That simply isn’t so. The Constitution’s guarantees of free speech, free association and personal autonomy guarantee LGBTQ students the freedom to be LGBTQ at school without interference from parents, teachers or administrators.”

According to experts at the SPLC, there’s a pattern to Liberty Counsel’s engagement with schools.

It often starts with a letter. Claiming to operate on behalf of concerned parents or students, Liberty Counsel will send a complaint to district or school board leaders. Usually, these complaints target LGBTQ-inclusive school policies and practices, such as Pasco County’s allowing transgender students access to bathrooms and locker rooms.

That letter often closes with a demand. In the case of Pasco County, Liberty Counsel concluded with a threat cloaked as an offer:

*Liberty Counsel is prepared to assist the Pasco County School Board if it returns to a gender-appropriate and legal policy accommodating claims of “gender identity.” ...*

*Please inform us by close of business on Monday, October 1, 2018, whether the Pasco County School Board intends for Liberty Counsel to be an adversary or an ally in the coming fight.*

The threat isn’t an empty one. In 2016, a federal court in Texas prohibited the federal government from interpreting Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 to protect trans students from discrimination. An upcoming Supreme Court decision could ultimately cement this interpretation of federal law. While the SPLC argues that current federal law does protect trans people from gender discrimination, Soto says that schools should protect trans students, even if the courts conclude—or Liberty Counsel argues—that federal law does not require it.

“No matter how the Supreme Court interprets federal law, schools and school districts can do more than what federal law requires them to do to protect LGBTQ students,” Soto says. “Federal law sets a floor, not a ceiling.”

Soto also emphasizes that educators should know LGBTQ students’ constitutional rights. Just like their straight and cisgender peers, LGBTQ students have freedom of expression, speech, assembly and equal protection under the law. This means that public schools cannot restrict them from forming GSAs or affinity groups, expressing their identity

through dress or speech, or attending dances with a same-gender date.

“Schools—from the district superintendent down to the teachers—must know and understand their duties and responsibilities under all laws, regulations and policies,” Soto says. “That way, any inconsistencies between what the law is and what Liberty Counsel says the law is will be clear from the start.”

But even if schools do not cave to threats from Liberty Counsel and similar groups, other dangers remain. These letters often contain falsehoods or discredited research. And repeated, misleading storylines have consequences.

“Once Liberty Counsel decides to write a letter of complaint or engage in a lawsuit, it then continues to promote harmful and dangerous pseudoscience about LGBTQ people through its briefs and letters and media that may be repeated through networks of parents and students,” says Heidi Beirich, director of the SPLC’s Intelligence Project. “And that then becomes part of a toxic environment.”

The letters also force schools to take action. They must consult with attorneys.

Often, specific educators named in the complaints are put under investigation and under the microscope.

“We’ve all seen how that works on social media,” Beirich says. “Once someone is targeted—whether the story about them is true or not—there is always the potential for a troll storm and harassment.”

It’s a reality that Jackson-Dean—and other educators—have faced. And even if those educators emerge triumphant, Beirich says, Liberty Counsel has secured a foothold in the community. They will often follow up with new claims, more demands or complaints that the investigation was flawed. Having garnered media attention, they will share and amplify talking points until local supporters can sustain the pressure without their presence.

“They may not have majority support, but they are very well organized, and

## LIBERTY COUNSEL

SPLC-DESIGNATED HATE GROUP

Founded in 1989

Location: Orlando, Florida

Ideology: Anti-LGBT

Founded by conservative activists Mathew (“Mat”) Staver—an attorney and former dean at Liberty University School of Law—and his wife Anita, Liberty Counsel bills itself as a non-profit litigation, education and policy organization that provides legal counsel and pro bono assistance in cases dealing with religious liberty, “the sanctity of human life” and the family.

they are able to take advantage of already-extant networks and a media ecosystem that amplifies the messaging,” Beirich explains. “And without sustained, organized pushback to combat falsehoods and to provide positive, supportive messaging, the illusion will continue.”

Of course, this isn’t just a Florida issue. Liberty Counsel’s methods are closely mirrored by other groups like the Child Protection League in Minnesota and Mass Resistance in Massachusetts. Beirich says that countering them requires preparation and steadfast support of targeted students and educators.

“Better-informed communities ... help disrupt the illusion that the groups and their supporters are in a majority and can help communities provide support to students and faculty who are LGBTQ,” she says.

Otherwise, Beirich emphasizes, the onslaught can be too much.

“The situation with Lora-Jane Riedas demonstrates the kinds of upheaval they can bring.”

### Being “The Target”

Lora-Jane Riedas remembers, most viscerally, a physical reaction of fear. It was April of 2017. She had just hung up the phone after receiving a call from her principal. The Riverview High School math teacher now faced a professional standards investigation by Florida’s Hillsborough County School District.

Riverview High’s GSA had organized a GLSEN Day of Silence for the following day. Riedas—the co-chair of GLSEN’s Tampa Bay chapter, a GSA advisor and an out lesbian woman—would have to miss it. Liberty Counsel had sent a letter, and Riedas was their focus.

She refers to the contents of that complaint letter as “twists and lies.” Liberty Counsel claimed she banned necklaces bearing the Christian cross; she says she asked students to remove rosaries because they violated the school’s dress code. Liberty Counsel also claimed she inappropriately

“[The kids] count on me to feel safe and accepted, and cared for, and loved. And that’s what I did.”

—BRANDON DAHLIN-BRACCIALE

imposed pro-LGBTQ messaging through classroom decoration and her affiliation with GLSEN.

“They pick a person that sort of becomes the target—the face that they can use,” she explains.

The district cleared Riedas of any wrongdoing. But the damage was done. She shut down her social media accounts as hateful comments and threats poured in. A colleague screened her emails and told her which were safe to open. She worried about her wife, who teaches in the same school.

“All my students that year essentially got a new teacher with four weeks left of school because I was changed,” Riedas says, ruefully. “I was not myself. I was going through hell. And they should not have had to deal with any of it.”

But ultimately, Riedas re-emerged because her support proved as strong as her opposition. Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association Executive Director Stephanie Baxter-Jenkins spoke to the press alongside Riedas to counter the misinformation. GLSEN’s executive director, Eliza Byard, called Riedas to offer support and spoke publicly on her behalf.

“[Liberty Counsel] is used to having control of the narrative because the process silences their target,” Riedas says. “I was not silent.”

Neither were her allies. Riedas stresses the importance of this united front. She learned of the incident in Pasco County and reached out to Jackson-Dean. She offered her support and that of the local GLSEN chapter.

“My advice is: Stick with your support group,” she says. “Make sure you have your people who are going to fight with you and fight back.”

Much like Jackson-Dean, Riedas also found strength in the actions of supportive students.

The Monday following the phone call that changed her life, Riedas found a poster on her desk. Students had written, “We love and support you, Ms. Riedas.” She framed it and keeps it up in her classroom.

Her own safe space sticker, in a way.

**Resistance and Resilience in Pasco County**  
Students also played a role in changing the narrative in Pasco County—through the support of allied educators and through their own self-advocacy.

“We had some kids who were living in fear,” Jackson-Dean says. “Then, I also saw something really powerful: I saw a lot of kids come together and actually feel empowered.”

Students wrote to the school board and the superintendent. They went to school board meetings to tell their own stories.

Jackson-Dean says their message was clear: “We are who we are, we’re proud of who we are, and we’re going to fight back about this.”

They didn’t fight alone. Families and peers joined the chorus of support. Dahlin-Bracciale says most Chasco students “rallied around” the transgender boy targeted by the complaint.

And the district didn’t fold; it doubled down.

EXCERPT FROM BEST PRACTICES FOR SERVING  
LGBTQ STUDENTS

WHAT DO I DO IF...

### THE COMMUNITY PUSHES BACK?

Here are some basic tips for responding to backlash over LGBTQ-inclusive practices. For more, see the Fall 2017 article “Teaching From the Bulls-eye.”

### KNOW THE LANDSCAPE OF HATE.

Be aware of local and national hate groups that actively target schools over LGBTQ-inclusive practices. The Alliance Defending Freedom and Liberty Counsel sometimes offer free legal counsel to sue schools. Arm yourself with information so you can counter their misleading messages.

### FIND ALLIES IN YOUR COMMUNITY.

Build relationships with local business leaders, faith-based organizations, sports teams or other groups that support inclusivity and can show that support in a public, influential way.

### SUPPORT THE TARGETS.

If outside groups or online communities target particular students or student groups, bring those students together and give them an opportunity to express their feelings. Let them know you support them, even after the worst is over. Provide counseling and additional security if needed. Make sure public statements do not draw a false equivalency between the demands of hate groups and the needs of LGBTQ students.

### DO NOT LET MISINFORMATION GO UNCHECKED.

Outside groups may respond to the implementation of best practices with untrue accusations. Inform students and families of misinformation and set the record straight through your usual channels of communication.

Those who have faced Liberty Counsel’s ire say they cannot understate the importance of support from community members beyond the school.

“We need them to not be silent,” Riedas says. “It’s the silence that gives [Liberty Counsel and its supporters] permission to be loud.”

Jackson-Dean agrees. As the voices opposing LGBTQ-inclusive work got louder, she emphasized the importance of people voicing their support.

“I thought, our school district needs to hear, ‘Stay the course. ... You’re doing what’s best for kids.’”

For Dahlin-Bracciale, that is what matters most.

“It’s about doing what is best for students,” he says. “When you look at the research, trans students are some of the most at-risk students that we have in our schools. Implementing guidelines that allow them to use facilities that correspond to their gender identity is just one way we can make them feel accepted.”

De Palazzo, director of Equality Florida’s Safe Schools, says that shared understanding is the key to Pasco County’s resilience.

“If Pasco did not do their legwork ahead of time, if Pasco did not have the strength of Jackie Jackson-Dean’s good work, I’m sure that there could have very possibly been caving,” Palazzo says. As someone who works with districts across the state to implement best practices for serving LGBTQ students, she stresses the importance of creating buy-in before a controversy arrives, finding a community of vocal support and ensuring district leaders have the education they need to stand up to misinformation. In Pasco, she says, that happened.

“The district stood solid,” Palazzo explains. “There were a lot of meetings that took place to ensure that the district understood how important it was to take care of LGBTQ young people, and they did—and they did the right thing.”

### Life After Liberty: Why the Work Is Vital

Every year, several school districts, including Pasco County, come together to hold a statewide conference alongside Equality Florida. They discuss their needs and the challenges facing LGBTQ students. At this spring’s conference, one moment stood out to Palazzo as simple but profoundly important.

It was a panel discussion, and all four participating superintendents agreed that the work was courageous and—despite opposition—necessary because it was in their students’ best interests.

The acknowledgment matters. It represents a sea change from when Palazzo started this work. And it comes at a moment when a lot of the data about LGBTQ youth, such as suicidal ideation and mental health concerns, remain dire. In the superintendents’ responses—and in Pasco—she saw hope.

“I’ll never forget the words,” Palazzo says. “I hope our districts ... will look toward Pasco for doing the right thing even in the face of great challenges.”

Doing the right thing comes up again and again from educators who have faced Liberty Counsel’s targeted campaigns.

“None of the other stuff, none of the other comments and the personal opinions, have as big of an impact as knowing you’re doing the best you can for all members of the LGBTQ community,” Jackie-Jackson Dean says.

Dahlin-Bracciale explains it this way: “[The kids] count on me to feel safe and accepted, and cared for, and loved. And that’s what I did.”

For Jackson-Dean, doing the “best she can” means returning to the office, even when pressure from the outside threatens to break what she has built. The sticker on the wall is just a symbol. It’s the work that creates the space where students can feel safe, seen or liberated.

It’s resilience that reclaims that work as sacred. ♦

*Collins is the senior writer for Teaching Tolerance.*





# Authors of Their Own Stories

A school survey of reading lists showed that course texts rarely reflected the identities of the school's students, so these educators developed a program to change that.

**WHEN CHILDREN'S AUTHOR** Vanessa Brantley-Newton spoke about seeing her identity reflected in literature for the first time, her audience nodded in knowing agreement. Brantley-Newton was addressing elementary students at Tapestry Charter School in Buffalo, New York, as part of the school's project "I Am the Author of My Own Story" and a Teaching Tolerance Educator Grant.

Brantley-Newton described how, as a young person reading the classic picture book *The Snowy Day*, she felt a profound sense of validation and belonging. She eventually decided to pursue writing and illustrating children's books full time. A simple moment of recognition had set the course of her entire career.

Among the listeners that day was Leah White. A parent and teaching partner at Tapestry, she had come to learn more about representation in children's literature. For White, the issue was personal. "It is very hard for us to find books that relate to our situation," she says. Dontae, an 11-year-old Tapestry student, is White's cousin. White's mother was raising Dontae, but when she passed away in 2017, he came to live with White. She now has full custody as his legal caregiver.



*Kaylan Lelito worked with librarian Jennifer Chapman to acquire and create books that reflect families like Dontae and Leah White's family.*

“We talk about unique families, how there aren’t a lot of books in the world about them,” she says. “It would be really nice to pick up a book and show Dontae that even though our family is different, what brings us together is that we love each other. A lot of times our kids aren’t seeing these things.”

White wasn’t the only adult at Tapestry considering the role of representation. As a reading specialist, TT grantee Kaylan Lelito watched the stories that had long been taught at Tapestry fall flat with her students.

“When I worked with students from different backgrounds,” Lelito explains, “often they would say when we were reading with them that they weren’t really interested in the books, that they didn’t see themselves.” Students of color comprise 74 percent of Tapestry classrooms, but in an inventory of their shared book room, Lelito found that only 17 percent of guided reading texts contained one or more characters of color.

**“A lot of kids would like to see books about families that are like them. If [every book] has the same storyline ... they could feel invisible.”**

**—Fourth-grade author**

To further explore this dissonance, Lelito surveyed her students to find out more about their reading experiences. The results were unsettling: Roughly half of her students didn’t see themselves reflected in the stories they read. Forty-four percent said they never found books about a neighborhood like theirs, and 40 percent said

they never found books featuring families like theirs.

National statistics tell a similar story. While more than 50 percent of students in U.S. schools are children of color, only 13 percent of children’s books from the last 24 years contain “multicultural characters, storylines or settings,” according to a 2018 study conducted by the Cooperative Children’s Book Center (CCBC). When the organization studied books published in 2018, they found more animal or nonhuman characters than people of color.

And these numbers only measure the presence or absence of representation—they don’t evaluate the quality of books that feature characters with underrepresented identities. “Just because you have 300 books about African Americans,” CCBC Director KT Horning says, “doesn’t mean all 300 of those are books you would recommend.”

For Lelito, the surveys of Tapestry students confirmed her suspicion:

## “I don’t get to read about people like me.”

—Third-grade author

Students didn’t see themselves in the stories they read. And, because of this invisibility, they couldn’t relate. “The stories,” she recalls, “weren’t impactful for them. We wanted to find more books our students could see themselves in, and we were having difficulties doing that.”

With the help of her TT grant, Lelito ordered a wide selection of books from the children’s literature publisher Lee & Low Books, focusing on texts featuring characters with underrepresented identities. But Lelito didn’t just want to make better texts available to students—she also wanted to create space for them to tell their own stories.

After distributing the new books to third-, fourth- and fifth-grade classrooms and the library, Lelito turned to Tapestry’s librarian, Jennifer Chapman, for the second part of the project. Chapman worked with students to explore concepts like voice, flow and the sequence of storytelling. Then she had them create their own stories, with characters modeled after their own lives. “How does this reflect you?” she asked them.

Writing their own stories resonated particularly well with older elementary students, who Chapman says were developmentally best prepared to process the project’s significance. “The youngest of our readers, they’re just excited about getting a book,” she says. But as kids age, they begin to pick up on the nuances of socialization and difference. “At about third grade,” Chapman explains, “a little switch happens. They start to spend more time actively looking for books that better reflect their lives.”

Once students finished their stories, Chapman and Lelito sent them

off to a publisher, where they were anthologized in three collections. At a school community meeting, the stories were shared with family and friends. Third-graders titled their book *Diary of a Third Grader*; fourth- and fifth-graders followed suit. This fall, copies of the texts will be made available for checkout in the library, as well as in all classrooms.

For the final step in the project, students wrote persuasive letters to major children’s book publishers, articulating their need for characters and storylines that better reflect their experiences. “As educators of a very diverse population,” Lelito reflects, “it is incredibly important for us to help students realize that even at a very young age, they can have some control over how they are represented in the world around them.”

“Dear Scholastic,” one third-grader wrote, “I’m just a kid, and I have a different heritage. I’m Muslim, and I don’t get to read about people like me. Other people should get a chance to read about different people, too. To me, learning something new about others makes me feel like I can connect with them and understand them.”

Another student’s letter articulated the problem that led to the project in the first place. “When someone reads a book,” he wrote, “they should be able to say, ‘Hey! That person looks like me!’ instead of reading a book and feeling bad about themselves because they look different. ...

So I suggest that you write some more diverse books.” ♦

*Ehrenhalt is the school-based programming and grants manager at Teaching Tolerance.*

## Finding the Right Texts

KT Horning, director of the Cooperative Children’s Book Center, suggests three strategies for honoring a diversity of student experiences in children’s books in your own school community.

First, even if classroom teachers don’t have book budgets, school librarians often do. If your school has a librarian, you can ask them to purchase multiple copies of a particular book or ask them to help with diversifying the collection. If you’re a teacher with a small book budget, you can add a handful of high-quality books to the shelves.

Second, consider quality before quantity. Aim to purchase a second copy of a popular book featuring underrepresented characters before searching for another new title.

Finally, think of your library as a living, breathing entity—one that needs regular care and tending. “Just because a book has been on your shelf for 10 years doesn’t mean you have to keep it there. You should really go by quality as much as possible,” Horning says.



# TEACHING HARD HISTORY FROM THE BEGINNING

*New resources support educators committed to teaching our nation's hard history of slavery—including Indigenous and African enslavement—in grades K–12.*

BY **JULIA DELACROIX** ILLUSTRATION BY **TAYLOR CALLERY**

**IN A CONVERSATION** with *Teaching Tolerance* magazine last summer, teacher Jordan Lanfair shared the “great sense of betrayal” his eighth-grade students felt when they studied slavery in his class. The response he described—“They’re like, ‘Why didn’t I learn this before?’”—was almost identical to the one teacher and librarian Izzie Anderson heard from her sixth-grade students. “They’re angry,” she explained on the *Teaching Hard History* podcast, “wondering, ‘Why haven’t I learned this before?’”

This is why Teaching Tolerance developed Teaching Hard History in the first place—to support middle and high school educators who are committed to teaching this difficult truth. The project, which includes a suite of free resources designed in collaboration with an advisory board of educators and scholars, was launched in February 2018. Educators could download the

framework, browse a library of primary texts, read instructional recommendations and examples of Inquiry Design Models, and listen to the popular *Teaching Hard History* podcast.

The response was overwhelming. Educators weighed in from across the United States. They sent emails detailing how they were using the framework or requesting a version for early grades. They commented on articles about how others taught slavery and tuned in for webinars. They downloaded the podcast by the tens of thousands. They sent in praise and gratitude and recommendations for improvement. In one memorable Twitter thread, teachers debated what might comprise the STEM equivalent of “hard history”—and who among them might have the courage to teach it.

As feedback rolled in, Teaching Tolerance continued collaborating with the Teaching Hard History Advisory

Board, working together for a year and a half to develop more resources and recommendations for teaching about American slavery. And in August 2019, Teaching Tolerance released a new edition of Teaching Hard History.

Expanded to support learning for students of all grades, the new edition offers guidance and resources K–12 educators can use to lead students through the history of slavery in the Americas, from the enslavement of Indigenous people that shaped European colonies in the 16th century through the white supremacist legacy still at work in the 21st.

## **Starting Early**

The problem is not that young children don’t know about slavery, says Teaching Hard History Advisory Board Chair Hasan Kwame Jeffries. “We do introduce our students to this material,” he explains. “We mention slavery in the



early grades. ... And we mention and introduce slave folk. [But] we don't talk about it—or them—in a way that would help our students understand the seriousness of the institution.”

Jeffries, a history professor at The Ohio State University, offers an example: a handout about George Washington that his third-grade daughter brought home from school. “It lists all these ‘fun facts’ about him having no teeth and owning pet rabbits. But it said nothing about him owning people.”

When slavery is taught in the early grades as an afterthought or a footnote, Jeffries explains, students are set up for misunderstanding. It's not easy for a young person to reframe their ideal of Washington-the-hero to include the truth of Washington-the-enslaver. “If these contradictions aren't explained, then what they do is just tune it out,” he says. “And then they're never able to fundamentally grasp what the issues are to be able to make sense of the past—and then be able to make sense of the present.”

To better support educators in the crucial work of helping students understand this history, the new edition

of Teaching Hard History includes resources designed especially for teachers of younger students.

For those concerned about walking the fine line between overloading students and sugarcoating the truth, the new framework for the elementary grades identifies age-appropriate, essential knowledge about American slavery, organized by grade band. For those unsure of where to start, the resource is complemented by new additions to the Teaching Hard History Text Library, written especially for K-5 readers. The framework itself also includes concrete recommendations for introducing these ideas to students.

The resource is organized thematically, so elementary educators who aren't tasked with teaching American history can still incorporate elements of this history into their curricula. The idea, Jeffries says, is to give educators what they need to build a strong foundation for students. “With almost every other subject, we would scaffold education,” he explains. “With math and science, we don't wait. ... And it's the same thing with teaching about this

early American experience that is so central to the development of America as a nation.”

### Indigenous Enslavement

The new edition of Teaching Hard History doesn't just reach back through grades; it also reaches back through time. August 2019 was a critical moment in this hard history: the 400th anniversary of the first trade in enslaved Africans on land that would be the United States. But the history of slavery here began well before that. As Jeffries points out, the “global phenomenon” of trade in enslaved people “begins not with the enslavement of African people. [It] begins with the enslavement of Indigenous people.”

It's a beginning left out of curricula far too often.

As Teaching Hard History advisor and Carleton College history professor Meredith McCoy explains, the systems of slavery and colonialism were key elements of a foundation that shapes our nation today.

“[The early colonists] set up their government, the governing system, on

top of territories that were still the territories of other people. And then they just never left,” she says. “They set up all their infrastructure on top of this territory. And in order for that to happen, they needed the enslaved labor of African and Indigenous peoples.”

Despite this foundation, the history of Indigenous slavery is rarely taught. McCoy notes that she never studied it in school, and Renée Gokey, another advisory board member, says the same.

The first step toward any understanding, Gokey says, is “to really know what happened ... [and] Teaching Hard History, the resources and the framework, will really help with that.”

*“The United States has built itself on this narrative of Manifest Destiny. For that national mythology to work, school curricula act like Indigenous people no longer exist.”*

**MEREDITH MCCOY**

Because the history of Indigenous enslavement is inextricable from broader histories of American slavery and the United States itself, it is woven throughout the K–12 resources. Elementary educators will find recommendations for pushing conversations about resistance beyond the Underground Railroad to include discussions of how enslaved Africans and Indigenous people—and their descendants—protected their cultures and traditions even in the most abject conditions. Secondary teachers will find primary source documents to help students trace the relationships between the expansion of cotton plantations, the domestic trade in enslaved people and the Indian Removal Act of 1830.

But the expanded framework and new texts aren’t the only new resources for teaching about Indigenous

enslavement. Gokey, who also works as teacher services coordinator at the National Museum of the American Indian, explains the need for additional support when it comes to teaching Indigenous history. “One challenge we’ve found,” she says, “is that teachers often need to unlearn some of what they think they know about Native peoples as a starting point.”

For educators unsure of where or how to undertake some of that work, season two of the *Teaching Hard History* podcast is largely dedicated to the history of Indigenous enslavement. In addition to historians, guests will include preservationists, scholars and activists who can help listeners see how this history continues to affect us today.

“The study of the past is important for understanding what happened in the past,” Jeffries maintains, “but it’s equally important for understanding what is happening in the present. So in order to understand, for example, the rhetoric of racism, the use of the racist belief to explain disparities and ongoing discrimination is very much rooted in this history of slavery.”

To support that understanding, the new framework also offers recommendations for ways educators can help students connect the history they’re learning to the world in which they’re living. And, as Gokey points out, these connections aren’t merely academic. She lists a few questions that Teaching Hard History might raise: “How might our descendants look back on us from the past? And how can we make our ancestors proud of our decisions today?” Reflecting on her own heritage and the histories of privilege and oppression affecting her English, Ukrainian and Eastern Shawnee ancestors, she clarifies.

“It’s a call to action, for us, I think. And we can’t act if we don’t know our own history and ourselves first.” ♦

*Delacroix is the associate editor for Teaching Tolerance.*

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## WHAT’S IN THE FRAMEWORKS?

### Key Concepts

- The foundation of the frameworks. Ten ideas critical to understanding American slavery.
- Example | KC5: Enslaved people resisted the efforts of their enslavers to reduce them to commodities in both revolutionary and everyday ways.

### Essential Knowledge

- The basic units of the K–5 framework. Twenty learning goals that connect to the Key Concepts.
- Example | EK6: Students should know that enslaved people tried to maintain their cultures while building new traditions that continue to be important.

### Summary Objectives

- The basic units of the 6–12 framework. Twenty-two learning goals that build on Essential Knowledge to support the Key Concepts.
- Example | SO12: Students will discuss the nature, persistence and impact of the spiritual beliefs and cultures of enslaved people.

### “What Else Should My Students Know?”

- An explanatory list included with—and tailored to—each Essential Knowledge or Summary Objective.

### “How Can I Teach This?”

- A list of resources and teaching strategies included with—and tailored to—each Essential Knowledge or Summary Objective.
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# A Truer Sense of Our National Identity

Historian Ned Blackhawk explains why we must do a better job learning and teaching about the history of Indigenous slavery.

BY MONITA K. BELL EDITED BY JULIA DELACROIX





**NED BLACKHAWK** is a professor of history and American studies at Yale University. A member of the Te-Moak Tribe of the Western Shoshone, he has worked at Yale to build the university's Native American Cultural Center and serves as a faculty coordinator for the Yale Group for the Study of Native America.

In his book *Violence Over the Land: Indians and Empires in the Early American West*, Blackhawk traces histories of conflict between and among Native nations and European empires, including the capture, enslavement and trade of enslaved Indigenous people that was common along the Spanish frontier. This summer, Blackhawk answered questions from Teaching Tolerance Managing Editor Monita Bell about the often ignored history of Indigenous slavery in America, explaining why it's so frequently mistaught—and why we owe it to ourselves and our students to learn and teach the truth.

**What do you remember learning about American Indian history in school during your K–12 years? What did you learn about Indigenous enslavement during that time?**

Growing up in the city, I attended Detroit public schools and a Jesuit high school not too far from our neighborhood. I learned very little formally about American Indian history during this period, though I remember doing projects as a child at Cooke Elementary about Indian history and culture for various school projects. I did well in both U.S. and A.P. European history in high school but cannot remember much formal instruction on the subject.

There are, for me, many ironies about this. ... Detroit and Michigan were formed out of deep histories of encounter between Europeans and Native peoples; the city both celebrates its early 18th-century founding and has countless French and Native place names. Even in a Jesuit school, with images of French martyrs within it, few [of my

teachers] ever talked about the history of the region or its Native peoples.

**Given that many educators themselves may feel they lack a solid grounding in Indigenous histories, what's a starting point for understanding the history of Indigenous slavery in America?**

As I have argued, [Indigenous slavery] is largely an institution that emerged out of the colonial encounter—particularly after the establishment of Spanish colonial settlements in the 1500s and 1600s. ...

We are now living with the legacies of these related histories of enslavement and colonization. And seeing the connections between them invites alternate understandings of the nature of race and power in American history.

Indigenous peoples in the Americas endured the burden of European colonialism in unparalleled ways and forms. European enslavement [of Indigenous people] was often an initial stage in the larger processes of land loss and invasion that followed.

**Most people tend to think of American slavery fairly narrowly: in terms of black and white, 1619–1865, limited to the British colonies and then, later, the antebellum South. How does an understanding of the history of Indigenous slavery shift those borders?**

It is very hard to understand the extent, brutality and legacies of American slavery if slavery remains synonymous with strictly African American history and peoples. In fact, before 1700, more Indigenous peoples were trafficked across North America than peoples of African ancestry. Indian slavery helped

expand Spanish, French and English colonial realms.

Boston, Charleston, Santa Fe and Montreal not only held Indian captives but also became sites of trafficking to other imperial realms. Some scholars suggest that hundreds of thousands of Native peoples from across the Americas were also trafficked before 1700 throughout the Atlantic world. ...

In North America, European ships began capturing Native peoples as early as the 1490s off the Northeastern coastline; by the time of Puritan arrival over a century later, such captivity had become commonplace. ...

There were 17 Spanish settlements on Española in 1513, and Native peoples there were forced into slavery. They mined, harvested cotton and sugar and died in large numbers.

European slavery did eventually over time shift into low-land and tropical locations that became overwhelmingly tied to African slavery, but other forms of Indigenous servitude, as well as enslavement, continued across the Americas through the 19th century.

I think it's unhelpful to try to disconnect these subjects and to see them isolated from one another.

**So how are scholars pushing back against these misconceptions?**

Like many in my field, I've been working on a variety of projects that attempt to further build the field of Native American history. I'm pretty far into a book, currently titled *The Rediscovery of America: American Indians and the Unmaking of U.S. History*, which tries to bring together broad subjects within the field into a single-volume



interpretation. It tries to advance alternative approaches to rethinking American history, and is part of a field that offers essential perspectives for remedying the misguided suggestions about America and its past. ...

These projects are familiar in the sense that they are set in the past and often across the Americas but are also deeply unfamiliar in their suggestions and outcomes. Indian slavery is one of these fields that has now grown into a particularly advanced area of study, and it doesn't look anything like more conventional understandings of American slavery.

Indian slavery is not, for example, only a story of the American South. It isn't a 19th-century story exclusively, and it usually involves a multiplicity of imperial perspectives rather than occurring exclusively within an Anglophone colonial or national sphere. The Spanish conquest of the Caribbean, Mexico and subsequent explorations into the Southeast and Southwest now form essential beginnings for understanding the cataclysmic ruptures brought by European colonialism, in which Indigenous slavery became one of the driving motivations for conquest as well as one of the most profitable forms of colonization.

Following the Spanish conquest of New Mexico, for example, the governor sentenced in 1599 over 500 Acoma Pueblo Indians into servitude. One of

his lieutenants received over four dozen slaves to help build his *encomienda*, to herd his animals, work his fields and clean and cook in his home. One individual, then, received collectively over 1,000 years of bonded Indigenous labor.

**This history is so important. How do you think educators might frame it for students?**

I generally find that students are interested in expanding their understandings of Native history, as are teachers with whom I often work in various summer programs. I believe there is a real hunger for more accessible scholarly information about the early American world and that many desire alternative approaches to rethinking the nation's history.

I try to connect these earliest centuries of Indian-imperial relations with more contemporary subjects, such as federal Indian policy, and believe that the past deeply informs the present.

**Will you talk more about this? How does that history manifest today?**

Colonialism is a defining feature of American history, and we live with its legacies on a daily basis. Many, in fact, suggest that our contemporary environmental challenges and climate crisis originated with the capitalist transitions that colonialism first established. Legal doctrines, conceptions of property, the exploitations of natural resources and [many of] the organizing notions about

race and social development originated from earlier periods of history.

Understanding the formation of colonial societies is necessary in order to begin re-centering their colonial legacies.

**What can educators do to better teach these critical histories or even to undo the ways that this history has been mistaught for so long?**

There are many ways to remedy the pervasive erasure of Native peoples. Understanding that narratives of the past are inherently incomplete is a necessary beginning.

I believe that local and regional histories are effective ways of incorporating Indian history into more familiar pedagogical structures. Understanding not only the history of the original, Indigenous peoples of a particular place but also the ongoing histories of Indigenous survival, adaptation and ... resurgence offer effective measures against the hard sediment of previous generations and paradigms.

Showing films, inviting guest speakers [and] doing more locally conscious research projects offer ways out of the inadequate formations of the past. ...

It is hard to counteract the narratives of the past that we have received, especially about the arrival of Europeans to North America. Celebrations of European arrival not only have gone on now for generations in the K-12 school systems but also have equated American history often exclusively with Europe.

As we can see in our contemporary political discourses, once American history becomes synonymous only with Europeans and their descendants, then understandings of America and of Americans foreclose the heterogeneity that both pervades our society and also defines it.

We lose, in such celebrations, a truer sense of our national identity. ♦

*Bell is the managing editor of Teaching Tolerance, and Delacroix is the program's associate editor.*



# Kindness Isn't Enough

Teaching kindness is a staple of elementary education. But, as a veteran first-grade teacher explains, we need to teach students about justice as well.

BY BRET TURNER ILLUSTRATION BY KELLY CANBY

**DR. SEUSS BOOKS** have long been held up as parables. For years, we've celebrated when Sam-I-Am's persistence pays off and felt our hearts grow three sizes right along with the Grinch. But in February 2019, a groundbreaking study pinpointed in depth what people had been saying for years: White supremacy lurks in the pages of many Seuss books. The foundation of the easy-to-spot morals of the stories were disturbing depictions of people of color and racialized nonhuman characters. The study led a number of educators

to wonder, *How could these racist ideas exist alongside such valuable lessons? Alongside such kindness?*

Educators, particularly elementary educators like me, are good at talking and teaching about kindness. It's at the core of elementary pedagogy, after all: those lessons and teachable moments related to being a good friend, being generous and acting thoughtfully. But when being considerate, nice and friendly are all children learn about how to treat one another, we risk losing something fundamental.

Young children are not only developing a sense of morality; they are developing a sense of who they are. This includes their race, gender, class and more. These identities have never been treated or represented equally in our society, so when we teach about love, acceptance and kindness without addressing this inequity, we gloss over crucial differences in the ways our students experience the world.

The harm done by long-term exposure to injustice—to the kind of imagery found in racist books, microaggressions and discrimination—calls for more than a simple understanding of kindness. It demands that kindness be interwoven with substantial notions of true justice. That’s why, in my first-grade classroom, my goal was to guide students’ thinking in terms of real justice. I used a set of principles that went beyond kindness and moved toward specific actions students could take to counter bias and stereotypes and work for a more equitable future.

### Building a More Just Curriculum

The first step was making space in my curriculum for the difficult realities of systemic injustice.

It’s easy, for example, to study the civil rights movement and cherry-pick quotes from Dr. Martin Luther King that focus on everyone getting along. But we can also show students that his famous speech imagining a world where children are judged “by the content of their character” is also the one in which he refuses half-measures toward equity, saying, “No, no, we are not satisfied. And we will not be satisfied until justice rolls down like waters and righteousness like a mighty stream.”

Focusing on the dream of an equitable future without teaching the reality of an inequitable present ignores the radical anti-racism work that King and his contemporaries undertook at great

risk and greater cost. It paints the false narrative that kindness is all we need to make social progress. And worse, it suggests that kindness has already won.

In my classes, instead of whitewashing these heroes, I wanted to paint a more detailed picture: They were flawed, human, ambitious, organized. Students deserve fuller stories of King, Gandhi, Rigoberta Menchú and others who practiced nonviolence while working for justice. They deserve tales told with nuance and complexities so they can learn what

**When being considerate, nice and friendly is all children learn about how to treat one another, there is much that we risk losing.**

it really means to be an ally rather than a sanitized idol. Allowing students access to a fuller story helps them see that, even with healthy doses of love and compassion, kindness alone rarely brings about change. Change requires a real understanding of what injustice looks like—and a plan to combat it.

But building a just curriculum isn’t only about teaching history in a responsible way. It’s also about ensuring that all of our students are represented in our studies and that all are respected in our classrooms. Many schools make use of social emotional learning (SEL) curricula. Audits of SEL curricula and practices can make sure that the end result isn’t simply a more emotionally literate version of kindness.

I’ve used a variety of programs that aim to increase emotional intelligence, but they sometimes fall short of truly honoring children’s feelings, where they come from and how they’re treated. A just SEL curriculum honors differences and recognizes that emotions don’t exist in a vacuum. It also accounts for the history of pathologizing emotional expression by women and people of color and corrects for it.

One year, a student asked me, “Is it OK for me to be *really* ticked off that all our presidents have been men?”

I told her that yes, of course it was—and she then wrote a long, furious letter to “the president’s house” demanding change. When we teach young people that their feelings are valid, we are recognizing that they are important too, and sometimes anger may well be the starting point in a fight for justice.

“The letter isn’t very nice,” she told me as I read it, “but it’s what I feel.”

### Creating a Culture of Justice

Moving away from simple kindness and toward real justice begins with building an identity-safe classroom: a place where everyone’s story is not only recognized but honored, studied and loved. This means moving beyond a curricular focus to make justice part of a class’s daily culture.

In my elementary classes, I attempted to do this in a wide variety of ways—and my students always responded. Recently, I was working with a small group of first-graders on a reading assignment; partway through an old, dated book, the protagonist tells a friend he doesn’t want to play baseball with her because she “throws like a girl.” Without hesitation, a student slammed his fist down on the page and bellowed, “Microaggression alert!”

Every eye in the class turned to him. He was right, of course: This was no mere unkindness. This slight was



rooted in identity and stereotypes. I recalled our earlier discussions about microaggressions. Students had discussed how that pain felt worse than other unkindness, how it was a different kind of hurt that demanded a different kind of intervention.

We paused to discuss why this insult might necessitate a different course of action than a simple “sorry.” We roleplayed the parts of—and brainstormed specific language for—the target (“I actually like the way I throw” and “Yes, I do: I’m a girl who throws”) and a bystander (“I’ll play catch with you. I like how you throw and how kids of all genders throw”).

We talked about the protagonist, and how he could apologize afterward: “I think I said that because I heard somewhere that girls can’t throw well. But I know that’s not true, and I’m sorry.” In looking for language that goes beyond the placations of typical apologies, students were able to explore what justice might look like in action.

What I tried to ensure in my classroom—frequently, intentionally and with care—was a viable, usable understanding of justice. Young people need to know what is (and isn’t) equitable, inclusive and just so they can begin to wrestle with systemic and institutional

injustice, which affects them all in different ways. If I shirk the inclusion of justice in favor of a facile definition of being kind, I—intentionally or not—pave the way for students to believe they “shouldn’t see color” or find other ways to preserve their ignorance about marginalization, privilege and the often-complex reality of the world we live in.

With that end in mind, I didn’t just encourage students to engage with justice; I codified it. Like many other teachers, I worked with children to make rules and agreements at the beginning of the year. Agreements like “Be kind,” “Make wise choices” and “Respect all people” commonly adorn classroom walls, but too often they lack teeth.

Setting classroom agreements offers an opportunity to challenge our young ones to do more. We can guide students toward true allyship by encouraging them to think carefully about justice and our responsibility to it. What do we agree to do if one of us is misgendered or called a slur? How will we react if one of us is excluded because of skin color, accent or body shape? Heftier agreements like “Speak up when we see microaggressions” and “Fix the mistakes that really hurt our

classmates” are more than pieces of a charter to hang on a wall—they’re daily reminders that kindness must be paired with justice.

In the end, as much as I planned ways to incorporate justice alongside kindness in my classroom, the biggest impact likely comes from the everyday moments: the times a child is excluded for their gender, made fun of for their weight, told their accent sounds funny or that they’re a terrorist. Superficial notions of kindness and unkindness don’t suffice here—the response has to be specific, direct and sensitive.

Young people need language to combat microaggressions, and they also need to know that their teachers care about it. They need to know their trusted adults will speak up, facilitate and engage. There’s nothing wrong with taking a moment to think, to say, “That didn’t feel right, and I need to circle back to this.” But there is something wrong with answering injustice with easy reassurances like, “We just need to be kind to one another.” Even if they can’t yet articulate why, our students know that’s not enough. ♦

*Turner is a writer and former elementary school teacher in the San Francisco Bay Area.*

# Black Minds Matter

Interrupting school practices that disregard the mental health of black youth.



BY COSHANDRA DILLARD ILLUSTRATION BY ALLEANNA HARRIS

**MCKENZIE ADAMS AND MADDIE WHITSETT** should still be here with us today. But after being tormented at their respective schools last year, the two girls, both 9 years old, died by suicide. According to the girls' families, McKenzie was the victim of racist bullying, and Maddie was taunted because she had ADHD.

These two children represent the human faces behind a disturbing study published in *JAMA Pediatrics* in 2018: Although the overall suicide rate for black youth is about 42 percent lower than for white youth, that number represents all young people under 17. While black teens between the ages of 13 and 17 are 50 percent less likely to die by suicide than white teens, the suicide rate for black children between the ages of 5 and 12 is about twice as high as that of their white peers.

The study, which analyzed data from 2001 through 2015, does not describe reasons for the disparity, but it points to the need for culturally informed interventions. In a 2015 study published in *JAMA Pediatrics*, which analyzed data from 1993 through 2012, researchers came to a troubling conclusion: Because there was no significant change in the overall suicide rate among youth, the fact that the suicide rate had decreased among white children but increased among black children had been obscured.

While youth advocates note that these statistics are disturbing, they welcome the much-needed and long-overdue conversation about the well-being of black children. This awareness of suicidality among black youth is why the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) established an emergency Taskforce on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health

in April 2019. It aims to determine the reasons for the significant increase in suicide, recommend ways to improve black children's access to mental health care and create solutions to better protect and support them.

Black people, including youth, are less likely to receive adequate care for mental health issues for a number of reasons: disparities in access to care, stigma about mental illness and lack of culturally competent mental health practitioners. According to a study published in the *International Journal of Health Services*, black children are about half as likely as white children to get mental health treatment. As the CBC task force, mental health experts and policy makers mull over ideas to address this gap, it's also crucial that schools devote significant attention and space to mental health literacy and provide mental health services in the form of counselors and psychologists.

### Schools Must Fill the Gap

Because the racial disparities in mental health access and treatment affect children, schools necessarily play a major role in helping to mitigate those disparities. This inequity "perfectly underscores schools as the de facto providers of mental health services to students," says Charles Barrett, a school psychologist and multicultural committee chair for the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP). "Because systemic issues related to race and poverty disproportionately affect black

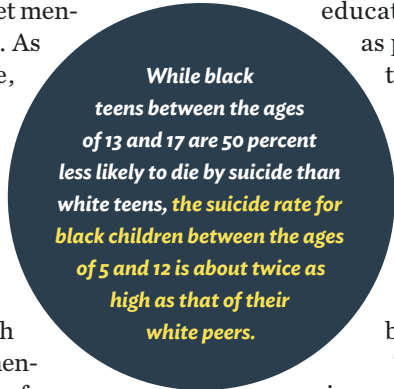
children and families, schools, due to having access to large numbers of children, are a practical way to meet a significant need."

Advocates agree that school administrators and educators must be part of this work. School faculty and staff are likely to notice signs and symptoms that something is amiss and refer students to the help they need. But schools often fail in this effort when it comes to black students—and sometimes cause even more harm.

When black students exhibit negative behaviors or become withdrawn, educators often label them as problems and subject them to reactionary, zero-tolerance policies and other practices that disproportionately affect black students but don't address the root causes of such behavior.

This harm manifests in a number of ways: adopting curriculum that isn't culturally responsive, lowering academic expectations, tracking black students into remedial or special education classes and seeing black youth as older and less innocent than their white peers—a bias known as adultification.

"Kids who don't feel safe, engaged or supported cannot show up in schools and demonstrate what they know and have learned," says David Johns, executive director of the National Black Justice Coalition, a civil rights organization dedicated to empowering black LGBTQ and same-gender-loving communities. "In particular, those



While black teens between the ages of 13 and 17 are 50 percent less likely to die by suicide than white teens, the suicide rate for black children between the ages of 5 and 12 is about twice as high as that of their white peers.

## When teaching black students, consider these reminders:

**Know your own story.** Teacher educator Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz uses the phrase “Archeology of the Self” to describe how teachers should dig deep, peel back layers of themselves and think about how issues of race, class, religion and sexual identity live within. Recognize that what is beneath these layers will affect relationships with your students. And if these issues go unexamined, they may even cause harm. Teaching requires more than academic study. Re-evaluate *why* you teach and be willing to think beyond pedagogy to holistically serve black students. Practice critical humility and avoid speaking *for* black students and their communities.

### **Decolonize your curriculum.**

Make historical literacy a priority. Representation matters, but historically, Eurocentric narratives and perspectives have been elevated in curricula. Instead, learn and teach full histories that accurately reflect a real, diverse world.

**Be mindful.** Recognize that some communities, particularly those that have been historically marginalized, need to heal. This certainly includes many of your black students’ communities. Allow black children to just be, and reject anti-black attitudes.

**Be a first responder.** School and district leaders play an important role here: You can ensure that your staff become mental health literate and get trained in “mental health first aid.” This knowledge is critical so they know what resources to refer to when the need arises. Learn how one school district accomplished this in our Spring 2019 feature “Demystifying the Mind.”

**See all of your students.** Use an intersectional approach and recognize that students may have identities that don’t conform to the dominant culture at your school. For example, be aware of the vulnerability and risk of harm that black LGBTQ youth face inside and outside the classroom.

who have been terrorized by [educators’] indifference and our ignorance—and the hate that is often birthed from that—suffer and are suffocated.”

We see this suffering play out regularly in news reports of egregious assaults on black children’s dignity at school: A black student is humiliated when made to clean feces off a bathroom wall; a teacher rips the braids from a black girl’s head; groups of black kids are forced to act as enslaved people while their white classmates pretend to trade them as property; black students are turned away from school because they have dreadlocks or some other “unacceptable” hairstyle.

These stressors are serious. And sometimes they rob children of their lives, especially if they’re compounded by underlying mental health issues.

“I’m acknowledging that the world often doesn’t allow black people to simply be,” Johns says. “But it’s incredibly important for parents, family members and educators to protect the ability for our babies just to be babies—to laugh, to make mistakes, to color outside of the lines, to create things with blocks that don’t make sense to those of us who have forgotten how to dream. Too often we snatch them from black kids in ways that are unfair and undeserved.”

Johns leads a policy committee for a working group commissioned by the CBC’s task force. He leverages his experience as a former kindergarten and third-grade teacher into policy work and activism. He spent a decade crafting federal policy, from serving as a congressional fellow to directing the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans under President Barack Obama. His work has focused on education and health care issues as they relate to children and families.

In his postgraduate work at Teachers College, Columbia University, Johns describes how schools themselves are sources of trauma for kids who are not white, cisgender or heterosexual.

Too often, he says, academic researchers and policymakers approach

conversations about issues black youth face with a deficit mindset—treating black students, their families and communities as perpetually problem-ridden despite the fact that these conditions were forced on them. “We need to invert that. Black feminists a long time ago talked about the reality that there are signs, symbols and systems that work to make white privilege real and work to preserve it and often make it invisible,” Johns emphasizes.

Johns notes that there is urgency in the establishment of the CBC task force, which is expected to produce a report with recommendations by the end of the year.

“The emergency in this context also signals that it’s not designed to be permanent,” he explains. “This isn’t going to be a standing caucus. We are working through the first quarter of next year to accomplish as much as we can and to plant seeds that will continue to bloom.”

### **“We’re Still Healing”**

Gabriel Bryant, coordinator for Engaging Males of Color, a Philadelphia youth initiative, sees firsthand how under- or undiagnosed mental health issues can add to the challenges black students might have at school.

“Oftentimes, there are added stressors for young people when they don’t feel that they have an outlet with which to cope, with which to manage the grief, the loss, the anger, the sadness,” Bryant says. “And what happens is that it’s compounded when that young person recognizes that they also have just a whole host of social determinants to navigate. That can be overwhelming.”

He argues that these added stressors—the causes of that grief, loss, anger and sadness—must be addressed before there can be real change. Such stressors include the effects of poverty, environmental issues, living in a food desert and having disabilities.

The growing awareness of mental health concerns for black children doesn’t mean something new



is happening. Educators and mental health advocates note that perhaps the increase in black youth suicidality may be coming to light now because previously there wasn't a collection of such data specific to black children.

"And in particular," David Johns points out, "we have a lot of work to do to overcome the stigma that's still associated with mental health, which is still seen in too many communities as a 'white people thing.'"

Charles Barrett encourages school psychologists and school counselors to help black families understand how depression and anxiety look in children, which may be different from adults.

"Relatedly, school-based mental health professionals need to assist black families with accessing culturally responsive community-based resources—for example, counseling and therapy," Barrett says. "And although it's improving, school-based mental health professionals can also work with black families to reduce the stigma that is associated with mental health in the black community."

Trust has to be built, though.

"Whenever possible—and it's not always feasible—I think identifying other black providers for families could be very helpful," Barrett says. "I think sometimes I've shared the same message that they've heard from others, and it's received better from someone who looks like you."

Another aspect of that lack of trust has to do with black communities' historical and ongoing struggles for equal rights. On top of that, some communities must also tackle issues that are exacerbated by these inequities, such as violence, poverty and substance abuse. Yolanda Sealey-Ruiz, an associate professor of English education with Teachers College, Columbia University, says black people are often left out of critical conversations about these problems that plague families of any race.

"As black people, we're still healing," she says. "We've been ignored for so long. The issues that have been in other

***"The world often doesn't allow black people to simply be. But it's incredibly important for parents, family members and educators to protect the ability for our babies just to be babies."***

communities—let's say issues of abuse or incest or whatever—always seems to get public media attention when it happens to white families. Some of these same ills have always been happening in our community and probably more so because of the vestiges of enslavement and captivity in this country."

### **Invisible at Intersections**

Nigel Shelby, a 15-year-old Alabama student who "loved everybody," his mother, Camika Shelby, said, was consistently targeted because of his sexual identity. His mother has said the teen struggled with depression that, by April of this year, had become unbearable. His death by suicide is a painful reminder that black LGBTQ youth are extremely vulnerable. Camika Shelby claims that school officials failed Nigel because they allegedly had knowledge that he planned to take his own life.

Nigel was also harmed by society's inability to respond to the ways systems of oppression intersect. Black LGBTQ students are being bullied for just existing. They experience a multiplying effect of intersectional identities, which creates physical, mental and emotional harm from many different angles.

For example, they are more likely to also experience economic insecurity, violence, harassment and religious intolerance in addition to racial discrimination. LGBTQ youth are more than three times more likely to attempt suicide than their straight classmates. Being black creates a greater risk. According to the Human Rights Campaign's 2019 Black and African American LGBTQ Youth Report, over two-thirds of black LGBTQ respondents ages 13 to 17 had

been verbally insulted, and just under one-third had been threatened with physical violence.

Their stories resonate with Johns. He advocates for and uplifts black LGBTQ youth who are rejected or disregarded by those around them. He noticed such disregard while serving on a U.S. Senate committee.

"Whenever a group came to lobby us and they were concerned about issues affecting black people or communities, they talked as if students in this context were all heterosexual," he says. "There were literally no queer possibilities at all. And then, conversely, whenever groups like GLSEN or HRC or the Trevor Project lobbied us, they would talk as if all LGBTQ [people] were white."

Johns says support for black LGBTQ youth goes beyond ensuring their physical safety. It also means teachers are intentional about creating environments that are inclusive of LGBTQ history and narratives and mindful of exclusive or binary constructs that ignore black LGBTQ students' intersectional identities.

### **Using Critical Humility and Interrupting to Better Serve Black Students**

In her work at Teachers College, Columbia University, Sealey-Ruiz teaches critical humility—a concept coined by a group called the European-American Collaborative Challenging Whiteness. They want white people to think about their whiteness and to use their privilege to speak up and take action against inequity. From Sealey-Ruiz's perspective, this approach requires that teachers—particularly

white teachers in schools with predominately black students—interrupt the status quo of white supremacy, thus countering systems that contribute to black students’ diminishment at school.

“But as you’re speaking up and taking action, you have to be humble enough to make sure you’re not trying to speak for those who are marginalized,” Sealey-Ruiz says. “It’s a perfect antidote to the white savior complex.”

A first step is to be mindful of the recent black youth suicide data to avoid placing labels on students who may be suffering silently. This means refraining from profiling or labeling black children as problematic and re-evaluating discipline policies that disproportionately affect them.

“That information needs to be in schools where there is a predominance of black children,” Sealey-Ruiz says. “Teachers need to be trained on what to look for so that they can interrupt ... to be equipped with knowledge and to be able to interrupt their own thinking about that child, and then have enough information to say, ‘Well, this might be a signal that something else is going on.’”

Interrupting also means being grounded in cultural responsiveness and rethinking pedagogy and the aims of teaching. For Sealey-Ruiz, that means interrupters should also raise the sociopolitical consciousness of their students.

“Ultimately, it’s about liberation of the human spirit, liberating yourself from the false lies of [white] superiority, and therefore creating liberating spaces for black and brown children, for them to be their best selves in school.”

Teachers of color aren’t exempt from this deep work.

“If you’re a person of color and you hold certain beliefs about your own people because you’ve been colonized to do so, unless you unpack that and release that,” Sealey-Ruiz says, “that doesn’t just disappear because you decided to serve children who look like you.”



She notes that knowledge about black youth suicidality will help teachers and communities arm themselves with tools to better support black students. But they have to be honest with themselves first.

“Even if teachers don’t realize it, subconsciously, they’re almost given permission to treat children a certain way,” Sealey-Ruiz emphasizes. “So, I think about the children who have immigrant experiences or the black children—the way that we’re portrayed in media and what’s stereotypically passed down around that. Teachers subconsciously hold those stories.”

She insists that teacher educator programs and programs that produce principals must have serious conversations about this work.

She also encourages her students, who are pre-service teachers, to consider how their own identities and conditioning interact with those of the children they teach.

“I’m very open and honest with my students about what it means to be a teacher,” she says. “I do that through reading, through conversations, but my main method is what I call the Archeology of the Self. They have to do this deep digging about where issues of race and racism, homophobia, transphobia—all of these intersectional identities that children bring—they have to really dig deep about how it lives within them and how they understand it will impact their practice.”

### School as a Safe Haven

Barrett says that while there is more knowledge about mental health issues concerning black youth, there isn’t enough action.

For example, we continue to see discipline practices that respond to subjective notions of disruptive behavior, defiance and disrespect have not changed, despite evidence that restorative justice practices can greatly reduce suspension and expulsion rates—approaches that disproportionately affect black students and potentially harm the trajectory of their lives.

After the mandatory implicit bias, cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity trainings for educators, there must be a policy shift, and that has to happen at the school board level.

“If those [policies] aren’t changed,” Barrett says, “I think we’re still spinning our wheels talking about issues but having the same outcome, because our practices follow the policies that they are designed to support. I think school psychologists and others that can speak to the need for more culturally relevant policy could be an important next step in this process.”

Ultimately, it’s imperative that teachers reassess why they do this work and who they are serving.

“Too often, I’ve met teachers who feel like it is the obligation of the student to change themselves, to bend and shift in order to show up in spaces that aren’t designed for them,” Johns says. “Unless teachers understand that it is our responsibility to do the work to make sure our classrooms and school communities are safe and inviting and supportive of and reflective of all of the parts of all of our students. ... If we can’t do that, then we’re not doing enough.”

“If we’re unwilling to do that, then we need to consider another profession.” ♦

*Dillard is a staff writer for Teaching Tolerance.*



## I WISH I HAD KNOWN...

Our advisory board shares what they've learned as they've worked for justice in schools.

This summer, the Teaching Tolerance Advisory Board gathered in Montgomery, Alabama, for three days of learning, fellowship and planning for the year ahead. Our board is composed of educators working in a range of fields, at all stages of their careers and from all corners of the United States. Sharing their expertise, their ideas and their voices with us, they play an invaluable role in the work of Teaching Tolerance.

During this year's gathering, they took the time to share their personal experiences as social justice educators. They talked about what they'd learned over years of doing this work and what they wish they'd known when they began. In this collaborative piece, the 36 members of the Teaching Tolerance Advisory Board welcome educators new to the work of social justice, reflect on their own journeys and share some of the wisdom they've harvested along the way.

BY THE TEACHING TOLERANCE ADVISORY BOARD ILLUSTRATION BY ZACHARIAH OHORA

# I WISH I HAD KNOWN...



***This is about the kids.  
Building community is survival.***

I wish I had known this is about the kids.  
Constantly undoing the layers of my own  
internalized oppression even though I may  
never be completely free.

How powerful I truly am to effect change within  
myself as well as my community.  
That internal conflict is where my magic happens.

***That some of my actions  
replicate the oppression I seek  
to end.***

***That it's essential for white  
teachers to have a full  
understanding of this  
country's history of  
white supremacy  
and how they  
benefit from  
whiteness.***



***That systems and institutions  
in this country are not made for  
people of color to succeed.***

I wish I had known to trust my inner voice. Meet  
people where they are. Build coalitions. Journey  
together to mitigate the loneliness of leadership.

That my voice and my perspective mattered.  
That openly sharing my struggles does not make  
me weak or less than.

That I can work in a school and not be fired for  
doing anti-racist work.

That this is about the kids.  
White people may let me down, and  
people who look like me may betray me.  
This work should not fall upon the  
shoulders of marginalized people.

How many things would change,  
if not always the way I thought  
they would.



***My power would multiply over the years with my experience, but I am still sometimes invisible.***

I wish I had known that teaching consists of a lot of meetings and paperwork that can make you forget your main purpose.

That a snack and cold sparkling water is magical at 2 p.m.

That I can and should leave work at school.

That exhaustion is not a badge of honor, and I need energy for my students.

This is about the kids. Accountability means speaking up and owning my mistakes.

To minimize appropriation,  
to empower the voices of those of us who are systemically silenced,  
to find courage in the stories of resistance past.

The words of Audre Lorde:  
*Caring for ourselves is not self-indulgence,  
it is self-preservation  
and that is an act of political warfare.*



***I wish I had known how to have fun.***

That behavior is communication.

***That passion is not enough.***

***And that patience is your friend and hard to muster.***



That this is about the kids.

Our students watch us closely and model themselves after what we do—not what we say. Act, speak, love, fight and organize accordingly, so that kids can do the same.

***I wish I had known this is about the kids.***



# The Right to Not Bear Arms

As lobbyists and lawmakers encourage more guns in schools, educators consider the threats these policies introduce to classrooms and communities.

BY COSHANDRA DILLARD ILLUSTRATION BY CARL WIENS

**ASK A SCHOOL** teacher if they want to be armed with a gun at school to protect their students, and you are likely to get, “No way” in response.

Despite opposition from educators, lawmakers continue to insist that arming teachers is an effective way to prevent gun violence at school. Since the deadly shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, which claimed the lives of 17 people, lawmakers in state legislatures across the nation have introduced bills to arm school staff.

In May 2019, Florida passed a new law that would allow teachers to carry

guns in their classrooms. There are stipulations: School districts have to approve it, and educators who volunteer for the program must complete a gun-safety course and undergo a psychiatric evaluation and background check. Even with those provisions, Florida educators aren’t happy with the prospect of some of their colleagues becoming default law enforcement officers and potentially harming one of their students—or being heroes.

The new Florida law is a sore spot for educators, particularly those who survived the Parkland shooting in February 2018.

“When it got passed, we were obviously taken aback, as probably, I would say, 95 percent of the staff was against it,” says Jeff Foster, an AP government teacher at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School. “Immediately, [our superintendent] and the school board voted to not allow teachers to do it. So as of now, the way the law is written in Florida, the county can deny the funds for arming the teachers. So right now, we’re in no danger of getting armed at all at our school.”

Students and families are anxious as well, and teacher organizations foresee that arming teachers would create

outcomes opposite of stated intentions—it would cause more harm.

Time and time again, educators and community members are saying they don't want this.

And it's not just a vocal minority. Several studies show that most teachers don't want to carry firearms at school. Last year, a national poll released by Teach Plus showed that 83 percent of teachers don't believe educators should be armed at school.

In a statement, Teach Plus notes that they are concerned proposals to arm educators “will militarize our schools” and potentially yield harmful effects. “Building a stronger school security apparatus in our schools might further exacerbate the school-to-prison pipeline,” the statement reads.

The National Parent Teacher Association (PTA) does not support arming teachers, either.

“National PTA believes that all efforts to address school safety must be locally determined, collaborative, include input from all stakeholders (students, parents, families, teachers, school leaders, public safety officials, community members and decision-makers), and take into account a variety of factors, including the physical and psychological safety of students,” says Leslie Boggs, National PTA president, in a statement provided to Teaching Tolerance.

National Education Association President Lily Eskelsen García released a statement calling the arming of teachers “ill-conceived, preposterous, and dangerous.”

And American Federation of Teachers President Randi Weingarten wrote in a letter to President Donald Trump that schools should be “safe sanctuaries, not armed fortresses.”

She added, “The response we have heard is universal, most notably from educators who are gun owners, military veterans and National Rifle Association members: Teachers don't want to be armed; we want to teach. Our first instinct is to protect kids, not engage in

a shootout that would place more children in danger.”

### Why Arming Educators Is a Bad Idea

Those who oppose arming teachers are quick to point out real-life situations that help demonstrate the danger of having guns on school campuses. Even with training and proper vetting, adults carrying guns in school could have the opposite effect of protection.

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## Teachers don't want to be armed; we want to teach.

—RANDI WEINGARTEN

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In the last five years, more than 70 incidents of guns being mishandled in U.S. schools have been reported, according to data compiled by Giffords Law Center, an organization that explores policies and programs to reduce gun violence. The organization tracks the use of guns in schools and records them in categories that include “discharged unintentionally” and “mishandled during discipline”—and “used in times of personal stress or conflict.”

The center shares examples from around the country. In Alabama and California, for example, students were struck with bullet fragments after their teachers accidentally fired guns in class. In Missouri, a pair of middle school students stole the gun their teacher brought to school. And the mishandling isn't just from educators. In Florida, a school resource officer accidentally fired a shot while leaning against a cafeteria wall.

There are just too many risks in arming educators that don't sit well with many of them. Marjory Stoneman Douglas's Foster, for example, has a lot of questions.

“Where would you store it?” he asks. “Would you carry it off with you? Would you carry it on you? Would you be responsible for protecting the floor? What if that teacher lost his or her mind on a student and pulled a gun on a student, God forbid, in a non-shooting situation, basically. Or what if a kid tackled a teacher and got the gun from the teacher ... The scenarios are endless as to what could happen. So, I think the majority of us, again, just aren't that enamored with the idea.”

In addition to mishaps that could lead to bodily harm, teachers also worry that arming adults who might have an implicit bias toward students of color is too big a risk to take. Black and brown students around the country have been vocal about their uneasiness with armed teachers, an anxiety that is heightened by the disproportionate policing of students of color in schools.

Some adults view black boys as young as 10 as less innocent than their white counterparts, according to a 2014 study. Similarly, recent studies show that black girls are also perceived as older, leading to less nurturing and support. Black students are more likely to be punished more severely than their white counterparts for the same behaviors. Biased perceptions, coupled with deadly weapons, leaves students of color—and their families—concerned about their safety.

### How'd We Get Here?

A school should be a safe haven, a place where students are free to learn instead of worry about the threat of violence. But we know that gun violence on campus is becoming a reality for some students today.

According to *The Washington Post's* database of school shootings, more than a quarter of a million students

have been exposed to gun violence at school in the last 20 years.

In the two decades since the shooting at Columbine High School in Colorado, schools have become increasingly hardened with metal detectors, school resource officers and locked gates. Lockdown and active shooter drills are everyday parts of children's school experiences.

And a lucrative industry has developed around school safety, from bulletproof whiteboards and backpacks to armored classroom doors. Pro-gun advocates assert that placing guns in teachers' hands when all else fails could save more lives.

### Elevating Voices

Foster says it's imperative to discuss gun violence and safety in schools with students—and it's a good idea for teachers to read up on local, state and federal gun laws and how they can advocate for their students.

He argues that the very nature of teaching is political and that it's up to educators to give students the tools to make conscious decisions about issues that affect them now and that they'll be responsible for as adults.

Before the shooting happened at his school, had he led discussions about access to assault weapons. Not all of his students felt the same way about guns, so he encouraged Socratic discussions in class to explore different perspectives. And he's watched with pride as some of his students have become publicly vocal anti-gun violence activists over the last year.

Foster himself was thrown into the spotlight when a student, Emma González, mentioned him in speeches in the days following the shooting. With that mention came criticism and even physical threats.

"It's just incredible how far people will go over such a hot-button issue, obviously," Foster says. But the flood of anger toward him and his students

didn't keep him from working toward a day when no more children would lose their lives to gun violence.

Outside the classroom, Foster advocates tightening up gun laws in his state. He's a committee member of Ban Assault Weapons Now, a group with the goal of collecting signatures so Floridians can vote in 2020 to amend their state constitution to ban the sale of assault weapons. "Whatever I can do along the way to aid in this rush to try to change laws, I'm happy to do so," he says.

Foster says his students' courage inspires him, and he believes this generation will create lasting change for a safer world. He recommends that other teachers make their voices heard, too—starting at the ballot.

"The best thing we can do is put our votes behind what we believe in," he says. "If the people want something, it's up to us to vote those people out if they don't want to listen to us. ... Unfortunately—and I hate being overdramatic—but they just don't listen to us at all, at every level, every person, every party."

National PTA members encourage local units to get behind students when they are speaking out on this issue. Boggs, the national organization's president, says local PTAs can provide support and establish forums to listen to their students' concerns and causes.

"They want and need to be heard," she says. "They are the ones living in the current environment in schools, and it is important that we learn from their experience and viewpoint."

"Student-led activism against gun violence has been an inspiration to all of us," Boggs says. "National PTA is proud of our youth, and we applaud their leadership on this issue. Their voices are what is going to make the changes needed to ensure students and everyone feel safe, wherever they are." ♦

*Dillard is a staff writer for Teaching Tolerance.*

# For Educators Who Want Safety Without Guns

**Ask questions** about your school's safety plan and provide suggestions on how it can be improved. Work with school officials if your school does not have a safety plan.

**Meet** with local, state and federal decision-makers to communicate what your school needs to be a safe and supportive learning environment. Educators and families should have seats at the table with the team that develops, implements and evaluates school safety policies and procedures.

**Reach out** to teacher advocacy organizations for resources, such as the PTA's guide at [PTA.org/SchoolSafety](https://pta.org/SchoolSafety).

**Host** a school safety forum. Gather key stakeholders for collaborative decision-making about the school's safety plan.

**Encourage and support** student activism related to gun violence.

SOURCE: NATIONAL PTA





# THE THINKING IS THE WORK

*Confronting implicit bias and systemic racism in schools is not easy. These two educators are using a model that can work in almost any school.*

BY **CORY COLLINS** ILLUSTRATION BY **LILY PADULA**

**RANDYL WILKERSON AND** Alison Mann had not even started the conversation before some of their colleagues had questions—and concerns. Where was this coming from? Did something happen? What have *I* done wrong?

Mann remembers wondering if some colleagues would push back—or worse, revolt. They were being asked to confront lifelong preconceptions. They were being asked to refocus the

lens through which they saw their students, their work and their world.

Wilkinson and Mann—who teach sixth grade and kindergarten, respectively—were spearheading an initiative that led to a schoolwide goal for professional development: identifying one’s own biases.

Nestled into a single block of Boston’s Allston neighborhood, Gardner Pilot Academy (GPA) has a strong reputation

for equity. The school is rated a Tier 1 institution by Boston Public Schools’ Quality Framework and has won awards for its innovation in environmental education, after-school programs and anti-bias principles, including the Human Rights Campaign’s Seal of Excellence.

But inside GPA, educators would come to recognize that even the best teachers are not immune from bias and that the goal of equity requires

looking beyond accolades and numbers. It requires looking within.

“It’ll take a lifetime, and then you still won’t learn everything you needed to learn,” says Erica Herman, the principal at GPA. “That complexity is what makes people really scared.”

Mann and Wilkerson had leaned into the complexity. For educators conditioned to expect PD that delivers concrete classroom practices, the goal inspired trepidation.

“That was a big battle,” Wilkerson says. “To say these are actually proactive, definitive, culture-shifting conversations that we want to have, not prescriptive or shame and blame.”

Some educators doubted that a year-long PD centered on considering biases could translate into tangible results. Others feared evaluation. Over time, Wilkerson and Mann demonstrated their own thinking about biases to remove some of the hesitancy.

“What we had to reiterate time and again is that thinking *is* the work,” Wilkerson says, “that thinking about your perceptions and these dialogues that you’re having *are* work—because now you can replicate these dialogues with your students. You can use it to change your curriculum.”

### The Audit

The movement began with conversations. Mann and Wilkerson attended Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity, a program of the YWCA. It brought in multiple stakeholders from school and business communities for facilitated discussions about race and bias.

Mann and Wilkerson immediately recognized that other members of the school community needed access to these conversations. But while Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity represented a great opportunity, the six evening meetings were often late. For those who could not find childcare or who worked late hours, opportunities for access were limited. So Mann and Wilkerson considered their options. Instead of leaving with an answer, Wilkerson says, they left the program with a question:

“Why don’t we make it our first goal to figure out what the community needs?”

So, in conjunction with the equity-focused management consulting firm Kingston Bay Group, Mann and Wilkerson developed an audit to get feedback on how the school was doing on the equity front. They solicited the views not just of teachers but also of paraprofessionals, students and families.

“I think what was great about it was that it wasn’t someone coming in and saying what we’re lacking and, ‘Here’s what you need to do instead,’” Mann says. “It was truly from the community: the community asking for our strengths, our challenges and for us to pull together.”

[It’s] one of the only opportunities where the community gets to say, explicitly, “This is what I’m experiencing at the school, this is what I see, this is what I perceive, this is what I feel.”

That community narrative, Wilkerson says, was affirming. “We had a lot of the same wants and needs,” she says. Focusing on audit participants’ stories rather than statistics allowed for a valuable glimpse into the experiences of staff and students alike.

“We decided that it’s OK that the equity audit is qualitative,” Wilkerson says. “Because that’s one of the only opportunities where the community gets to say, explicitly, ‘This is what I’m experiencing at this school, this is what I see, this is what I perceive, this is what I feel.’”

In the audit, participants named the disparities they saw, such as boys

of color receiving more IEPs than their classmates. They called for a closer look at policies and curriculum. And a potential starting point came up again and again: Educators, families and paraprofessionals alike wanted spaces where they could talk about racism and bias.

Gardner Pilot Academy had committed to equity and anti-bias PD years ago. But often, the success of each initiative was determined by the varying availability of funding and outside facilitators.

“Sometimes initiatives come and go in a school and it’s a hot ticket for a year or two, and then it doesn’t remain,” Principal Herman explains. “I think the work of becoming an anti-racist institution is a long-term vision. It’s not a one- or two-year or three-year goal; it is a continual, never-ending goal.”

Working toward that goal meant starting with a story.

### The Power of Narrative

Describing what the Gardner Pilot Academy PD on bias looks like, Alison Mann says, “It’s very much about narrative.”

In conversations facilitated by Wilkerson and Mann, teachers discussed current events through the lens of the seven forms of bias described by researchers Myra and David Sadker: invisibility, stereotyping, imbalance/selectivity, unreality, fragmentation/isolation, linguistic bias and cosmetic bias. Wilkerson and Mann used them to frame the way media portray a story or people, then connected those narratives to the experiences of students at GPA.

“And so we can start to unpack the bias that’s often associated with terms that our children are referred to, as in ‘immigrant,’ or ‘first-generation’ or ‘black,’” Wilkerson explains.

For example, Wilkerson and Mann facilitated a discussion about people migrating from Central and South America to the U.S. border—people who, at the time, were often referred to as “the migrant caravan” by media and politicians. Educators read news accounts that flattened the experiences of those immigrating. After cohort

and whole-staff discussions, they were assigned more humanizing texts for the following session. These texts often re-centered and empowered those with oppressed identities by having them tell their own stories. In this case, educators got to read and watch individual, first-person narratives of people seeking asylum or migrating.

Unpacking narratives in this way helped illustrate the importance of understanding the contexts of history and systemic inequality, as well as the importance of uplifting individual voices rather than telling a single story.

The PD covered many topics in its first year. Mann says the discussions were often exercises in perspective building. “It’s about who the narrative is told by, who gets to tell whose narrative,” she says. “It’s the concept of making people have multiple perspectives and not just relying on the one.”

Herman has seen how unpacking this power of narrative has led to a broadened perspective among the staff.

“To see our staff talking about really difficult topics,” Herman says, “in ways that are really challenging to engage in, challenging to see, but understanding why they are the way that they are—and then being able to incorporate that into practice—is really powerful.”

### The Power of Leading From Within

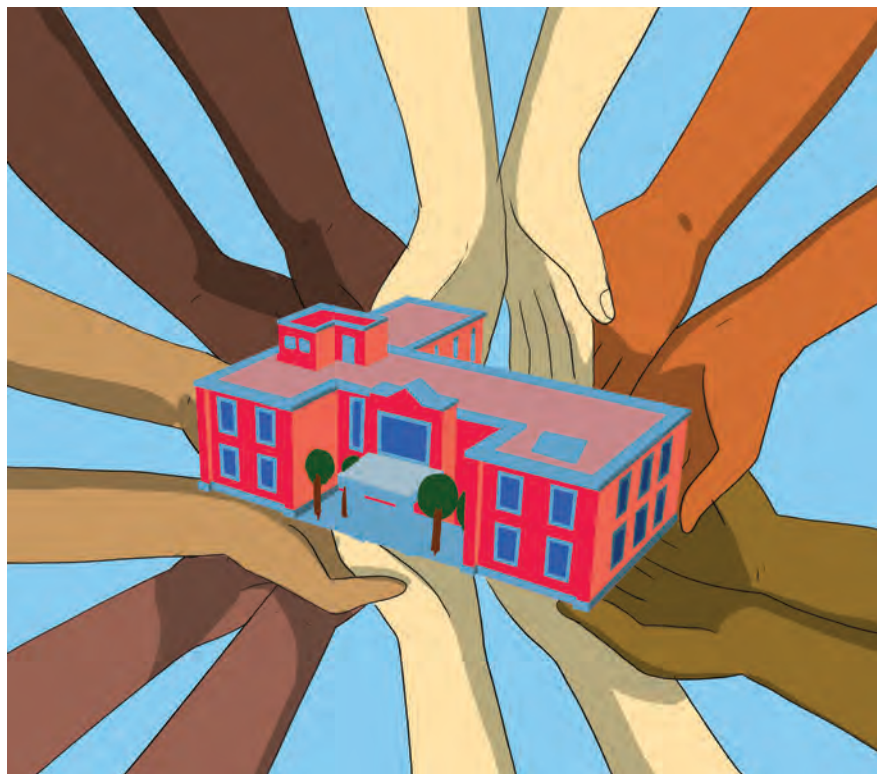
Mann and Wilkerson are quick to stress that they engage in these discussions *along with* their colleagues—not from a podium or pulpit.

“We are facilitators, not experts,” Mann explains. “So we’re learning too, which is helping us to find the tools to help push [the] learning along.”

It’s not just a common goal that builds trust between the facilitators and teachers at GPA. It’s a common context. Mann says that context separates this experience from past work with outside facilitators.

“Because we’re in the community with everybody, we have a pulse on what’s happening in the school,” she says.

Of course, many outside PD programs prove beneficial. But they



sometimes fall short in adapting to the educators in the room, who have specific needs and ideas.

“Sometimes, outside expertise also comes with its own agenda or its limited engagement and not a full understanding of the context in which teachers and students and communities are working,” explains Paul Tritter, the director of professional learning at the Boston Teachers Union. “So, to have the leadership of the project being taken by teachers is, one, going to make it more effective, and, two, it’s empowering for the teachers themselves.”

This practice aligns with what Herman says is a new commitment to internally driven PD at GPA.

“How does a leader support leaders?” she asks. “Sometimes, it’s getting out of the way. Sometimes, it’s allowing people to really take their ideas and go and learn from those and take risks.”

### The Power of Demonstrating Thinking

When Mann and Wilkerson had each small cohort of teachers create conversational norms, several themes

emerged: to speak and listen from the heart, to embrace discomfort and to be open to change.

Mann and Wilkerson model those norms by showing their own vulnerability. They say they have cried at times. Wilkerson remembers sharing her initial ignorance about the experiences of people seeking refuge from south of the U.S. border. She explains that she had to seek out knowledge about those experiences to build understanding and become a more empathetic person.

And saying that out loud, she says, can help others recognize their own biases, embrace the feelings that recognition evokes and move on toward improvement.

“I don’t cry on purpose, but it was still a model to say it’s OK to feel through this,” Wilkerson says.

Since then, growth has manifested in a number of ways. Wilkerson and Mann note that people became more comfortable sharing out. Disagreements that may once have caused fragility or hurt in the person receiving pushback became constructive.

“It’s hard work,” Mann says. But she stresses the endgame: “If I held a bias and didn’t know, and discover it, it doesn’t mean I’m a bad teacher. It’s about doing the work to uncover I’m holding that bias.”

Creating space to do that work was a necessary step if the goal was to one day have these conversations about bias inform changes in classroom practice.

“We’re getting to that place of action in the curriculum next year,” Wilkerson says. “But this is such an important foundation so that we’re ready to receive that and not be hurt.”

### Beyond the Teacher’s Lounge

A more inclusive conversation will also build on that foundation. Mann, Wilkerson and Boston Public Schools Community Field Coordinator Nicolasa Lopez have been awarded a grant from the Teacher Leadership Fund, supported by BPS and the Boston Teachers Union. It will help build the community’s capacity to do this work in tandem with educators and students. As with the audit, Mann and Wilkerson are measuring success by how far this can go beyond them.

That means sharing the power to facilitate—and seeing their experience and thinking encoded into practice.

This school year, \$15,000 from the grant will help expand the work to learning communities of paraprofessionals, schoolwide staff, students and family members. Each group will have the opportunity to engage in conversations about bias from their perspectives—and all facilitators from each group will be paid, including students.

For Paul Tritter, this is a perfect application of the Teacher Leadership Fund, created to support teacher-led projects that empower marginalized students.

“You can’t do any great school improvement work—and especially anti-racist work—without involving all of the community,” he says. “In schools where you have black and brown communities who often feel disenfranchised in the schools, to engage the families, to engage the students, to engage

paraprofessionals and teachers ... it’s going to be empowering for everyone.”

“It’s not a hierarchy,” Mann emphasizes. “We are doing this together.”

Flattening the traditional hierarchy of PD and school decisions meant reckoning with who holds the power in a school like Gardner Pilot Academy. During the equity audit, participants noted that teachers were more likely to be white, while paraprofessionals were more likely to be people of color.

“To not provide that place of voice would kind of be reifying that power difference,” Wilkerson says, “because then, they’re not participating in a conversation that affects them and implicates them as well.”

This becomes particularly important when considering the student population of GPA: More than 80 percent are students of color, more than half face economic disadvantage and more than half learned a first language other than English. Given the diverse range of individual stories among students, Wilkerson and Mann think it’s important that they, too, have a say in how their school serves them.

“I don’t understand how we can talk about being bias-free and not include the people we’re serving,” Mann says.

### The Outcomes

When Wilkerson and Mann committed to a qualitative equity audit, they understood that the lived experiences of staff members, students and families remained undervalued, given the systemic privileging of quantitative data. But they also knew their project would be met with a call to see outcomes, to see how the PD changes test scores or narrows opportunity gaps.

“When I do an assessment, I can see if the student needs growth in reading or math,” Mann explains. “But this is not something you’re going to see change in right away—or is even quantifiable. It’s qualitative, and that can feel scary when we’re not, as a profession, measured that way.”

“Quantitative data is often silencing because it’s that big number,”



Wilkerson says. “Just like *caravan* is a big word that doesn’t actually narrate for you the experience of any of the people that are involved in the process.”

The conversations at GPA have illustrated the importance of lifting up these individual stories. And if thinking is the work, *rethinking* is the outcome. Rethinking biases. Rethinking curriculum. Rethinking the stories educators tell and to whom they grant agency to shape their own stories. Rethinking how they reached those conclusions and what it means for their practice going forward.

“Which is what we teach kids,” Wilkerson says. “We want them to demonstrate their thinking.

“Why can’t we?” ♦

*Collins is the senior writer for Teaching Tolerance.*

# What We're Reading

Teaching Tolerance loves to read! Check out a few of our favorite diverse books for diverse readers and educators.



Written by sign language interpreter Lynne Kelly, *Song for a Whale* introduces Iris, a mechanically inclined girl who, as the only deaf student at her school, fixes radios because she understands feeling like no one is listening. When she learns about a whale who sings at a frequency that makes it difficult to communicate, she devises a plan to help him feel less alone. Her journey underscores the importance of empathetic communication, community and representation for readers young and old alike.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

*“For any student who has felt lonely or unheard, this book will sing, and sign, to them.”*

—Cory Collins



## PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

*White Kids: Growing Up with Privilege in a Racially Divided America* by Margaret A. Hagerman



## HIGH SCHOOL

*The 57 Bus: A True Story of Two Teenagers and the Crime That Changed Their Lives* by Dashka Slater



## MIDDLE SCHOOL

*Modern HERstory: Stories of Women and Nonbinary People Rewriting History* by Blair Imani



## ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

*Mary Wears What She Wants* by Keith Negley

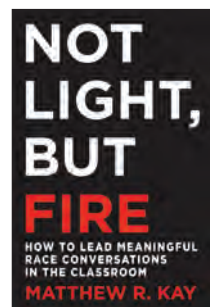


The host of *The Daily Show*, Trevor Noah, began his life with his most criminal act: his birth. As the son of a black Xhosa mother and a white Swiss father, Noah's existence violated the harsh segregation laws of apartheid South Africa. *It's Trevor Noah: Born a Crime (Adapted for Young Readers)* uses humor and honesty to contrast personal vignettes of Noah's childhood with the history of injustice in his country.

MIDDLE SCHOOL

*“As educational as it is powerful.”*

—Belle Briatico



In *Not Light, But Fire: How to Lead Meaningful Race Conversations in the Classroom*, educator Matthew R. Kay

provides a guide to creating a dialogic classroom in which students can have difficult conversations about race. Kay describes his teaching strategies and provides examples of his successes—and failures—facilitating discussions about topics such as cultural appropriation and the n-word, always trying to nudge his students past offering up facile proclamations and toward wrestling with what he calls the “hard problems.”

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

*“A reminder to educators to not sidestep or oversimplify conversations about race, but to engage students in them as scholars with voices and experiences that are just as important as those of the adult in the classroom.”*

—Ericka Smith



“A gripping journey of self-love and liberation through the eyes of a young Afro-Latina slam poet navigating complex spaces determined to silence her.”

—Gabriel Smith



“These beautiful pieces of sequential art are powerful, exciting, timeless and compelling.”

—Kate Shuster



“A sadly beautiful story of the last days of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and his ongoing, peaceful work to battle injustice.”

—Angela Hartman,  
Teaching Tolerance Advisory Board member

“This story will send students on an important exploration of identity, assimilation, history and the diversity of cultural and religious norms.”

—Coashandra Dillard

When it’s time for Henry’s class to turn in their kindness projects, he’s got nothing! But why? Turns out he doesn’t think he’s done anything kind in the past week, but his classmates show him he couldn’t be more wrong. In **Henry is Kind: A Story of Mindfulness**, written by Linda Ryden and illustrated by Shearry Malone, students not only get a sweet introduction to mindfulness but also a great reminder of the power of kindness.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

In author Ibi Zoboi’s debut, she presents a devastating, yet beautiful, young adult novel that combines mysticism and realism. **American Street** tells the story of teenage Haitian immigrant Fabiola Toussaint’s quest to reunite with her mother, who is detained by immigration officials. Be aware that Fabiola’s story also includes frequent use of the n-word. Her haphazard journey, which includes the help of spiritual guides, leads readers through raw and emotional experiences that illuminate failed systems, violence, the elusive American dream and the tenderness of love.

HIGH SCHOOL

It’s hard to fathom packing 150 years of Indigenous Canadian history into 10 stories spread across fewer than 300 pages. **This Place: 150 Years Retold** is a collection of tales in comic book style. However, this is more than a graphic novel—it’s an extraordinary history text (with a dash of speculative fiction) that animates obscured narratives and will enchant and educate all ages.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



“This book can help us all remember to ‘slow down and pay attention to our bodies, hearts and minds.’”

—Monita K. Bell

The day before he was assassinated, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was in Memphis lending peaceful support to 1,300 black men from the Memphis Department of Public Works. The Sanitation Strike of 1968 was born from a combination of extremely low wages, dangerous working conditions and the tragic deaths of two black sanitation workers caused by malfunctioning equipment. Poetry, prose and artwork knit together the story of **Memphis, Martin, and the Mountaintop: The Sanitation Strike of 1968** by Alice Faye Duncan and illustrator R. Gregory Christie.

ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

**The Poet X** tells the story of a young woman coming to terms with her identity and place in the world amid the backdrop of a vibrant Harlem neighborhood. X’s (short for Xiomara) journey of self-discovery and self-love leads her to discover her own personal liberation through the art of slam poetry. This National Book Award-winning debut novel from Elizabeth Acevedo is a unique and skillful blend of short poems and novel writing resembling Xiomara’s diary of poetry and inner reflections on the struggles she confronts daily. X comes to terms with homophobia, misogyny, street harassment, religion and abuse among other timely topics. Acevedo uses very accessible language that students use themselves and presents struggles they might face within their own personal journeys and school communities. Educators and students alike will find tremendous value in this book.

HIGH SCHOOL

# What We're Watching

Dim the lights and get ready to learn with these TT-approved films!

**When They See Us**, the long-awaited limited series from Ava DuVernay, humanizes the targets of racist policing and prosecutorial discrimination through brutally honest storytelling. In this telling of the Central Park Five case, we learn how the New York City police, court systems and the media violently discriminated against five black boys—Antron, Kevin, Yusef, Raymond and Korey—and wrongfully convicted them of a sexual assault that sent them to prison for terms ranging from six to 12 years. Color of Change's official discussion guide, available at [winningjustice.org](http://winningjustice.org), encourages viewers to reflect on themes of anti-black racism, policing and incarceration. Viewers should also be aware of the challenging, painful and visceral depictions of state violence. (Four episodes, 64–88 min. each)

**Available on Netflix**  
[t-t.site/see-us](http://t-t.site/see-us)  
PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

In Triggerfish Animation Studios' **Belly Flop**, Penny is a young, fat girl of color who is very excited for her trip to the pool with her grandmother. When she sees another child impressing everyone with her effortlessly elegant dives, Penny only grows more confident in her own ability. Her journey offers children an important message of self-acceptance—and a model for finding it without tearing other people down. In the end, Penny makes a beautiful splash in her own way! (5 min.)

**Available on Vimeo**  
[t-t.site/belly-flop](http://t-t.site/belly-flop)  
ELEMENTARY AND MIDDLE SCHOOL

"It was the honesty of my own experiences that made room for me," YA author Jason Reynolds muses in **Dear, Dreamer**. Interspersed with footage of students, the profile shares Reynolds' love of the written word and makes a strong statement about the need for representation in children's literature. The short film is packed with vivid imagery and serves as part biography, part celebration and part inspiration. It opens and closes with poetry, the work that pushed Reynolds to become an author, and serves as a call to action for students—to read, to write, to tell their stories and to connect with others. (10 min.)

**Available on Vimeo**  
[t-t.site/dear-dreamer](http://t-t.site/dear-dreamer)  
MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

StoryCorps' Animations illustrate interviews that speak to the power of shared conversation about a range of important topics. One short, "**The Door She Opened**," tells the story of how a transgender teenager found acceptance while visiting an aunt who allowed her to dress as her true self in public. Another, "Common Ground," highlights a relationship of understanding and love between a liberal woman and her conservative father-in-law. StoryCorps' Animations bring you back to the heart of storytelling and human connection, while also serving as a model for students starting on projects interviewing members of their own families or communities. (2–3 min.)

**Available at StoryCorps**  
[storycorps.org/animation](http://storycorps.org/animation)  
ELEMENTARY, MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

**Out of Many, One** documents the often-unseen lives and sacrifices of naturalized American citizens. This short documentary follows a group of immigrants as they prepare to take the naturalization test and reflect on what U.S. citizenship means to them. It quietly shows the parallels between immigrants of today and yesterday by examining the hardships and sacrifices many face as they work toward citizenship. The documentary shows how its subjects are citizens in everything but name, many having built entire lives, careers and families in the United States before obtaining citizenship. **Out of Many, One** tells a uniquely informative story while reminding us of the hope and promise of the United States. (34 min.)

**Available on Netflix**  
[t-t.site/many-one](http://t-t.site/many-one)  
MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL

# Songs of Zion





BY DOROTHY H. PRICE ILLUSTRATION BY LORRAINE NAM

**MARY LOVED SUNDAY MORNINGS.** She waited all week for them to come. It was only her and Mama.

Mary didn't know her father. He was sold to another plantation in the South not long after she was born. Mary was thankful Mama hadn't been sold, too. Sunday mornings were special because enslaved people were given permission to sing, pray and worship in their own unique way.

Like many other enslaved people, Mary and Mama believed a better day would come. Mama had a great voice and loved to sing. She passed that gift to Mary. Mama led most of the songs during church; Mary always joined in.

They sang spirituals like "Ain't Got Time to Die," "Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen" and "Down by the Riverside." These songs and music were part of their oral heritage brought by the first enslaved people during the Middle Passage from Africa to America. Traditional African rhythms and beats also helped enslaved people in the fields while they worked for hours and hours in the heat.

Singing Sunday songs of worship and praise was how enslaved people communicated with their creator. It lifted their spirits and allowed Mary and Mama to dream of a better day when they would be free.

Although American slavery lasted far too long and should have never existed at all, the spirituals Mary and Mama sang centuries ago are still sung in African American churches around the United States. Many forms of music created by African Americans are also used today to inspire people to fight against unfairness.

Like Mary and Mama praying and singing songs of Zion all those years ago, Negro spirituals still bring a sense of comfort to many African Americans. They serve as a reminder to never forget the past and always believe a better day will come. ♦

*This text is part of the Teaching Hard History Text Library. Watch the accompanying video at [t-t.site/songs-of-zion](http://t-t.site/songs-of-zion).*



### Questions for Readers

#### RIGHT THERE (IN THE TEXT)

Why were Sunday mornings special for Mary?

#### THINK AND SEARCH (IN THE TEXT)

How did the Sunday songs encourage enslaved people like Mama and Mary?

#### AUTHOR AND ME (IN MY HEAD)

Why did enslaved people draw on traditional storytelling, rhythms and beats for their music?

#### ON MY OWN (IN MY HEAD)

What traditions have been passed down to me by my family or community?

Each of us  
has a magic  
inside of us  
that we can  
use to make  
the world a  
better place.  
-Marley Dias



When Marley Dias was in the sixth grade, she got tired of never seeing herself in the books she read for school. So she founded #1000BlackGirlBooks, collected thousands of stories featuring black girls as main characters and donated them to schools. In 2018, she even published a book of her own, *Marley Dias Gets It Done: And So Can You!* At that time, the author and activist was only 13 years old.







## The New Teaching Hard History: American Slavery

- Frameworks for teaching all grades, with guidance for K–2, 3–5, 6–12
- A new season of the *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery* podcast, hosted by Hasan Kwame Jeffries
- New classroom-ready videos, featuring Ibram X. Kendi, Annette Gordon-Reed and other leading historians

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