

# LEARNING FOR JUSTICE

Issue 5 • Fall 2023 • [learningforjustice.org](http://learningforjustice.org)

## Civics Education for Democracy

Civics literacy is crucial if our nation is to achieve a truly inclusive multiracial democracy.



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**New Publication — Coming Fall 2023!**

# Teaching the Movement

## **A Framework for Teaching the Black Freedom Struggle**

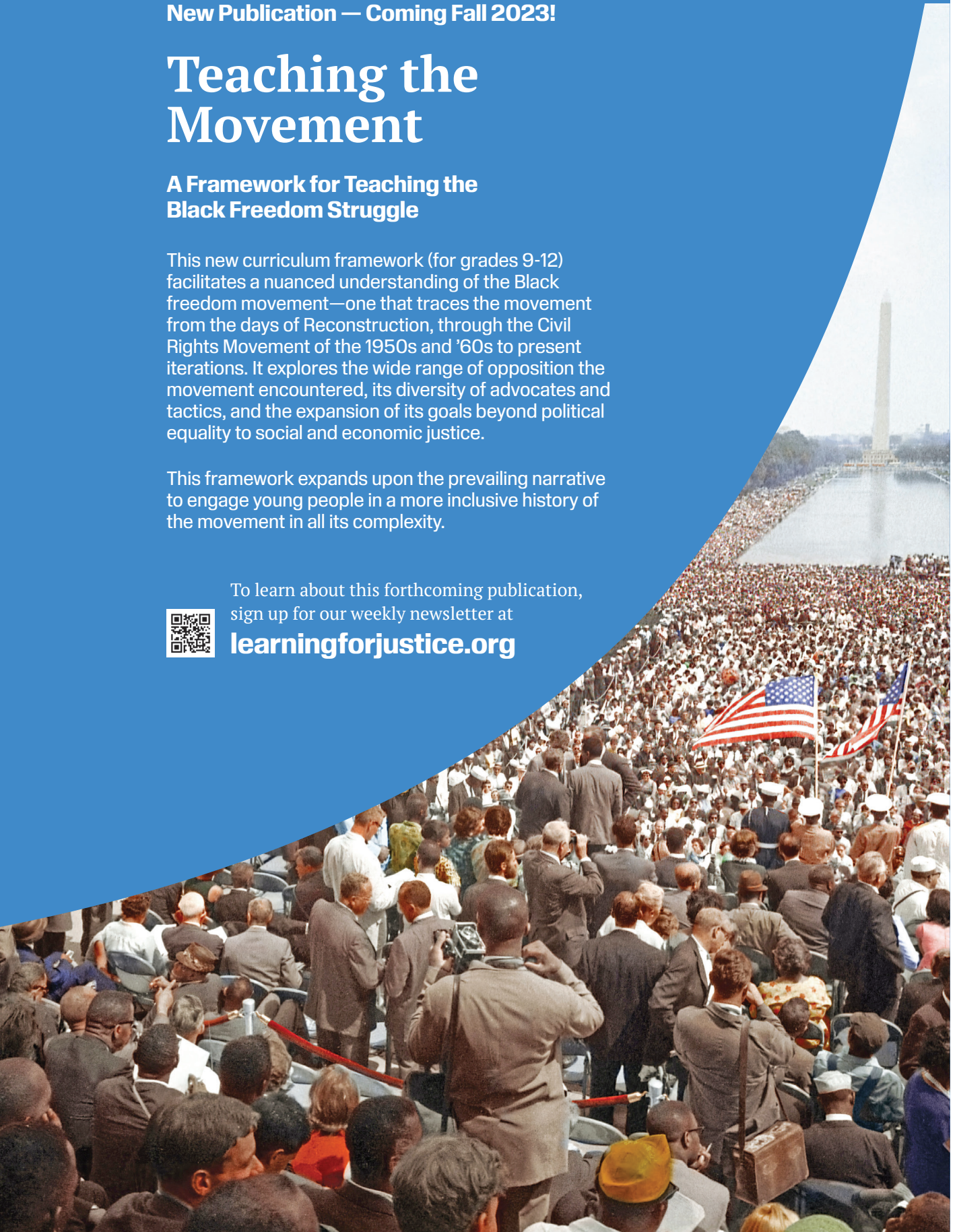
This new curriculum framework (for grades 9-12) facilitates a nuanced understanding of the Black freedom movement—one that traces the movement from the days of Reconstruction, through the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and '60s to present iterations. It explores the wide range of opposition the movement encountered, its diversity of advocates and tactics, and the expansion of its goals beyond political equality to social and economic justice.

This framework expands upon the prevailing narrative to engage young people in a more inclusive history of the movement in all its complexity.

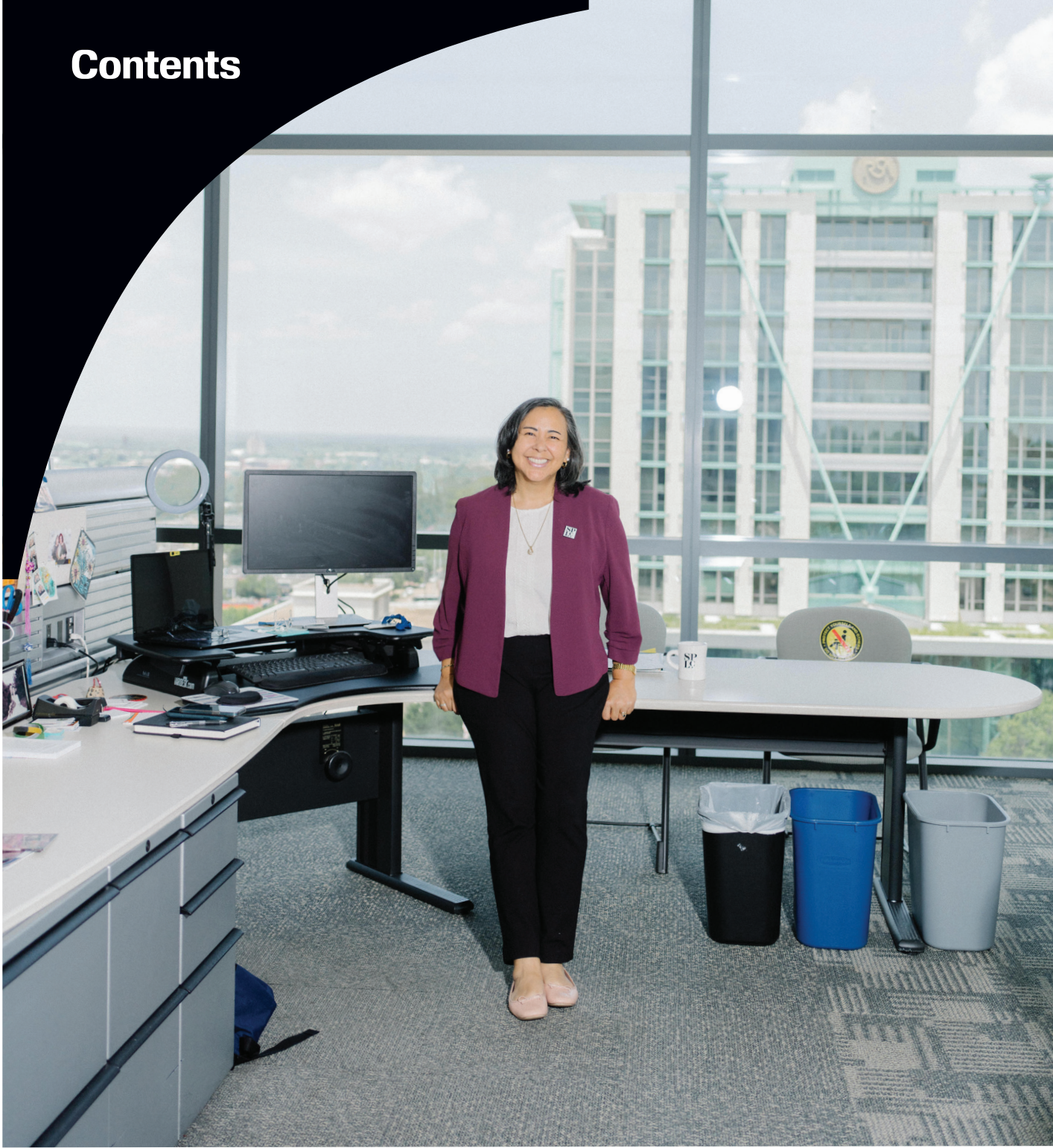
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To develop the next generation of civic leaders, educate children early and in age-appropriate ways about their identities and key concepts about race. **By Erica Licht and Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Ph.D.**

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Acts of censorship in education perpetuated by a small group with concentrated power go against the principles outlined in the United States Constitution. **By Khiara M. Bridges, Ph.D., J.D.**

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### Educating for Democracy

Effective civics literacy develops critical thinkers who can connect history and current events to engage in democratic action in building an equitable and just society. **By Anthony Conwright**

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Inclusive education builds critical thinking—the intellectual tools for reflection, continuous inquiry, constructive dialogue and the possibility of changing one's perspective—and is an essential lever for democracy. **By Gregory M. Anderson, Ph.D.**

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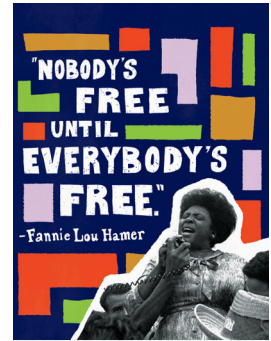
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“Nobody's free until everybody's free.”  
— Fannie Lou Hamer (above)

**On the Cover**  
Illustration by Tracie Ching



All articles are available for educational use at [learningforjustice.org/magazine](http://learningforjustice.org/magazine)

**New 2023 Edition!**

# *Critical Practices for Social Justice Education* Second Edition

*Critical Practices for Social Justice Education (2023)* is a resource to support K-12 educators in growing their understanding of social justice principles and integrating them into their practice.

This revised edition is informed by the current social and political landscape, and it acknowledges the new ways educators have been challenged by increased political scrutiny, censorship and debate about what can be taught in schools.

**The guide is organized into four pillars, each representing a foundational aspect of social justice education:**

- I. Curriculum and Instruction
- II. Culture and Climate
- III. Leadership
- IV. Family and Community Engagement

Download this guide at



**learningforjustice.org/  
Critical-Practices-Fall23**



# Perspectives



## Civics for Democracy

**Jalaya Liles Dunn** (she/her)  
Learning for Justice Director

The appeal for democracy is not new. And the plea for the expansion of democracy to include all people is why democracy remains a harbinger of hope today.

As the actualization of democracy, civic engagement is how we respond to and participate in our shared society. It's how people have made space for their stories in our country's narrative. And it is how generations have defined their place in the fight for liberation and justice for all.

In his 1830 *Appeal*, David Walker, born free but the son of an enslaved person, points out the contradiction between slavery in the United States and the values expressed in the Declaration of Independence. Walker calls attention to the declaration's language on equality and the inherent rights to life and liberty, writing: "See your Declaration Americans!!! Do you

understand your own language? ... Compare your own language ... with your cruelties and murders inflicted by your cruel and unmerciful fathers and yourselves on our fathers and on us."

Langston Hughes, in his 1926 poem "I, Too," defines his citizenship in the segregated U.S. when he proclaims, "I, too, sing America. ... I, too, am America."

In Fannie Lou Hamer's 1964 testimony to the credentials committee of the Democratic National Convention on the treatment she received while trying to vote in Mississippi, she questions U.S. democracy, stating: "Is this America, the land of the free and the home of the brave, where we have to sleep with our telephones off the hooks because our lives be threatened daily, because we want to live as decent human beings, in America?"

Four years earlier, students from the colleges forming the Atlanta University Center published "An Appeal for Human Rights" as an advertisement in Atlanta newspapers. The manifesto proclaimed: "We do not intend to wait placidly for those rights which are already legally and morally ours to be meted out to us one at a time. Today's youth will not sit by submissively, while being denied all of the rights, privileges, and joys of life."

And in the UCLA Center for Labor Research and Education's 2012 publication *Undocumented and Unafraid*, Grecia Mondragon shares their experiences in this democracy as a queer and an undocumented person, writing: "I live with the everyday struggle and challenge that comes with being a part of more than one marginalized community. ... My rights as a human being are limited because I am undocumented, and my civil liberties are violated simply because I am trying to be myself."

This is civics in action across time, place and perspectives! Each plea for democracy illustrates how, across generations, we have strived for representation. We push for it, challenge it and shape it. Civics is a collective action, practiced in community and centering the well-being of the collective.

Therefore, civics goes beyond the study of citizenship and government. It is a practice, not a monolithic body of information we must recall and accept. Civics should represent the agency and change of each generation, demonstrating the needs of the time and how people showed up for the collective good. The scope of civics is dynamic.

Civics is nothing less than the expansion of democracy to more groups of previously excluded people. Collective agency and acts of resistance have been the most



# SP LC LEARNING FOR JUSTICE

powerful and inspiring ways of participating in democracy. This is why knowing the true history of our nation is fundamental to understanding the rights and responsibilities each person has in challenging democracy to be more inclusive.

Radical democratic practice is not formulaic. Rather, it is entrenched in deliberation by the people. The combination of interaction, discussion and consensus-building is a precursor to the electoral and legislative victories and court decisions that cement the values of democracy. Importantly, this radical approach to situational democracy centers equity and inclusion, not merely the majority's interests. We must constantly assess power dynamics, shift power and redirect it to support the least powerful of the particular moment.

In *A People's History of the United States*, Howard Zinn refers to this type of radical, situational democracy in the chapter "The Coming Revolt of the Guards." He describes what we are calling for today: a new, innovative, multiracial and inclusive democracy. To achieve this reshaping and expansion of democracy requires radical measures. We are challenged to relinquish the benefits and disproportionate power many of us receive as "guards of the system" as we engage in democratic practices with those Zinn refers to as the "prisoners of the system." Today's democracy requires the "guards" and "prisoners" to join forces to dismantle the old system while building a new one reflective of all. This is the start of a new radical inclusive democracy.

Our democracy's strength depends on how we as a collective citizenry respond to the needs of the most oppressed. This inverted hierarchy of power is reiterated in the words of Fannie Lou Hamer: "Nobody's free until everybody's free." ●

Learning for Justice seeks to uphold the mission of the Southern Poverty Law Center: to be a catalyst for racial justice in the South and beyond, working in partnership with communities to dismantle white supremacy, strengthen intersectional movements and advance the human rights of all people.

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**[learningforjustice.org/EF-Fall23](https://learningforjustice.org/EF-Fall23)**





Why I Teach

## The Kids Are All Right

By Akela Leach

**My comments in** the 2022 *Learning for Justice* magazine article “Teaching Local History in Tulsa” emphasized the need for honest history lessons in our schools: “The effects of the race massacre are still here in Tulsa. ... It’s still very visible. It’s still very segregated. And there’s still a huge difference between South Tulsa and North Tulsa, which is where Greenwood was located.”

During the 2020-21 school year, I was on the team at Tulsa Public Schools that created inquiry-driven units about the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre. The lessons were created for grades 3-12 in a new social studies curriculum. Although I grew up in Tulsa and knew about the massacre, it is common for many



Tulsans to be completely unaware of this history. Our school district sought to end that silence.

Tulsa’s history may be hard, but our students can handle it. And they need a solid understanding of the past to solve problems of the future. Children are naturally curious, and with great care and preparation, educators can help students make sense of this complicated history in Tulsa and connect it to the world around them.

Historical context is important, even at young ages. The themes of the third through fifth grade lessons our team created are resiliency and rebuilding. The lessons are designed to give students background knowledge on the Greenwood community—a wealthy, self-sufficient Black community that was destroyed by white mobs during the massacre.

Students learn about the resiliency it took to establish Greenwood in the early 20th century, and the reasons why that resilience was necessary—after Reconstruction, Tulsa was segregated because of Jim Crow laws. And we also explore the causes and impact of the Tulsa Race Massacre to understand the significance of rebuilding the Greenwood community after the attack.

I teach fifth grade, and some years we take field trips to Greenwood to view landmarks and structures that residents rebuilt after the massacre. Because Greenwood’s history is our local history, students can make more personal connections to the place and events. Some students live near Greenwood Avenue; others recognize the churches in the area and stores they have visited. And some students who live in other areas

of Tulsa share that their parents had driven them through Greenwood to show and teach them about the history. Personal connections to the community and experiences through family lessons make learning this history more meaningful.

When children understand the causes and effects of historical events, they learn to think about what is happening in their communities and the wider world. Sometimes my students make connections between the lessons about the massacre and current events. One year when I taught the lesson about the massacre—a few weeks after Russia invaded Ukraine—students were moved to learn more about present-day events. A student raised his hand one day and said, “I think the Greenwood people and Ukrainians have something in common. They were both resilient.” When I asked him to tell me more, he said, “They both fought back even though people were against them. In Greenwood, people did not give up when it was burned down. In Ukraine, people are not backing down.” Not only did the theme of resilience resonate with the student, but he could also apply the concept of fighting back to a modern-day international event. Students recognized the destruction of two communities.

When teachers present information directly with quality resources, like our district’s Tulsa Race Massacre units, students are able to make strong connections. And with critical thinking and introspection, children can connect injustices at home to injustices around the globe.

That’s why I teach—because understanding the honest history of our past will help our students create a more equitable and just world in the future. ●

**Akela Leach** (she/her) is a fifth grade teacher in Tulsa, Oklahoma.



Why I Serve

## Fighting for Inclusive Schools

By Carol Lerner

In 2015, I moved to Sarasota, Florida, after retiring from a 35-year career in education. Attracted to Sarasota because of its renowned beaches and extraordinary cultural offerings, I had no idea that Sarasota would soon become the epicenter of the cultural war for education or that I would be countering attacks and working to ensure inclusive education for all students.

In my early years in Sarasota, I was appalled at the attacks on learning from state government, which for years sought to defund and privatize education. Concerned by the 2017 passage of Florida's House Bill 7069—a bill that transferred funding from public schools labeled as “failing” into for-profit corporate-managed charter schools—I formed Protect Our Public Schools (POPS), an organization to educate the public about these attacks.

POPS grew in numbers and became the area's leading pro-public education voice. In 2018, POPS successfully urged the Sarasota school board to reject the application of the nation's largest for-profit charter school provider. POPS then urged neighboring Manatee County schools to adopt the community school model with academic and social service supports for children and their families rather than close two elementary schools designated as “failing.” The Manatee district now has two thriving community schools, one fully implemented and one emerging.



Then in March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit, and everything ground to a halt. When schools reopened in August 2020 with a remote option and a mask mandate, the Sarasota school board meetings became a war zone. As if on cue, extremists showed up to intimidate anyone supporting masking and claimed teachers were indoctrinating students.

But young people, particularly current and former students of color, challenged the extremists.

The 2020 national election brought a short-lived calm that was broken when Gov. Ron DeSantis launched his culture war on education. Simultaneously, three Florida women, including the current chair of the



Sarasota school board, formed Moms for Liberty, a group described as an extremist anti-student inclusion group by the Southern Poverty Law Center.

By spring of 2021, extremism returned to Sarasota schools with disinformation and protests that critical race theory—a theory taught at law schools and graduate school programs about the role of systemic racism in shaping laws and social structures—was rampant throughout K-12 education. They argued that historical aspects of slavery, racism or the Holocaust were making some children, particularly white children, feel guilty and pushed to erase the history of students of color. Simultaneously, vicious attacks on the rights of the LGBTQ+ community occurred.

When the Sarasota superintendent held a series of town hall meetings to gain community input on a five-year plan, extremists converged on these meetings. The meeting that I attended turned ugly, with extremists warning school officials that they knew where officials and liberal school board members lived. Outnumbered, my small group left, shaken by the hate displayed that night.

Things took a turn in 2021 when the Sarasota school board voted 3-2 to join 11 other Florida districts in defying the governor’s plan to end mask mandates amid skyrocketing COVID-19 cases. While supportive parents came out in droves when the board’s mask mandate vote was taken, few made other meetings due to COVID concerns and their fear of extremists. This allowed extremist groups to gain a foothold.

As COVID-19 numbers decreased, a group of mothers of school-aged children banded together with ideas similar to POPS. These mothers denounced the hatemongering and explained how these attacks were

creating chaos to destroy public education and weaken democratic values while real education issues—like reducing educational inequity for students of color and providing financial resources for public schools—were ignored. They formed Support Our Schools (SOS), a nonprofit organization with the mission to “organize, educate, and empower parents and community members to defend public schools.” I joined their executive board when POPS voted to merge with SOS so we could become one strong force. Simultaneously, I launched a research project to better understand the extremism that had so dominated Sarasota, research which received extensive national media coverage.

## Signs of trauma currently exist all over our community. Teachers must navigate vaguely written laws and can face felony charges if they share “unsuitable” material with students.

The 2022 Sarasota school board election showed the importance of voting, particularly at the local level. Low voter turnout and the roles played by right-leaning politicians and extremist groups contributed to the election of conservative candidates, thus beginning the next chapter of attacks against inclusive schools.

Signs of trauma currently exist all over our community. Teachers must navigate vaguely written laws and can face felony charges if they share “unsuitable” material with students. Growing numbers of parents are

horrified by book bans and the rewriting of history to maintain white supremacy. LGBTQ+ youth, especially trans students, are afraid.

Yet change began to happen in 2023 as more people showed up and spoke out against extremism at school board meetings and in support of a moderate school board member, attacked as a “groomer” because he is gay. The firing of a popular superintendent after the new conservative board took office also woke people up. Then in rapid succession the school board banned books, censored curricula, and eliminated a social emotional learning (SEL) program that teachers supported and students found helpful.

In opposition to a recent board proposal and in support of finding a superintendent who would prioritize education and students, hundreds of Sarasota residents attended rallies and participated in hours-long public commentary. And by a narrow 3-2 margin, the board decisions followed a path of reason, with even two of the conservative members voting for truth.

With a focus on truth and justice, we’ve started to reclaim the narrative from a loud vocal minority. When people stand together and speak out against extremism, positive change is possible. The community has a lot of work to do, but I have hope that through increased civic engagement, justice will prevail. ●

**Carol Lerner** (she/her) is a director of the nonprofit organization Support Our Schools.



## Learn More

For more information about Support Our Schools, visit [supportourschools.com](https://supportourschools.com)

# Mosaic



## Youth Activism

# Changemakers for an Inclusive and Just Future

By **Jahnee Smith and Vince Cuadra**

**Florida has recently** enacted oppressive anti-LGBTQ+ legislations that affect individuals of all ages but target queer youth with a particularly hostile focus. These measures include denying transgender youth access to necessary health and medical care; prohibiting sexual and gender identity topics in public K-8 schools; banning gender-inclusive bathrooms in schools; and defunding diversity, equity and inclusion programs at state universities while also banning courses and majors that cover critical race theory and gender studies. These legislative acts of censorship are unmistakably direct assaults

on queer youth, especially those belonging to communities of color, who now experience heightened feelings of insecurity and targeted discrimination in their daily lives.

What does it feel like to live in the state of Florida today?

“I feel hyperaware of my identity more than ever,” says one member of the ChangeMakers 2023 cohort, a leadership development program for LGBTQ+ youth. “I don’t know who to trust. I’m not sure if school counselors are on my side or where I can go to find community.”

In response to the state’s recent attacks on LGBTQ+ rights, the Alliance for LGBTQ Youth, a nonprofit organization based in Miami, has been actively fighting against the harms caused by both this current assault on rights and by decades of historical marginalization and erasure. The Alliance offers a variety of services—such as care coordination for mental health, therapy, leadership development and policy advocacy—that prioritize the lives and experiences of LGBTQ+ youth in South Florida. As part of the Alliance’s leadership development efforts, the ChangeMakers Leadership Institute is a program for queer youth aged 13-20 who are passionate about leading progressive social justice movements. This six-month commitment empowers ChangeMakers cohort members to develop into community organizers and leaders, gaining valuable experience in the legislative process, campaign strategies, outreach efforts and community-building.

Ask a ChangeMaker what motivates them to be a part of this work and you will get a variety of answers, with shared themes of justice and leadership for change.

“Since I was in middle school, I’ve wanted to engage in community work and activism, especially as a queer-trans person living in Florida,” says one 2023 ChangeMaker. “I’ve been searching to become more involved in LGBTQ+ activism after experiencing how my community is highly affected by the political climate. When I got the opportunity to apply for ChangeMakers, it sounded like exactly what I’ve been looking for—an opportunity to further learn the skills I need for community organizing, campaigning and more in-depth political education.”

Currently, the ChangeMakers 2023 cohort of activists is focusing their campaign on ensuring that ninth

## ChangeMakers Leadership Institute

To learn more about the ChangeMakers Leadership Institute and the Alliance for LGBTQ Youth, visit [all4lgbtqyouth.org](http://all4lgbtqyouth.org)

grade English and social studies curricula center teaching the “people’s history,” giving prominence to the perspectives of people of color, queer folks, and members of the working class and poor, along with other marginalized communities. This effort is in response to recent legislation that seeks to erase the histories and suppress the education of these communities. Miami-Dade County Public Schools, the third-largest school district in the nation, has a student body enrollment of 72.7% Hispanic/Latinx and 19.1% Black. Given Gov. Ron DeSantis’ recent attacks on critical race theory at the college level, the ChangeMakers aim to safeguard against censorship at the high school

level. They have strategically chosen to concentrate on ninth grade, recognizing it as a critical period when students are exposed to new environments and ideas.

As part of the ChangeMakers’ campaign, they plan to create Little Free Libraries with books that tell the stories of historically oppressed communities, making representative education accessible outside of schools. They will also host an opening event to invite local community members to engage with the libraries and resist the current attacks on their communities through celebration and mutual aid.

In the face of oppressive legislation targeting LGBTQ+ individuals in Florida, the ChangeMakers are standing strong, advocating for inclusive education, and fostering community resilience. ●

**Jahnee Smith** (they/she/he) and **Vince Cuadra** (he/him) are members of the ChangeMakers Leadership Institute’s 2023 cohort.

## Article Spotlight

Read these online articles at [learningforjustice.org](http://learningforjustice.org).

### **Whole-of-Community Resilience**

By Lydia Bates

Helping young people build resilience against manipulative extremist narratives and conspiracy theories requires adults to be equipped with the skills and knowledge to intervene.

### **A Letter to Young People on Your Power to Effect Change**

By Anthony Conwright

Recognize the possibilities of the power of the vote, encourage your friends and family to engage in civic action, and become a change agent in your community.

### **Promote and Model Civic Responsibility**

By Coshandra Dillard

It’s one thing to learn about voting rights and civic responsibilities; it’s another to engage in action to make positive change in our communities.

### **Connect Voting Rights History to Current Policies and Discourse**

By Coshandra Dillard

Uncovering the honest history of voting rights in the U.S. is crucial to create an inclusive society and realize the democratic ideals expressed in the Constitution.

### **Toolkit: Peace-Building Circles**

By Jeremiah Smith

Transforming discipline practices requires commitment to processes that strengthen relationships among individuals and connections within communities.

### **What Is Social Justice Education?**

By Lee Anne Bell, Ed.D.

Scholar and educator Lee Anne Bell explains social justice education.



Vince Cuadra (left) and Jahnee Smith (right)



# Building Resilience Against Manipulative Disinformation

Supporting young people’s mental health and well-being is essential in addressing vulnerabilities to harmful disinformation.

By **Lydia Bates**





As **political and** social polarization dominate the national landscape, maintaining inclusive learning environments is increasingly formidable. Young peoples’ time online and exposure to disinformation, conspiracy theories and supremacist thinking further compound the difficulties in supporting their mental health and well-being.

However, counseling psychology Ph.D. candidate Jackson Liguori and school counselor Brennan F. McIntosh recommend steps to mitigate these challenges. Incremental lessons, honest conversations and community networking can support young people’s resilience against efforts to undermine civic engagement and learning environments grounded in safety and belonging.

**Practice social emotional learning.**

“You can’t talk about finding things that are hateful and hurtful online if [students] can’t understand and figure out how to talk about how [they] feel about it in respect to [themselves],” says McIntosh. Widely referred to as social emotional learning (SEL), the Committee for Children defines this approach as “the process of developing the self-awareness, self-control, and interpersonal skills that are vital for school, work, and life success.”

Building social emotional learning into the norms of a classroom, McIntosh explains, looks different depending on the students’ ages. “For the younger kids, if [students] can have a daily morning meeting with [their] teacher ... to be able to recognize their feelings, then you’ll also be able to transfer that over into the social media technology world.” Since older students have less time for morning meetings, McIntosh recommends working social emotional lessons into advisory

periods or scheduling in-depth lessons taught by a school counselor.

The self-awareness and interpersonal skills learned through SEL are also foundational for digital literacy and civic engagement. As young people spend time online, their ability to discern fact from fiction, recognize manipulation and engage in civic discourse is essential. McIntosh recommends embedding exercises in digital literacy into the curriculum from the beginning of students’ education. This will help young people know how to be “a good digital citizen... and not just click *share, share, share.*”

**Understand vulnerabilities to radicalization.**

According to Liguori, educators can also develop vigilance against disinformation and the impact of supremacist ideologies on young people’s mental health by simply being “aware of the social dynamics of the class and the emotional status of their students.” Those who are most vulnerable to manipulation by hateful agendas, he says, often have experienced some childhood trauma.



**Resources**

**Preventing Youth Radicalization: Building Resilient, Inclusive Communities**  
splcenter.org/peril

**Common Sense Education**  
commonsense.org/education

**GLSEN: Supporting Trans and GNC Students**  
glsen.org

**Human Rights Campaign: Schools In Transition: A Guide for Supporting Transgender Students in K-12 Schools**  
hrc.org

**Speaking of Psychology podcast**  
apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology

**Stop AAPI Hate**  
stopaapihate.org

When combined with self-hatred—another key precursor to radicalization identified in Liguori’s research—these individuals are particularly vulnerable to manipulation.

Educators may recognize a behavioral change in a young person that indicates increased susceptibility to manipulation. Oftentimes, Liguori explains, these behaviors appear on two ends of the spectrum: isolating or acting out. Young people who are acting out may “feel like they have been overlooked in their own family and the only way they know how to get attention is to ... draw attention to themselves by breaking the rules and getting in trouble,” he says.

Regarding deepening social disengagement, Liguori warns that young people who become increasingly isolated may be “avoiding attention because the attention they receive is generally negative.” Such behavior may indicate trauma, depression or other mental health concerns that could increase a young person’s vulnerability to extremist manipulation.

Both behaviors—*isolation and acting out*—are young people “asking for help in a nonverbal way,” Liguori says. Both require support that addresses the root causes of manipulation and helps young people take responsibility for harmful words or actions.

**Speak to the person, not their behavior.**

When addressing behavioral changes or situations in which a student has caused harm to their peer(s), educators should distinguish between the young person’s behavior and their identity.

“Pulling the student aside and giving one-on-one attention,” Liguori advises, says “to the student, ‘I see what you’re communicating, and I’m not taking the way you are



communicating as who you are. I'm not identifying you as your behavior.”

In the classroom, McIntosh says this means not calling the behavior out explicitly but rather reinforcing the students' social emotional learning. “Really try to dig into how it would feel if it happened to [that student]. It's harder to relate when you don't have any idea what it would feel like,” she says.

These empathetic prompts, Liguori adds, give “the student a place where they can feel that they are being paid attention to in a caring way and not to punish them.”

**Explore options for those harmed.** “Part of trauma,” Liguori explains, “is feeling like you've had your agency taken away from you.” Therefore, it's imperative that responses are compassionate and directly informed by the needs of those harmed without imposing forgiveness.

This means providing young people with multiple avenues for reporting an incident. Schools should strive to have at least “one person that [each student] feels comfortable going to, to talk about what happened ... even if it's not the teacher,” says McIntosh. “If they can get to an adult, whether you're 5 or 18, we can help solve [the issue].”

However, speaking in person with an educator, school counselor or administrator can sometimes be intimidating, emotionally taxing or retraumatizing. Therefore, using platforms or processes that allow young people to submit anonymous reports can provide the opportunity to make educators aware of an incident.

Once a trusted adult has been made aware of an incident and if the targeted individual has been identified, then a plan of action that centers the mental health and well-being of those harmed can be

outlined. “Having a set of possibilities for addressing what has happened... and having the person who has been traumatized in charge of how they want to address it is crucial,” says Liguori. Options could be as simple as talking to a school counselor and filing an official report or as extensive as helping a student change their class schedule to restore their sense of physical safety.

**Compassion fatigue is real.** “You have to take time for yourself,” says McIntosh. “I really like having a check-in buddy at school that [I] can talk to about things. If [educators] have that person...who understands the students, who knows what happened or maybe saw what happened, [you can] check in on each other and talk through your thoughts and feelings.”

In addition to the therapeutic aspect of talking through difficult situations and building consensus, these conversations can also help educators determine what further resources and support they need. Oftentimes combating compassion fatigue comes down to “advocating for yourself and your students,” McIntosh explains, “knowing what to ask for, [knowing] it's OK to ask for things.”

**Engage the broader community.** In responding to harmful incidents and helping young people build resilience through mental health care and awareness, educators should connect with broader networks of trusted adults. “Teachers who are dealing with this type of ... prevention,” Liguori advises, “need some kind of explicit support that's designed for the reactions that one has to this kind of intervention because it can be painful, stressful and taxing.”

Not only can these broader networks help dissipate the responsibility of responding to harmful situations, but various trusted adults in young

people's lives present unique opportunities to help them build resilience and to intervene if the need arises. Coaches, youth mentors, mental health practitioners, religious leaders and others all offer an alternative conduit outside of school and the home for resilience-building. Similarly, these individuals also offer an alternative support network for individuals or communities who may have been harmed by disinformation or supremacist ideologies.

Tapping into these local networks offers young people the opportunity to interact with diverse individuals, build empathy for differing lived experiences, and engage more broadly with the civic life of their community. When educators and broader circles of trusted adults are equipped with the tools to help young people build resilience against manipulation, social emotional learning is reinforced, isolation and moral disengagement are constructively challenged, and the foundations for an inclusive and just society are strengthened. ●

**Lydia Bates** (she/her) is the program manager of Partnerships in the SPLC's Intelligence Project.



## Learning for Justice Articles and Webinars

**“Prevention and Resilience: Supporting Young People Through Polarizing Times”**  
By Lydia Bates

**“Conversations About Gun Violence, Disinformation and Extremism”**  
By Lydia Bates

**“Whole-of-Community Resilience”**  
By Lydia Bates

**Against Hate: Media Literacy and Other Tools for Combating Extremism**  
Learning for Justice webinar

Cover Story

# A Time of Transformation and Possibility

Learning for Justice interview with **Margaret Huang**

The United States has championed human rights around the globe but needs to consistently ensure those protections domestically.

Photography by **Gem Hale**



**Margaret Huang, president** and chief executive officer of the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the SPLC Action Fund, took time to share her thoughts with Learning for Justice on the role of public education in building a multiracial, inclusive democracy to advance the human rights of all people.

Huang, an experienced human rights and racial justice advocate, has spent her career challenging discrimination and fighting to protect the human rights of those who have been marginalized and oppressed, both internationally and in the United States.

**We often frame civic action in relation to the values of a democracy, but we don't always clearly define those values. What are democratic values? And how would you describe the SPLC's vision of a multiracial, inclusive democracy?**

The values at the heart of a multiracial, inclusive democracy are freedom of expression and assembly and authentic representation of the communities our democracy serves. The leaders we elect should not just hold office to put forward their own interests but to meaningfully advance the interests of everyone in their jurisdiction. All of those values necessitate active participation of the people. Democracy can only thrive when we fuel it with our voices, votes and healthy discussion and debate about how we move the country forward.

A central tenet of democracy should be the protection of the minority. While the majority will often make decisions, the rights of the minority must be respected in any outcomes sought. Sadly, we're in a deeply troubling moment when white Republican legislators and supermajorities in Southern statehouses are trying to deny voters of color fair representation in government and assert partisan control over the power of local elected officials—often officials who are Black, as happened recently in my home state of Tennessee.

After Reps. Justin Jones and Justin Pearson joined thousands of young people inside the Tennessee Capitol for a historic protest following a horrific school shooting, the white majority in the state House of Representatives wasted no time in dredging up Jim Crow tactics to smear and expel them. Thankfully, both were reappointed to their seats. But it is a disturbing reminder of what happens when lawmakers abandon democratic norms and shamelessly silence minority voices.

**“This rising anti-democracy threat presents an opportunity to remind the U.S. government of its obligation to finally redress the scourge of white supremacy in our past—because only in healing those wounds can we build a multiracial, inclusive democracy to lead us into the future.”**

**Margaret Huang**  
SPLC President and CEO





The SPLC is fighting to bring the values of a just and inclusive democracy to states in the Deep South where current political leaders would rather entrench a political system rife with racism and unequal representation. It will take all of us, but we believe the South is ripe for transformational change—and together we can achieve it.

**In the Fall 2022 issue of *Learning for Justice* magazine, LFJ Director Jalaya Liles Dunn emphasized that from the beginning of a limited form of democracy in the United States, abolitionists and activists challenged the institution to expand, and that struggle has been foundational to our country. In what ways is the movement to expand democracy—the application of rights and responsibilities to communities the founders of our democracy did not include—continuing today? In what ways is the movement currently under attack, and what does that mean for the nation?**

We’re in a time of regression. Here in the South and across the country, white supremacists are growing bolder. And Republican lawmakers are attempting to manipulate the levers of power to silence Black, Native and other voters of color and challenge free and fair elections.

We’ve also learned the hard way that progress can be reversed—that rights can be rescinded. When the U.S. Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* more than one year ago, the Court signaled that if the right to abortion can fall, so too can other rights we’ve long held as unassailable. *Roe* was a major step in advancing women’s rights as equals and our right to control our own bodies. No one thought we would again be debating people’s access to safe and legal abortion, let alone witnessing state after state across the South pass dangerous, near-total bans on the procedure.

These same state legislators have also turned their attention toward restricting medical care for trans youth and adults, removing Black history and the histories of other communities from our schools, and stifling free speech and political protest. These fights are all connected. When our rights are under fire, so too is our democracy. When our bodies are under threat, so too is our ability to live freely and with dignity.

It’s a scary time, to be sure. But it’s also a time of great possibility. I’m especially inspired by younger activists who don’t see the divisions between



Sixty years after the historic March on Washington, the nation grapples with many challenges. SPLC President and CEO Margaret Huang marched with SPLC (above) in the 60th anniversary of the March on Washington, August 26, 2023. Photograph by Eric Lee

Margaret Huang waits to enter the U.S. Supreme Court building (left) to hear arguments in *Allen v. Milligan* in October 2022. Photograph by Shuran Huang

communities the way older generations have. When I look across our movement today, I see so many people of different races, genders, sexual orientations, abilities and backgrounds showing up as allies for one another in the fight for justice and liberation. It seems to me that young people don't start from a place of assuming difference; instead, they start from a place of assuming equality and then challenge any notions that go against it. This brings me hope, and I'm excited that we're tapping into the wisdom and energy of many generations to guide the fight ahead for our democracy.

**In building a multiracial, inclusive democracy, what is the role of education in general and civics education in particular? What do people need to know and be able to do for responsible civic engagement that supports democracy?**

I want to first acknowledge some important history about the origins of public education in our country. After the Civil War, during Reconstruction, Black men were granted their right to vote, and historians estimate that about 2,000 Black legislators were elected to public office at all levels of government. One of the most extraordinary legacies of their leadership was the establishment of universal public education across the country, including the building of integrated schools. They understood that if they were going to help Black Americans—both young and old—and new immigrants and others become fully integrated, everyone had to start from a foundation of learning, especially about our democracy. Education was the key to freedom.

It's no coincidence that today we're seeing Republican lawmakers in the South curtail voting rights, free speech and protest at the same time that they're attacking public education. In the last two years alone, Republican state legislators have introduced or passed hundreds of bills to impose ignorance in our schools. They're trying to deny students of all backgrounds the opportunity to access a whole and truthful telling of our history.

Growing up in East Tennessee, I never saw my Chinese heritage reflected in textbooks or classroom lessons in the small public school I attended. In fact, I never learned anything about Asian American history at all until I moved to Washington, D.C., for college, and I'm still learning so much about my own community's history today.

No student should feel erased by their education. From their earliest years they should see themselves





Tafeni English-Relf (left), director of the SPLC's Alabama state office and the Civil Rights Memorial Center, and SPLC President and CEO Margaret Huang during Jubilee activities on March 5, 2023. Photograph by Lynsey Weatherspoon

reflected in the American story. It is essential for the health of our communities and our democracy that our classrooms promote justice, give students the knowledge and resources to exercise critical thinking, and equip educators with the best tools to guide them. Educating our next generation of leaders about where we've been and how far we have to go is our best hope for realizing a just and equitable future.

**The struggle to protect and expand democracy to benefit all people and counter oppression and injustice is a global movement. We've seen many of the same attacks on democratic principles and institutions happening in countries around the world—with some of those anti-democracy movements funded by organizers in the United States. In what ways does an understanding of the fight for international human rights relate to the ongoing movement for democracy in the U.S.?**

Like William Faulkner said, "The past is never dead. It's not even past." In some ways, the United States' experience is unique. More than many other countries, we have an obsession with racial identity—a legacy of long-standing racism, rooted in centuries of racial violence and exclusion, that we are unwilling to fully address and atone for.

From the early days of the international human rights system at the United Nations and other institutions, the United States has always taken a position of exceptionalism—that the U.S. government only respects those rights recognized

under domestic laws. Even though our government has often championed some of the most significant international human rights treaties and agreements, they've also thwarted their domestic application at the same time, much to our own detriment.

When we look to examples from other countries, it's clear that every country has followed its own path toward reconciling its past and building a better future, from decolonizing to drafting new constitutions to promoting collective healing and reparations, some with greater success than others. And as we confront this growing movement of authoritarianism across the globe, I try to remember how the principles of human rights resonate with people in every part of the world. There is something intrinsic in our human nature that believes we're entitled to basic rights and freedom.

This rising anti-democracy threat presents an opportunity to remind the U.S. government of its obligation to finally redress the scourge of white supremacy in our past—because only in healing those wounds can we build a multiracial, inclusive democracy to lead us into the future. And this moment also offers an opportunity to align with the rest of the world and ratify international human rights treaties here at home. The SPLC and other civil and human rights groups are advocating for a national human rights institution that would be charged with making sure that we live up to our principles within our own borders. ●

**Margaret Huang** (she/her) is the president and chief executive officer of the Southern Poverty Law Center and the SPLC Action Fund.





Cover Story

# Paving the Way to a Vibrant Multiracial Democracy

Learning for Justice interview with **Angela Glover Blackwell**

Civics education that tells an honest story about race in our nation is essential for a strong, inclusive democracy.

Photography by **Jungho Kim**

**Angela Glover Blackwell**, founder in residence at PolicyLink, an organization advocating for racial and economic equity, is a national policy expert, author and leader in the movement for equity in the United States. She has written many books and articles, including “The Curb-Cut Effect,” which highlights the ways in which targeting the needs of those who are most in need generally improves the circumstances of the entire society.

In her latest article, “How We Achieve a Multiracial Democracy,” published in the Spring 2023 issue of *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, Blackwell contends that understanding the racial history of the United States is essential for our democratic future. She illustrates that “diverse coalitions and movements are demonstrating the power of solidarity and exposing the lie that talking honestly about race divides us. Talking about race is in fact the only way democracy can succeed in a multiracial society. And if activists and organizations are successful, building and sustaining a vibrant multiracial democracy will be the next great U.S. innovation.”

Blackwell recently took time to share with Learning for Justice her thoughts on the significance of civics education in the story of our nation and creating a more inclusive democracy.

**In your article, you note that as the multiracial majority becomes a potent force for political engagement and transformative change, it’s no surprise to see efforts to prevent teaching children about the nation’s racial history, “because what is more threatening to authoritarian leaders than an educated, informed citizenry?” How do you**

**see the role of civics education in a strong multiracial democracy? And how can a historical framework that centers on race be applied in inclusive civics education?**

Civics education and literacy are critical. Teaching and learning about race, racialized power dynamics, the freedom struggles of our ancestors, and multiracial organizing and citizen engagement are essential if democracy is to succeed in our multiracial society. The nation—the world—has never had a flourishing democracy within the context of profound difference. Yet a multiracial democracy is the only kind of democracy that will succeed in the United States.

I believe understanding how race and racism shaped the nation is the foundation of civics literacy. A history that honestly addresses race and racism in the United States is essential because it is a whole history that allows us to identify the root causes of enduring structural challenges *and* to develop effective, equitable solutions. It reminds us that history is alive and a powerful force in our everyday experiences.

A whole history must include three key components. First, it must show

the origins of today’s seemingly intractable racial inequalities. Second, it has to explain how government policies and practices—at all levels—have baked racial inequity into institutions and systems, perpetuating the racial hierarchies that were created at the country’s founding. And third, it must unpack the complicated legacy of massive government investments in white communities—for example, federally backed home loans. Such investments exacerbated racial disparities, but they provide a blueprint for expanding and sustaining shared prosperity for everyone.

A whole history of the U.S. begins with the genocide of Indigenous people—the theft of land, forced removals, and ongoing attempts at cultural erasure and extinction. These actions created the contours of a hierarchy of human value and race-based structural violence. They were the first, vicious expressions of the nation’s foundational belief in white supremacy. Anti-Black racism was central to translating that belief into protocols of oppression, a combination of economic, legal, social, and psychological structures and practices used initially to enslave and dehumanize Black people—and justifying doing so!

These protocols have become so deeply embedded in our institutions and systems they now harm and marginalize people of all races. As a framework, the protocols of oppression do not ignore or minimize the histories or suffering of those who are neither Black nor white. Rather, they illuminate the interconnectedness of bigotry, structural violence, and devastating policy neglect, and they expose the biases at the root of oppression.

**Can you give an example of how these protocols play out?**

Unfortunately, there are many. Consider the nation’s response to the crack cocaine epidemic as it swept Black communities in the 1990s. If we’d treated it as a public health problem and invested in social support instead of criminalizing addiction, building more prisons and filling them with Black people, we would have been better prepared to address the opioid crisis before it ravaged low-income communities throughout the country. Similarly, the U.S. would not have had the highest COVID-19 death rate of any rich nation if we hadn’t neglected the health and health care of Black communities and starved public health systems of investment.

**In addition to the crucial aspects of voting and the election process, what important elements of democracy would you like to see lifted up in the conversation about civics literacy?**

First and foremost, we cannot have a healthy, functioning democracy without a just economy. A significant lesson we all took away from the COVID-19 pandemic was that the economy is only as strong as the people. Our economy is not only about businesses and jobs; it depends heavily on the health and well-being of people, their neighborhoods, and the planet. Democracy and our economy are inextricably linked.



In the same way that a thriving democracy has clear paths and processes that allow everyday people to have a say in how things are done and is responsive and accountable to their needs, a just economy is one that has clear systems and structures that work to create opportunities for mobility, prosperity, and economic dignity for everyone.

I love the framework I learned from my longtime friend and colleague, Manuel Pastor. In the book he co-authored with Chris Benner, *Solidarity Economics*, he makes clear that it’s not “the economy;” it’s “our economy.” And that’s because we created it. Our economy is not a set of rules handed to us by God or guided by the laws of nature. Our economy is the result of systems and structures people built and enacted, so it is something we can change. We can build new economic systems and structures that work for everyone, not just a few.

People are central to our democracy and our economy. Inclusive civics education can show us we have agency

“Democracy is about shared responsibilities and processes for working together, as equals, to have a meaningful say in our lives and our communities. Young people get this and they’re acting on it.”

**Angela Glover Blackwell**

and teach us how to exercise our power to build a fair, just society for all.

**Young people are living in a rapidly changing reality—shifting demographics; work transformed by the pandemic and the gig economy; skyrocketing costs for education and housing. And all of it within the context of climate change. What do inclusive civics education and literacy programs need to do to meet young people where they are today?**

A wonderful thing we are seeing with this younger generation is a shift towards organizing and action, in big ways. And democracy is rooted in organizing and action. Democracy is about shared responsibilities and processes for working together, as equals, to have a meaningful say in our lives and our communities. Young people get this and they're acting on it. They know what is at stake better than most of us. It's their future.

I want to emphasize that when the activists and organizers from the multiracial majority of young people today work hard for what they need, they are also working on what the nation needs. Since 2013, the majority of babies born in the United States have been babies of color, which means the majority of kids in schools today, particularly public schools, are kids of color. By 2031, the majority of the young workers will be of color.

The fate of the nation is dependent upon the very people who are being left behind, and who are now fighting to make sure the future isn't sacrificed to maintain systems that aren't working for any of us. When young people today advocate for what they need to be successful, they are advancing what the country needs to become more plentiful and prosperous for everyone— things like universal health care; tuition-free public universities; high-quality, affordable housing; and generational

**“The fate of the nation is dependent upon the very people who are being left behind, and who are now fighting to make sure the future isn't sacrificed to maintain systems that aren't working for any of us.”**

**Angela Glover Blackwell**

investments in climate resilience. So we need to listen.

Civics education and literacy programs can support young people by nurturing their spirit of collective action and giving them the technical knowledge to make real changes in their lives. Young people see value in the practices of activism to make systemic changes, and those practices are essential to a thriving multiracial democracy. As an example of how civics education can support young people, I want to spotlight the work of Elizabeth Clay Roy and Generation Citizen, the organization she leads. Through a project-based curriculum that supports students as they engage directly in their communities on ideas they care about, young people learn about democracy.

The work of collective decision-making that is at the heart of democracy is difficult. Doing that work in the context of the profound differences that exist in the United States is even harder, but young people are already there. The more young people—and all of us—build the muscle of democratic engagement across differences, the stronger and better our whole system will become.

**You have talked about emerging leaders, particularly from communities of color, who have moved from demanding equal**

**rights to taking ownership over systems and creating new democratic structures that serve everyone. How can civics education incorporate this work and philosophy into programs?**

I am so inspired by the leadership I see in the movement for equity today. There is a rich analysis of power combined with a deep generosity in their commitment to collective well-being. The people of color who are leading this are leading for all because they understand firsthand that if we don't include everyone in the definition of all, it's people of color—along with those experiencing poverty, immigrants, transgender individuals and people with disabilities—who will be left behind. When you have that understanding, the vision of the future you create is one where everyone has the opportunity to participate, prosper and reach their full potential.

Civics education programs can step in and support this in many ways. I want to talk about two. The first is by embracing the vision of a true multiracial democracy. Today's equity champions know that the founders of American democracy never meant to include people like them in their visions of representative governance. However, they know that American institutions and our fundamental liberties are strongest when democracy grows and stretches to include



Angela Glover Blackwell, PolicyLink founder in residence, gives a presentation at the White House Summit on the United State of Women in June 2016.

everyone. When all people are served and protected by American democracy and its governmental institutions, they also have a clear stake in protecting those institutions.

Today’s leaders have held fast to the vision of a government of the people, by the people, and for the people—all *people*. They know that when all people truly have a voice and the opportunity to participate, the government can produce extraordinarily equitable results. Inclusive civics education has the opportunity to help students and ordinary people develop a vision for a thriving multiracial democracy so they can engage in the ongoing work of collective self-governance to improve the world around them.

Second, the equity leaders of today are building massive, global coalitions for collective and planetary thriving using transformative solidarity. Transformative solidarity is not based

on shared issues or even shared experiences; it’s based on the shared principles of human dignity and a belief not just in a right to exist but to thrive. A radically inclusive, thriving multiracial democracy will only be sustained if we begin to interact with each other in different ways.

Transformative solidarity provides a blueprint for how we can work together, across the issues that are so important to our lives and our collective well-being, to create a just society for everyone. By helping a new generation come together across our shared goals and shared humanity, inclusive civics education is able to empower millions of people to see and seize their power, which is essential for achieving a radically inclusive, thriving multiracial democracy and a just economy. ●

**Angela Glover Blackwell** (she/her) is the founder of PolicyLink and author of numerous publications, including “The Curb-Cut Effect.”



## Additional Resources

**PolicyLink**  
[policylink.org](http://policylink.org)

**Radical Imagination podcast**  
[radicalimagination.us](http://radicalimagination.us)

**“How We Achieve a Multiracial Democracy” by Angela Glover Blackwell**  
*Stanford Social Innovation Review*  
[ssir.org](http://ssir.org)

**“The Curb-Cut Effect” by Angela Glover Blackwell**  
*Stanford Social Innovation Review*  
[ssir.org](http://ssir.org)



# A Call for Anti-Bias Education

To develop the next generation of civic leaders, educate children early and in age-appropriate ways about their identities and key concepts about race.

By **Erica Licht** and **Khalil Gibran Muhammad, Ph.D.**

Illustrations by **Eleanor Davis**

**Anti-bias education** is crucial for children of all ages. Identity-based biases lead to everyday forms of peer-to-peer harm. Sometimes the harm is verbal, sometimes physical, but always it is just the beginning for the ways young people practice how bias works in the real world. We need to help them understand that bias is a product of history, the legacies and ongoing ways that power shapes identities—who counts and who doesn't.

And this isn't just a problem in pre-K-12 education; anti-bias understanding is essential for the health of a fair and functioning multiracial democracy.

## **Understanding History to Build an Equitable Future**

Even at the elite graduate school where we work—the Harvard Kennedy School—situated in some of the oldest

buildings of private learning in the country, most of the students who walk through our doors do not know crucial facets of American history. Their working knowledge of the vast contributions of Black people, Indigenous communities and people of color to the United States is limited or even nominal. For international students, and in the countries they call home, marginalized racial and ethnic groups remain elusive as anecdotes in history books and as footnotes in national narratives about how countries came to be. Our U.S. pre-K-12 education system has failed to engage critically with these truths in its curricular aims to educate our youngest learners, the future adult citizens of our nation and the world.

The Southern Poverty Law Center's Learning for Justice program has documented what histories do or don't get

taught to students of all ages, and the reports on *Teaching Hard History* and *Teaching the Movement* show how poorly the civil rights movement is taught in most states. A more recent survey of how well social studies teachers engage with the history of U.S. slavery found abysmal results across a range of key concepts. Among the most disturbing was that only 8% of students could identify slavery as the central cause of the Civil War.

In the 2017 study “The Status of Black History in U.S. Schools and Society,” professor of social studies education LaGarrett J. King indicated this issue is pervasive among students in the U.S. And that finding is supported by Oberg Research, an independent research organization, which in 2015 found only one to two lessons or 8-9% of total class time is devoted to Black history in U.S. history classrooms. The average student graduating college cannot explain the Reconstruction era nor place the American Civil War in the correct 20-year time frame.

As a country, we need to make the critical connection between the lack of teaching Black and marginalized groups’ histories and the lack of understanding of these histories and their significance for racial identity. And we must recognize the potential outcomes of teaching those histories, especially in producing children and adults who are more racially aware and informed, behave in more equitable ways, and are better future civic leaders and decision-makers.

### **The Need for a Complete and Honest Education**

For most students in pre-K-12 public education, if they are taught Black history, it is as an add-on, not integrally woven into the core curriculum. As journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones, creator of the 1619 Project, notes, “Slavery touches almost every aspect of modern American life, yet it’s been an asterisk to the American story.” When it is taught, Black people are often presented as willing “immigrants,” rather than survivors of a global, racist, capitalist project of dehumanization. As educational studies professor Jeffrey Aaron Snyder indicates, not only is Black history ignored, willfully obscured or whitewashed, it is also taught as not relevant and not important for attaining a complete education.

A complete education is an honest education. Honesty requires people in the U.S.—especially adults and parents, who make up the decision-making bodies of our educational and political institutions—to commit to changing the ways

historical narratives are taught and imbued. But the numbers indicate many adults are unsure there is even a problem.

When asked if racism is a problem in the U.S. today, 28% of American adults said it is minor, while 14% indicated they think it is not a problem at all, according to a 2022 CBS News poll. For white adults, 32% said it is a minor problem and 16% not a problem. Yet when all adults were asked how much Black history schools teach in the U.S., 11% responded “too much,” 24% said “the right amount,” and 23% were “unsure.” People in the U.S. are at a crossroads of cognitive dissonance when it comes to reconciling the racial disparities and inequities that exist today with our country’s racist history and the continued lack of truth-telling, particularly in education.

Yet how can they reconcile this if they too did not learn Black history as children? How do we interrupt these patterns? The answer: We start early.

### **Educating Young Children About Race and History in Age-Appropriate Ways**

Developing the next generation of civic leaders means educating them from early childhood, in age-appropriate ways, about their identities and key concepts about race.

The research is clear: Talking about race makes young people more prepared to address racial biases rather than more likely to perpetuate them. Researchers have documented that children are as young as 3 months old when they start noticing differences in skin color, and by 3 years old, they express explicit racial biases. By age 4 or 5, white children are more likely to choose other white children as friends.

Talking to young children about skin color normalizes differences and teaches children appreciation for and awareness of racial diversity. Furthermore, talking to children in age-appropriate ways about visual differences they already notice helps to normalize these discussions. This approach disproves the discourse that talking about race makes children *more* racist or that it is better to maintain racial “colorblindness.” And the same is true for other identity differences, including sexuality, gender, ability and religion.

“Anti-bias education is not just doing occasional activities about diversity and fairness topics (although that may be how new anti-bias educators begin),” write education specialists Louise Derman-



“So while [children] may learn the social norms that it’s inappropriate to talk about race, it is unlikely that they have stopped thinking about it.”

Margaret A. Hagerman

Sparks and Julie Olsen Edwards, regarding early childhood educators. “To be effective, anti-bias education works as an underpinning perspective, which permeates everything that happens in an early childhood program—including your interactions with children, families and coworkers—and shapes how you put curriculum together each day.”

Racial socialization exists in the classroom, as well as through the myriad forms of social messaging and cultural expression in the U.S., and goes beyond the family unit, from media to products and toys and day-to-day interactions with communities and social institutions. Also, children quickly learn from observing how racial, ethnic and nationality differences map on to social status—who works for whom, who takes orders and who follows them. Children are not racially “colorblind.” No one is.

As Margaret A. Hagerman, sociologist and author of *White Kids: Growing Up With Privilege in a Racially Divided America*, contends, “So while [children] may learn the social norms that it’s inappropriate to talk about race, it is unlikely that they have stopped thinking about it.” In U.S. society, children have been conditioned to see whiteness as the norm and a universal signifier of beauty. In children’s books, they are socialized to see white people with agency, as heroes of the story, whose lives matter. But Black, Indigenous and other children of color are too often missing from these stories, or are marginal characters, or are, at worst, the villains. The consequences have long been known, going back to the groundbreaking work of social psychologists Kenneth and Mamie Clark with their doll studies in the 1940s.

More recently, researchers have documented the ways in which both Black and white children aged 3 to 6 make choices in favor of whiteness. A false sense of superiority on one hand, and a feeling of

inferiority on the other, is the consequence of learned behavior and repeated experiences.

The connection between learning about racial identity and promoting greater racial equity also exists for educators. Research shows that using race-specific language enables teachers to better identify and address racist dynamics related to school procedures, including discipline, compared to exchanges using race-evasive language. Additionally, school leaders who regularly use race-specific language as a part of their professional practice develop teams who are better equipped to address organizational disparities related to race and racism in schools as compared to those who do not.

Effectively teaching children to be critical thinkers and educated, engaged citizens requires active involvement of all educational stakeholders. In addition to teachers, this includes parents, school district leaders, school boards, educator-training institutions and community advocates. What we are missing is not the research on the effectiveness of critical race education—it’s the sustained implementation of successful examples of these efforts.

### **Teaching Critical Historical Truths Benefits Society**

In seeking a link between teaching about uncomfortable but critical realities and positive effects on society, we need not look far. Sexual education—or “sex ed” as it’s come to be known in the U.S.—is a prime example of developing a curriculum around sensitive content that crucially supports children in positive, healthy identity-development with profound consequences for the public health of young people. In the United States today, 90% of parents support sex ed for high schoolers, and 75% for middle schoolers.

In a 2009 interview with *Newsweek*, professor of sociology Janice M. Irvine noted the paradox



that sex ed addresses: “We have this massive sexualization of the media (just think of the movie *American Pie*), but we’re not allowed to talk about masturbation with teenagers.” Again, the research indicates the positive benefits of confronting uncomfortable truths: Teaching sexual health creates more body positivity and informed sexual decision-making, rather than the opposite. Sex ed teaches children not only to respect their own bodies but also the bodies of their peers in ways that diminish the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy and bias against gender-nonconforming youth.

Sex education, like anti-bias education, is literally a matter of life or death.

An honest education is the minimum we should strive for as educators, one that is rigorous, too, and demands the historical truth-telling of Black history, Indigenous history, and the history of Asian Americans, Latinx Americans, Middle Eastern Americans and other marginalized groups. An honest education centers these histories and makes them integral to the core concepts of learning. At best, this education becomes a foundational component of critical thinking—not only teaching these histories but also asking students to consider and understand ideas such as: What does this mean for me and for my friends? What is my responsibility for ensuring I do no harm, consider the well-being of others and promote equity and democratic values?

Children will learn and transmit messages about race even if the adults in their lives remain silent. Hagerman notes: “My own research suggests that kids are talking about race, racism, and controversial current events with each other, whether their parents and teachers know it or not. Adults and educators must therefore provide young people with not only the necessary tools to help them understand race and racism but also the opportunity to be heard.” Moreover, the severity of racial segregation means that children of different racial identities grow up remote from one another. However, the intergroup contact produced by more racially integrated environments in which children learn and live has been demonstrated to reduce intergroup prejudice.

**Building a Healthy Multiracial Democracy**  
Reckoning with truths about the United States is hard, but it is the only way to build a true multiracial democracy with leaders equipped to meet the demands of designing new societal

structures and systems that promote fairness, equity and justice.

This work is needed now more than ever, as the baseline of these practices of educational equity is under attack. From 2021-22, in every state except Delaware, U.S. government officials introduced at least one anti-“critical race theory” measure, including bills, resolutions, executive directives, legislation, regulations and statements. Even where there are no statewide bans, restrictive measures are being enacted by local school boards. And at the national level, in June 2023, the Supreme Court struck down the strongest piece of federal policy linked to better equity in higher education: affirmative action.

In April 2023, the governor of Alabama fired Barbara Cooper, head of the Alabama Department of Early Childhood Education, for promoting *Developmentally Appropriate Practice*, a training manual for early childhood educators written by the nationally recognized National Association for the Education of Young Children. This was not a children’s book, nor part of the curriculum, yet the governor condemned its material as teaching “woke concepts” because of language about inclusion and structural racism.

These recent policy moves and political attacks undermine a healthy and functioning democracy and instill a climate of fear. Additionally, teachers, librarians and many university faculty members are forced to censor themselves and the materials they make available to students. If they choose to even mention structural racism, gender discrimination or sexuality, the action can cost them their job.

To break the historical cycle of oppression and to build a stronger and healthier multiracial democracy, all of us must embrace and affirm teaching that the struggle against racism and all forms of identity-based biases is foundational to the nation’s history and the expansion of freedom for all.

As developmental psychologist Sandra Waxman contends, “By arming parents, educators, service providers, and policymakers with scientifically grounded evidence about how bias develops, we support their positions as agents of change.” ●

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# Exclusion Is Unconstitutional

Acts of censorship in education perpetuated by a small group with concentrated power go against the principles outlined in the United States Constitution.

By **Khiara M. Bridges, Ph.D., J.D.**  
 Illustrations by **Ojima Abalaka**

**In states across** the nation, school librarians are being forced to remove books like Toni Morrison’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Beloved* and George M. Johnson’s critically acclaimed *All Boys Aren’t Blue* from their bookshelves. Teachers are facing discipline and the loss of their jobs and licenses if they provide students with instruction on certain prohibited concepts like “structural racism” or “gender identity.” School districts are forcing schools to cancel events that aim to provide resources—and hope—to LGBTQ+ students.

Most of these acts of censorship and silencing are being committed under the disingenuous banner of “parents’ rights.” The politicians who are proposing and passing these laws argue that these measures, which prohibit teachers from providing students with an education that is responsive to the experiences and needs of racial and sexual minorities, reflect parental desires for their children’s education. Indeed, the official title of Florida Gov. Ron DeSantis’ “Don’t Say Gay” law, which forbids instruction on sexual orientation and gender identity in K-12 schools, is the *Parental Rights in Education Act* (emphasis added). DeSantis and like-minded supporters of these laws argue that the rights of parents to direct their children’s educations and to raise their children as they see fit are being violated by curricula that present racism and racial disadvantage as historical and ongoing features of American life and that propose that the humanity of LGBTQ+ persons ought to be respected. They claim that bans on humanizing instruction about the LGBTQ+ community and “critical race theory”—an academic framework that analyzes the relationship between law and racial inequality—vindicate parents’ rights.

But what about the rights of other parents? There are parents who want their children to learn the

honest history of our nation and to have an educational experience grounded in research-based practices that benefit all children. There are parents who want their children to have an education that fosters democratic principles and responsible citizenship. Is education in a democracy to be determined by the demands of small groups claiming “parents’ rights” above the rights and well-being of *all* children and families?

### **Curricular Censorship Is Undemocratic**

Supporters of censorship targeting topics of race and sexuality would likely argue that the rights of parents who want their children to receive an education informed by racial equity and LGBTQ+ inclusion do not count, as those parents might not comprise the majority in these jurisdictions. These supporters would contend that what the majority in a state or school district says, goes—and, in this case, that means the voices and experiences of people who have been historically marginalized must be silenced. Moreover, the argument goes, democracy requires the desires of the numerical minority to be subordinated to the numerical majority.

There are two things to keep in mind when defenders of recent curricular bans argue that they act in the service of democracy. First, even if democracy requires majority rule, we should be skeptical that these instructional bans represent the will of the political majority in a state or school district. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the U.S. Constitution protects against the infringement of certain rights *regardless of the will of the majority*. This type of educational censorship is a violation of those rights.

To the first point, there are compelling reasons to believe that the will of the majority is not, in fact, being accurately represented

in many jurisdictions. In Florida, for example, we might be incredulous that the state’s “Don’t Say Gay” law and its ban on what conservative political actors and pundits have misrepresented as critical race theory indicate the true desires of the political majority.

In 2018, Florida voters amended the state constitution to restore the voting rights of persons who had been convicted of felonies. Because those who are swept into the nation’s jails and prisons are disproportionately nonwhite and are overwhelmingly poor, the restoration of voting rights to those with felony convictions worked to ensure that people of color and those experiencing poverty would have a say in the laws that govern them. The constitutional amendment meant that Florida law would be more representative of *all people* in the state.

However, shortly after the state constitution was amended, the Republican-dominated state Legislature passed Senate Bill 7066, a law requiring persons with felony convictions to pay off all fines, fees and restitution related to their convictions before they could vote. Because these costs oftentimes amount to a large sum of money, and because most people with felony convictions have low incomes, Senate Bill 7066 disenfranchised many of the very voters who the constitutional amendment had just re-enfranchised. Thus, it is reasonable to doubt that recently passed laws in Florida censoring the curricula taught in K-12 schools represent the desires of a majority of parents in the state. We know that people experiencing poverty who have felony convictions—who are disproportionately people of color—were prohibited from participating in the marginally democratic processes that produced these laws. So, do these laws really represent the will of the political majority in Florida?

# Conversation: Democratic Principles for Civics Education

1. When groups and communities have been made equal citizens under the law, educational institutions must teach their students in a way that is consistent with that equality.
2. A democracy in which large portions of the population are unable to vote is, by definition, not a democracy.
3. The Constitution institutes limits on the will of the political majority when the majority would act in ways that are inconsistent with individuals' fundamental rights or would deny historically marginalized groups equal protection of the law.
4. The 14th Amendment's equal protection clause prohibits political majorities from expunging the experiences of Black people and other people of color from the curricula taught in public schools.
5. The Constitution prohibits political majorities from excluding from the curricula taught in public schools lessons that teach that the humanity of the LGBTQ+ community ought to be respected.

Importantly, Florida is not unique. Since the U.S. Supreme Court's 2013 decision in *Shelby County v. Holder*, which gutted the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Republican-dominated state legislatures have been passing—and the Supreme Court largely has been upholding—laws that endeavor to make it as hard as possible for people of color and others who would support Democratic candidates to vote. These efforts include unnecessarily restrictive voter identification laws, voter roll purges, the narrowing of the window during which new voters can register prior to an election, the closure of polling places in the communities that people of color call home, and constraints on early voting and absentee voting, among others.

In a state that has sought to disenfranchise large portions of its voters, we should not assume that its laws represent the will of the majority of voters. Instead, the elected legislators who pass the laws in these states represent only the will of the majority of people *who were able to cast a vote* in an election—a population that is much narrower than, and skews much whiter and richer than, the state's overall political majority. Therefore, we should be critical of the argument that bans on curricula that include the experiences of historically marginalized groups represent the desires of a majority of parents in a state or school district.

## Fundamental Rights and Responsibilities

Perhaps more importantly, the curricular bans that have proliferated across the nation of late are anti-democratic even if *a majority of parents support them*. The Constitution—the foundational document of American democracy—institutes limits on the will of the political majority. The Bill of Rights—the Constitution's first 10 amendments—identifies certain

fundamental rights that should not be infringed except in the most compelling of circumstances. These rights include the right to practice one's religion, the freedom to speak, and the right to be free from unreasonable searches and seizures, to name just a few. The Supreme Court has interpreted the Constitution as protecting other fundamental rights not explicitly named in the first 10 amendments, like the right to the care, custody, and control of one's children, the right to access contraception, the freedom to have consensual sex with an adult of the same sex, and the right to marry someone of the same sex. The theory behind fundamental rights is that there are aspects of life that are too important to an individual—too central to human dignity—to make the individual's ability to enjoy them contingent on the outcome of an election.

Consider the First Amendment right to practice one's religion. The Constitution's protection of the freedom of religion as a fundamental right is due to the framers' conviction that because the right to practice one's religion is so essential to individuals, no one should be required to convince a majority of voters in their jurisdiction to let them worship according to the tenets of their religion. Even if a political majority does not want a religious minority to practice its faith, the will of that majority does not matter. American democracy protects religious minorities by removing from democratic processes the question of whether they will be able to worship in accordance with their religion.

Crucially, the Constitution also protects people from discrimination under the equal protection clause, which prohibits the subordination of a protected minority—even if a majority desires it.

One can see the argument for why bans on curricula that reflect the experiences of historically marginalized groups are undemocratic *even if they reflect the values of a majority of parents in a jurisdiction*. The 14th Amendment, which contains the equal protection clause, was added to the Constitution in 1868, after the end of the Civil War. The architects and ratifiers of the 14th Amendment expressly intended to bring into the body politic as equals formerly enslaved Black people, who had been considered less than human for the entirety of the nation’s history. The 14th Amendment endeavored to make Black people equal citizens. In this way, the 14th Amendment should be interpreted as prohibiting political majorities from expunging the experiences of Black people (and, by extension, other classes of historically marginalized and disadvantaged people) from the curricula taught in public schools. American democracy protects people of color by removing from democratic processes the question of whether their experiences—with chattel slavery and Jim Crow, with the civil rights movement and the subsequent backlash to the gains achieved, with structural racism and racial privilege—will be taught in K-12 schools.

The same can be said of LGBTQ+ persons. For most of the nation’s history, LGBTQ+ people were subject to criminalization, suppression and erasure. However, in the 1996 case *Romer v. Evans*, the Supreme Court began interpreting the Constitution to protect LGBTQ+ people from certain forms of blatant discrimination. In 2003, the Court decided *Lawrence v. Texas*, in which it continued the trajectory that it began in *Romer* and struck down laws that criminalized same-sex sexual contact. Further, in 2015, the Supreme Court decided *Obergefell v. Hodges*, holding that the Constitution protects the

right to same-sex marriage and that states must allow LGBTQ+ persons to marry the people who they love. Importantly, the decision in *Obergefell* was as much about the injustice involved in treating LGBTQ+ people as second-class citizens as it was about the importance of marriage to individuals. The Supreme Court explained that “[f]or much of the 20th century ... homosexuality was treated as an illness.” However, more recently, “psychiatrists and others [have] recognized that sexual orientation is ... a normal expression of human sexuality.” The Supreme Court stated that an interpretation of the Constitution as recognizing a right to same-sex marriage follows from a recognition of LGBTQ+ persons as enjoying “equal dignity in the eyes of the law.”

If LGBTQ+ people enjoy “equal dignity in the eyes of the law,” there is a strong argument that it is unconstitutional to ban curricula that teach that the humanity of LGBTQ+ persons ought to be respected—curricula that recognize that our country and world are made better when LGBTQ+ people can live their lives free from criminalization, ostracism, stigma and shame. In other words, American democracy protects the LGBTQ+ community by removing from democratic processes the question of whether its experiences will be reflected in the curricula taught in K-12 schools.



### Civics Education in a Democracy

While a civics education should provide instruction on how government works, a civics education in a *democracy*—one that values difference and heterogeneity—must extend beyond this. People must learn that in a democracy, it is wrong to expect that educational institutions will reflect only *certain* experiences, values and beliefs. People must learn that when groups and communities have been made equal citizens under the law, educational institutions must teach their students in a way that is consistent with that equality.

Further, we should clearly understand that the curricular censorship that we are now witnessing is a backlash to the expansion of democracy. Nevertheless, the expansion of our democracy was necessary. Without it, our country would not deserve to be called a democracy. By definition, a country is undemocratic if large swaths of its citizens are unable to participate in society. Instructing children and young adults on the experiences of historically marginalized people may be the only way to ensure the continued citizenship of those who have been only recently included in the phrase “We the People.” ●

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# Building a Just Future

Four transgender high school activists courageously share their stories and explain how educators and allies can help them amid the hostile attacks on their human rights.

By **Dorothee Benz, Ph.D.**

Illustrations by **Peter Gehrman**

**“I came out** as trans when I was 11,” says Dayley. “Even since kindergarten, I kind of knew I was a girl.”

Ajia\* explains her realization over time while living outwardly as a boy: “I don’t think this is who I am supposed to be.” At 13, her self-understanding included her identity as a transgender girl.

Dayley and Ajia are not unusual. Research shows that gender awareness is generally established by age 5 or 6, meaning that most people will have a sense of their gender by that age. And gender identity is usually stable. This is true for both transgender individuals—those whose gender self-understanding is at odds with the gender assigned to them at birth—and cisgender individuals, for whom identity is congruent with gender assigned at birth. Helping young children understand their own experiences of gender can normalize their journey of identity formation and prevent the anguish of feeling they are somehow “wrong.”

“It wasn’t until I understood that being trans was an option for me that I came out and started social transition in fifth grade,” says Dayley. Being able to transition was a huge relief to her. This experience, too, is not unusual. Medical experts warn that withholding gender-affirming care (such as social

transitioning) from minors who need it causes grave harm. Studies also confirm that receiving appropriate gender-affirming care significantly reduces trans youths' mental health risks.

And yet every day, state politicians are restricting appropriate and necessary care for transgender youth. Literally hundreds of anti-trans bills were introduced in the past year at the state level, and dozens have passed. These attacks on trans youth are part of a broader assault on democracy and human rights to ban the teaching of accurate history, censor discussions of racism and force LGBTQ+ people back into the closet. LGBTQ+ people and students of color are in the crosshairs, and for youth of color who are queer, compounded discrimination is particularly intense.

Educators, civil rights advocates and above all young trans people themselves are fighting back. "Queer and trans people around me are so strong and so resilient," says ishani, who identifies as nonbinary. "LGBTQ people of my generation are coming together to fight these anti-trans and anti-queer legislations." They are also defining their identities for themselves and creating safe spaces with and for one another, often in hostile environments.

Educators have an important role in ensuring the safety and well-being of trans and LGBTQ+ young people. Trace Roth, a New York City teacher who also identifies as trans, remembers a teacher who helped them survive. "That's who I want to be for my students," they say. Roth finds hope in "knowing the kids will be that for other people, too."

### Defining Themselves

While LGBTQ+ people and allies have descended on state capitals to protest, young trans people are often confronting their own local anti-trans environments. "I'm from a

**"This is the really difficult moment that we're in, so we're really calling for our school district leaders and school districts to just be bold in how they plan to ensure that every child who steps into a classroom is going to feel safe and affirmed—because that's what's needed to be able to learn."**

Ian Siljestrom

small town [in the Deep South] where everyone knows everyone," says Ajia. "It's pretty hard, honestly; people like me are not accepted." She stopped going to church because it was a hostile space. School is "a mixed bag," with some teachers respecting her pronouns and others bringing their religious judgments into the classroom. Home can also be a challenging place. "One day it's cool, and the next day it's rocky," Ajia says.

Difficult situations are even harder for Ajia because of a lack of resources and role models in rural areas, especially those with high rates of poverty. So Ajia set out to change that. She started a community-based GSA (Gender and Sexuality Alliance) that created a safe space and "a place to be our authentic selves." About a dozen young people are part of the group, which has taken field trips to cities to participate in a Pride march and attend a drag show. It's life-giving "to see there's more people out there that are like us," Ajia says.

Ollie lives in southern Florida and has access to the kind of resources Ajia's small town lacks. They have been active in the regional GLSEN chapter, helping organize the annual youth conference, as well as with the Naples Pride Center, which holds regular youth events. Dayley, too, lives in a place with more support. "I'm in New Jersey, and I definitely think I'm in a lucky position," she says. "I want to use that privilege to do something good."

Dayley, like Ollie, is involved in local LGBTQ+ activism. They both also serve, along with ishani, on the National Student Council of GLSEN, an intergenerational LGBTQ+ organization working to make schools safer for queer and trans students. Ajia, Ollie, Dayley and ishani all understand that they have agency in the world and are using that agency to create better lives for themselves and for other youth.

This generation of LGBTQ+ young people also have a strong sense of agency to define who they are for themselves. Even if external circumstances make it difficult, they know they are the authorities on their lives. One wonderful result is that many young queer people don't let themselves be forced into fixed identity boxes, and they understand that *trans* and *queer* are terms that encompass many lived self-understandings. "I identify as nonbinary, transgender, genderqueer, transmasculine," says Ollie. Dayley and Ajia both identify as transgender girls.

As ishani, who lives in Orange County, California, explains, "The way I understand myself, I don't identify with a specific type of gender. I like to see my gender as very fluid." For young people of ishani's generation, the concept of intersectionality comes naturally. "As an Indian person, I've been going on this journey within myself to find out how my culture intersects with my gender

identity, how it intersects with my queerness,” ishani says.

### How Can Educators Support Trans Students?

Young people experiencing forms of marginalization and discrimination need support. “They need spaces to be themselves,” says Roth, the New York City teacher, “and adults they can trust, not only to talk to but to be role models and show them that *it’s possible to exist* and give them resources.”

Like Roth, Natalie Popadich is a teacher who is also trans, and she, too, has been paying it forward in providing safe space for young people. Both teachers emphasize the need for inclusive curriculum. “There’s so much research about making sure students can see themselves in curriculum,” Roth explains.

“We need to know that we have a history as queer people,” Popadich says, recommending that teachers start with “big names” in their subject areas—like Walt Whitman, James Baldwin, Bessie Smith, Frida Kahlo or Alan Turing. More broadly, Popadich says that it’s part of her district and school diversity, equity and inclusion efforts to make sure that “there’s representation of queer people, Black

**“When you see something happening, say something. Don’t be a bystander. Don’t sit patiently and watch the news and say, ‘Oh, I hope things get better.’ Actually be part of it.”**

Dayley

people, Brown people, people with disabilities, things like that.”

When ishani’s face lights up as they recount learning about hijra people in India—a broad category in South Asia that includes transgender and intersex people—the importance of such inclusive efforts is clear. “It’s affirming to find different ways my culture has historically or culturally had queerness be a part of it for a long time,” they say.

All four of these young people stressed the importance of educators doing “the small things,” as ishani puts it. These include asking students

for their pronouns and displaying safe space stickers or Pride flags. Popadich starts the school year by asking what names and pronouns students use in school and at home. “We don’t want to out anyone,” she says, because “it may not be safe” to be out at home. She also recommends leaving notes for substitute teachers so students whose names and pronouns may differ from the school roster don’t have to correct the substitute. To this list of “subtle but external support,” Dayley adds having topical classroom discussions and “bringing up current events.”

“Make explicit you as a teacher don’t tolerate discrimination from day one,” Ollie says, and recommends letting students know if they ever have an issue “that you are a safe space.”

Ajia puts it even more simply: It’s about “supporting a child and respecting them for who they are.” She also reminds educators that “you never know what someone is going through at home,” so teachers should help students “feel as comfortable as possible, let them know they’re loved, be understanding, don’t be judgmental.”

“Especially now in our current climate, it’s really hard for people to just listen,” says ishani, but sometimes that is exactly what young people need. “There’s times when all you need to do is just take a step back and listen to what we’re saying, because at the end of the day, queer and trans youth know what we’re talking about because we’re living through it.”

### Legal Rights and State Repression

Educators can support LGBTQ+ students by understanding that public school students have certain constitutional rights that school officials cannot violate and state laws cannot override.





“The Supreme Court says students don’t shed their rights when they enter the schoolhouse gate, and that goes to all the constitutional protections, including rights to speech and expression,” says Paul Castillo, senior counsel and students’ rights strategist at Lambda Legal. Those rights include gender expression—so, for instance, while schools can have dress codes, they can’t design them in ways that target students’ identities.

Title IX of the federal Education Amendments of 1972 prohibits discrimination based on sex, and sex discrimination includes discrimination on the basis of gender identity and sexual orientation. This gives LGBTQ+ students “the right, and this is particularly important now, to be free from discrimination and harassment at schools,” says Castillo.

The reality on the ground too often doesn’t match these rights on paper. In a survey by GLSEN, 59% of students reported that their schools have discriminatory policies or practices. And hostile state legislatures across the country are busy passing laws denying transgender students access to appropriate restrooms, among other things—and civil rights organizations are busy challenging them in court. This discrepancy underscores the truth that laws are only ever as effective as their enforcement; educators can be important advocates for the enforcement of these basic rights.

At the state level, it’s important for educators to get as much clarity as possible about what is and isn’t in the various laws and policies restricting students’ rights and limiting what teachers can teach. These laws are “intentionally vague, so that way nobody can discern what conduct is prohibited,” says Castillo. The result is that educators self-censor,

curtailing curricula, modifying anti-harassment policies and even shifting their responses to bullying. The First Amendment and Title IX rights of students aren’t altered by laws like Florida’s “Don’t Say Gay” act, but the chilling effect they have on teachers and others negatively affects LGBTQ+ youths’ learning environment, safety and mental health. Therefore, it is crucial that educators be informed about these laws and know, as much as is actually possible, what their own rights are. Armed with that information, they can better protect both their students and themselves.

“This is the really difficult moment that we’re in,” says Ian Siljeström, director of Equality Florida’s Safe & Healthy Schools Project, “so we’re really calling for our school district leaders and school districts to just be bold in how they plan to ensure that every child who steps into a classroom is going to feel safe and affirmed—because that’s what’s needed to be able to learn.”

### Changing the World

Teachers who in the past were passively supportive of queer and trans students “have been coming to our GSA and basically saying, ‘What can I do to help?’” says Ollie. “There have been multiple teachers who have told us they will do anything for us even if it means risking and losing their jobs.” That people “who don’t have skin in the game” have decided “that this is the time to stand up ... that’s what gives me hope,” Ollie explains.

Dayley’s message to educators is that LGBTQ+ young people need allies. “When you see something happening, say something,” she urges. “Don’t be a bystander. Don’t sit patiently and watch the news and say, ‘Oh, I hope things get better.’ Actually be part of it.”

These young people are definitely being “part of it.” They are exploring

and defining their own identities, building support networks where none existed, actively organizing for change, and using what privilege they have to fight for others as well as themselves.

“Everyone is equal, and I feel like we deserve better than we’re getting,” says Ajia. But even in her own very difficult environment, she asserts, “the world is capable of being changed.”

These kids are joining a long lineage of queer and trans people who have fought for a better world. As Roth reminds us all: “There’s always a history not only of struggle but of perseverance, joy and revolution.”

And as Ajia encourages us: “No matter what the world throws at you, don’t let anyone tell you you can’t be *that girl*.” ●

\*For safety reasons, Ajia’s name has been changed.

**Dorothee Benz, Ph.D.**, (she/her) is a writer, organizer and strategist who has spent decades on the frontlines of social justice struggles in the United States.



## Resources

**Equality Florida’s Safe & Healthy Schools Project**

**GLSEN**

**Lambda Legal**

## Learning for Justice Articles

**“Gender-Affirming Care: What It Is and Why It’s Necessary”**

By Dorothee Benz, Ph.D.

**“A Refuge for LGBTQ+ Young People”**

By Dorothee Benz, Ph.D.

**“Dear Young Person, You Are Valued”**

Q&A with Nikole Parker and Brandon Wolf

**“Inclusive Education Benefits All Children”**

By Melanie Willingham-Jaggers and GLSEN

# Parents and Caregivers for Inclusive Education

Responsible parent and caregiver groups are focusing on children’s right to inclusive and equitable education—in direct opposition to politically motivated “parents’ rights” groups with discriminatory agendas that harm young people.

By **Maya Henson Carey, Ed.D.**  
Illustrations by **Stephanie Singleton**

**Public school students** in the United States today are the most racially diverse in the country’s history. Embracing this diversity can assist us in building a healthy multiracial democracy. In addition, surveys and research have consistently demonstrated that the majority of parents and caregivers in the U.S. support honest education that is inclusive.

A close examination of the current push by lawmakers—especially in legislatures with hard-right affiliations—to censor teaching about race and racism and to attack student-inclusive education reveals a pattern of weaponizing classrooms and curricula to serve an extremist political agenda. In the article “Centering Diverse Parents in the CRT Debate,” Ivory A. Toldson, Ph.D., points out that “some politicians are focusing on ‘parents’ rights’ to disrupt



efforts to create more equitable and inclusive education environments. ... This insidious strategy normalizes prejudiced white parents, casting them against phantom teachers who are ‘indoctrinating their children.’”

An artificial division between parents and educators is being exploited to advance the harmful agendas of political groups attacking inclusive learning in public schools to the detriment of young people’s well-being and education.

Most parents and caregivers—and responsible family and community groups—in the U.S. support education based on credible well-researched pedagogy, want learning that develops young people’s critical thinking, and favor confronting the challenges of inequitable structures so all children can grow and develop as future decision-makers and citizens.

### **The Rise of Anti-Student Inclusion Groups**

The current increase of so-called “parents’ rights” groups rose from resistance to mask and COVID-19 vaccine mandates in schools, when groups of people using disinformation campaigns intensely and vocally opposed policies to protect students and their families from an ongoing pandemic.

Simultaneously, the 2020 murder of George Floyd led to widespread attention on diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), which some parents, politicians and hard-right groups quickly labeled as offensive and taboo topics. Battles against DEI were subsequently expanded to include a hyperfocused lens on critical race theory (CRT), which in these cases referred simply to teaching about Black history and culture (not the complex, university-level academic framework of that name). Eventually, these attacks spread and efforts to suppress members of the LGBTQ+ community

ramped up. In addition to race, gender identity and expression are now hot-button topics in many schools and communities.

In the past few years, a small group of vocal people have formed anti-student inclusion groups across the country to address what they see as “parents’ rights” issues in education: Black history and conversations about race and racism, along with LGBTQ+ acceptance and inclusive curricula and pedagogy. In addition to attacking students—as well as educators and parents and caregivers—based on race and sexual identity, these groups are ultimately attempting to censor, weaken and politicize public education.

Kevin Myles, deputy director of Programs & Strategy for the Southern Poverty Law Center’s Learning for Justice program, points out that the connection between education and democracy reaches back to the Reconstruction era following the Civil War, when Black Codes specified how Black people would be educated and what they could be taught. And similar to the days following the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* Supreme Court ruling in 1954, when preserving the separate and unequal way of life became paramount for some, the descendants of anti-integration groups now seek to continue oppressing students from communities that have been historically excluded from representation. These so-called “parent groups” are not in a battle to protect *all* parents and students as they would have the public believe. Once again, they are striving to protect white, straight, cisgender history and culture.

Another major goal of anti-student inclusion groups is to curtail the education that Black and other students of color need to advocate for themselves and their

communities—Black history, for example. Removing these essential curriculum components and banning books by writers of color limit what young people learn and know about their world.

“If you can change what the next generation learns, you can manipulate the context with which they understand their own conditions,” Myles says. “You can stop the next Black Lives Matter.”

Moms for Liberty leads the pack of anti-student inclusion groups. The group formed in 2021 to protest COVID-19 mask mandates in public schools, and its rhetoric quickly evolved to include anti-LGBTQ+ language, particularly hate-filled speech about gender identity and gender-affirming care. The organization also takes stances against CRT and social emotional learning (SEL) and supports abolishing the U.S. Department of Education. Through their claim of “protecting” children and families, these anti-student inclusion groups produce discriminatory practices that purposely disregard the well-being of young people.

Contrary to their narratives, these vocal so-called “parents’ rights” groups are not and have never been disenfranchised. Parents and caregivers have always had the right to direct their children’s learning according to their own values outside of public schools. They do not and should not, however, have the privilege of using their “feelings of discomfort” and their personal beliefs to censor the education of all students, especially through policies and practices that are discriminatory and cause harm.

Furthermore, in the fight to protect “parental rights,” particularly in schools, those most affected are the students. The inclusion, representation and well-being of all

young people are at risk from recent education censorship driven by the opinions of a few with extremist views.

Since the start of 2023, over 400 anti-LGBTQ+ bills relating to education and health care have been introduced in state legislatures. Those directly subjugated are LGBTQ+ students who must endure hateful rhetoric and narratives and are deprived of needed school resources like safe zones and counselors. Similarly, thanks to the urging of the same vocal discriminatory groups, the number of local, state and federal bills introduced to ban CRT has reached almost 700 since UCLA School of Law began tracking these bills in 2020. Students have had their history and identities stripped from libraries and classrooms simply because anti-student inclusion groups define these topics as “CRT.” Moreover, students from other historically marginalized groups—like those with disabilities—also suffer greatly from the consequences of attacks on social justice education programs. And for those young people who share intersecting identities targeted by these policies—such as Black and Brown LGBTQ+ students and those with disabilities—these attacks can compound and cause even more devastating harm.

Of the 2,571 instructional and media books challenged in 2022—a 38% increase from 2021—an overwhelming majority were penned by people of color or members of the LGBTQ+ community. This is a movement of targeted censorship that directly disadvantages students from all demographics by depriving them of complete, accurate education that reflects the world and the nation in which they are citizens.

### **Identifying the Real Concerns About Education**

Although anti-student inclusion groups claim to empower parents to defend their parental rights,

they represent neither the rights of all parents and caregivers nor the well-being and educational needs of all students. However, there are organizations and people who are genuinely fighting for the freedom to learn for all students and for the rights of all parents and caregivers.

Organizations like PAVE (Parents Amplifying Voices in Education) and the Baton Rouge Alliance for Students are actually making their actions match their words in working hard to represent their entire communities.

Adonica Pelichet Duggan, who founded the Baton Rouge Alliance for Students in 2021 at the height of COVID-19 and a wave of hostile school board meetings, says the organization tries to drown out the noise from anti-student inclusion groups and focus on the real problems facing parents and young people. “The challenge is that we have a real literacy crisis in our city and also across this country,” Pelichet Duggan says. “And that’s the thing

**Parents and caregivers do not and should not have the privilege of using their “feelings of discomfort” and their personal beliefs to censor the education of all students, especially through policies and practices that are discriminatory and cause harm.**

that we all should be waking up with our hair on fire about.”

Like Pelichet Duggan, Maya Martin Cadogan formed PAVE when she noticed a gap between the real issues that families cared about and the educational policies being enacted that impacted families in predominantly Black areas of Washington, D.C. With the goal of conveying parents and caregivers’ educational concerns to lawmakers and those responsible for creating policies, she has engaged dedicated families to become involved every step of the way, including in writing the business plan, mission and vision statement: “Parents are partners and leaders with schools and policymakers to develop a diversity of safe, nurturing and great schools for every child in every ward and community.”

Sometimes issues identified by parents and caregivers are in direct conflict with rhetoric pushed by anti-student inclusion groups. For example, while certain anti-student inclusion organizations rage about the evils of SEL, Martin Cadogan says that the parents involved with PAVE identified SEL as a focus area in 2018. “Our parents are pushing for SEL and mental health,” she says. “Other groups who are pushing against it are the ones that are getting most of the attention.” Additional needs identified include equitable funding for schools and providing students with access to more books, not fewer.

With its Youth Voice Initiative, the Baton Rouge Alliance for Students has also expanded its attention to student-identified needs. “If you want to know what kids are experiencing, they will tell you exactly what they need, what they see that’s a problem, what they see that’s broken,” Pelichet Duggan says. This effort involves working with the Mayor’s Youth Advisory Council and other community nonprofits to engage over 500 teenagers across the city



through surveys and focus groups. Pelichet Duggan says that the results serve as a call to action “around what young people are telling us that they actually care about. This is their experience with equity across the city. This is their experience with a lack of mental health supports.”

### **Supporting Families and Students**

Learning for Justice is also seeking to empower parents, caregivers and young people with its newly launched advocacy program, currently being piloted in Houma, Louisiana. The four components of the program are designed to inform parents and caregivers of their rights, teach them to advocate for themselves and their children, build capacity in them to seek positions on school boards, and educate their children on how to advocate for issues that they’ve identified.

Kevin Myles, who leads the program, says that when selecting communities, he is looking for those that face challenges but that also have on-the-ground infrastructure already in place, such as networks ready to step in and support parents and students. He says the goal is to

empower parents to take the lead once the groundwork has been laid.

When establishing this program, Myles was careful to consider that the educational issues drawing national attention are not necessarily the priority of local school districts. He invokes psychologist Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory to explain, saying, “In a Maslow sense, there are some immediate needs that parents have to take care of before they can get to stuff like bans and curriculum. And that’s a hard pill to swallow.” Parents in storm-ravaged Houma, for example, identified six priority areas that they would like to see improved, including the actual physical conditions of schools, which are affecting their children’s health. Progress in these priority areas will be used to measure the program’s success in their community.

### **Staying Focused**

In 2022, school board elections garnered increased national attention, with many anti-student inclusion groups, political action committees and elected politicians endorsing candidates to solidify their anti-democratic platforms.

In contrast, PAVE and the Baton Rouge Alliance for Students participated in local elections by encouraging parents to run for formal office to advocate for all students, as well as working to foster diverse, nonpartisan candidates who will serve in the best interest of all students.

Both Pelichet Duggan and Martin Cadogan contend that their main fight is not against individual anti-student inclusion groups but against the spotlight being put on them. Pelichet Duggan says, “The people who are often the loudest voices are not engaged with the needs of what parents and families are facing in our community.”

Parent and caregiver advocacy for equitable and quality education is not a new concept. In an era where anti-student inclusion groups are aiming to erode democracy, public education and civic engagement by restricting what students learn—thus preventing them from acquiring the skills needed for responsible participation in democracy—true parent advocacy groups are keeping their focus on the genuine issues plaguing public education. ●

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## **Resources**

### ***The Year in Hate & Extremism 2022***

By the Southern Poverty Law Center  
[splccenter.org/year-hate-extremism-2022](https://splccenter.org/year-hate-extremism-2022)

### **“Centering Diverse Parents in the CRT Debate”**

By Ivory A. Toldson, Ph.D.  
[learningforjustice.org](https://learningforjustice.org)

### **PAVE—Parents Amplifying Voices in Education**

[dcpave.org](https://dcpave.org)

**Baton Rouge Alliance for Students**  
[bralliance.org](https://bralliance.org)



# Educating for Democracy

Effective civics literacy develops critical thinkers who can connect history and current events to engage in democratic action for building an equitable and just society.

By **Anthony Conwright**

Illustrations by **Nicole Xu**

A **common understanding** of the purpose of civics education is that it should teach students about the mechanics of American democracy, yet only seven states require high school students to complete one year of civics or government studies. While many states require high school students to complete a half-year civics course, 13 states have no civics course requirement at all. The states with no required civics course are as geographically and politically diverse as those with one- or half-year requirements. Research shows a striking lack of knowledge among adults in the United States about the function and purpose of the nation's government and democracy, revealing a significant need for effective civics education.

In March 2021, the U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities released *The Roadmap to Educating for American Democracy*. The road map includes questions such as, “How can we offer an account of U.S. constitutional democracy that is simultaneously honest about the past without falling into cynicism and appreciative of the founding without tipping into adulation?” The framework, designed by more than 300 experts with varying political views, had bipartisan support, yet conservative activists characterized the road map as an attempt to impose both “critical race theory” and “action civics.”

Responding to the 2020 worldwide protests over George Floyd’s murder, Republican politicians have waged a culture war to prevent educators from teaching students about white supremacy’s effects on civic engagement. Since January 2021, 44 states have introduced bills or taken action to restrict teaching about honest history and racism in the U.S. through attacks aimed at critical race theory (CRT), which is often misrepresented. CRT basically examines and critiques American institutions, such as government and legal systems, from a race-based perspective and is most often taught in law school and higher education. According to Robert Kim, a leading expert in education law and policy, “[CRT] also poses key questions, such as: Has the American legal system and traditional civil rights litigation been effective at achieving racial justice? And if not, what should be done about that?”

### **Education Censorship Opposes the Principles of Democracy**

Anti-CRT laws are being passed under the guise of protecting students—white students in particular—from “psychological distress,” which Republican lawmakers are defining as “assigning fault, blame, or bias” to a race or sex “because of their race and sex” or claiming members of that race or sex are “inherently racist”—consciously or unconsciously. This deliberate misrepresentation of CRT attempts to erase history viewed as “uncomfortable” by a small, vocal group of people. Centering that group’s “feelings” restricts all students’ learning and their development of critical thinking around history and issues of racism.

Florida’s Individual Freedom Act, also known as the Stop WOKE Act (WOKE as used here is an acronym for Stop the Wrongs to Our Kids and Employees), forbids schools from teaching any material that could make students feel “guilt, anguish or any form of psychological distress” because of their

“The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals.”

**Martin Luther King Jr.**

race, gender, sex or national origin. The law allows educators to teach “how the individual freedoms of persons have been infringed by slavery, racial oppression, racial segregation, and racial discrimination” and how laws enforced racial discrimination but says nothing about who wrote and implemented those laws or how those laws violate principles of civic engagement. Lessons may also include “how recognition of individual freedoms overturned these unjust laws” but “may not be used to indoctrinate or persuade students to a particular point of view.”

While what anti-CRT legislation *does not* want students to learn is clear—anything abstractly related to race consciousness and the humanity of those previously excluded—these laws offer little guidance on what *should* be taught about civics literacy, leaving educators to wonder how to teach civics classes.

### **The History of Civics Education**

The attempt to codify what students should know about civics dates to 1892, when the National Education Association (NEA) started an initiative to develop the first standardized curriculum. The NEA commissioned a Committee of Ten to recommend a nationwide system of education. The Committee of Ten organized nine “conferences” based on a survey of subjects common in schools, including languages (Latin, Greek, English and other modern languages); mathematics; physical and biological sciences; geography and geology; and history, civil government and political economy. Each conference—made up of 10 white men—met for three days to answer questions to guide the creation of a standardized educational curriculum.

The Conference on History, Civil Government and Political Economy was tasked with structuring what students should learn to be active participants in

society, what history should be taught and what content should be covered in the study of civil government. The conference results have been long-lasting:

“Your Conference would, however, express the belief that the theoretical questions of government, such as the origin and nature of the state, the doctrine of sovereignty, the theory of the separation of powers, etc., are very difficult to teach to children; ... a system of ethics can better be taught by example and by appealing to common sense and to accepted standards of conduct, than by formal lessons. On the other hand, the simple principles underlying the laws which regulate the relations of individuals with the state, may be taught by specific instances and illustration; and the machinery of government, such as systems of voting, may be constantly illustrated by the practice of the communities in which the children live.”

As the conference makes plain, history and civics are distinct but inseparable disciplines, and in the conference’s design of what students should know about history and civics, the former instructs the latter. The committee writes, “To sum up, one object of historical study is the acquirement of useful facts; but the chief object is the training of the judgment, in selecting the grounds of an opinion, in accumulating materials for an opinion, in putting things together, in generalizing upon facts, in estimating character, in applying the lessons of history to current events, and in accustoming children to state their conclusions in their own words.”

Here, the conference outlines what the dynamics between civics, history and ethics could look like. But their ideal operates on the premise that the experience of Black Americans had nothing to offer education. The purveyors of the nation’s first standardized curriculum did not consider the horrors of enslavement in America or the failures of Reconstruction as worthy of study. This exclusion is not surprising given the members of the conference, which included a professor of jurisprudence and political economy at Princeton: future U.S. President Woodrow Wilson. Wilson’s belief that Black people were an “inferior” race was underscored in the conference’s proposals. His racist interpretation of history is imprinted on the development of the U.S. social studies curriculum and has yet to be scoured.

James W. Loewen, historian and author of the 1995 book *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, chronicled textbooks that insulated Wilson’s reputation from his racist



“The way to get students to learn about the power of government and civics is through issues that affect their own lives.”

Ann Beeson

deeds. He analyzed the absence of Wilson’s racist and imperialist views in textbooks. For example, textbooks did not mention Wilson’s takeover of Haiti or his extensive record of racism in office. Loewen’s lament about the omission of Wilson’s transgressions resonates today:

“Omitting or absolving Wilson’s racism goes beyond concealing a character blemish. It is overtly racist. No Black person could ever consider Woodrow Wilson a hero. Textbooks that present him as a hero are written from a white perspective. The cover-up denies all students the chance to learn something important about the interrelationship between the leader and the led.”

While schools might not explicitly avow Wilson’s sympathy for the KKK or espouse blatant anti-Black views, the exclusion of white America’s tireless incitement of Black suffering throughout history tacitly endorses Wilson’s anti-Black notions. This negation directly conflicts with the Committee of Ten’s ideals of teaching civics and history.

Still, the conference’s original formulation of teaching civics and history can instruct us on how to succeed where the committee failed: Civics education must connect history with present experiences to help students develop their ability to





critically analyze the ethics of political institutions at the local, state and national levels.

### Teaching Responsible Civics in U.S. Schools

Generation Citizen, a national, nonpartisan civics education organization, advances a student-led form of civics education known as community-based action civics. “The work is making sure that the connection between culturally relevant education in the classroom and the importance of that being a catalyst for racial equity and cross-generational collaboration in our democracy is fully connected,” says Andrew Wilkes, chief policy and advocacy officer for Generation Citizen.

Generation Citizen works with educators to deliver interactive, hands-on civics lessons and collaborates with school districts to adopt progressive civics teaching practices—instruction that goes beyond traditional document analysis or learning how a bill becomes law. For example, Generation Citizen helped San Francisco students create a three-bin classroom waste system and meet with the office of the Board of Supervisors to plan waste drop-off days and a beautification event. “It’s important to make sure that student access to action civics education is maximized across the board,” Wilkes says. “We see that as a key step towards fulfilling our mission of young people being equipped and empowered to exercise their civic voice, beginning in adolescence.”

The essential task in responsible action civics education is guiding students to develop questions about their surroundings and lived experience. Ann Beeson, the Southern Poverty Law Center’s chief program officer, says this means asking young people, “How do you define community?” Beeson—formerly a senior fellow at the Annette Strauss Institute for Civic Life, an institute at the University of Texas at Austin that prepares students to make “constructive and impactful civic contributions”—says the process of inspiring civic engagement in students starts with inquiry. “When you ask, ‘How do you feel about your community? What about your neighbors, how are they doing? What are the issues where you live?’ students are going to talk about all sorts of things,” Beeson says. “They are going to talk about challenges with public transportation, their parents work three jobs.”

In one civics project, students at a majority-Latine/x school in San Antonio noted bad food in the lunchroom and began investigating their access to quality food by asking, “Why is the food so bad in our school?” The inquiry led students to make

connections between food and government policy. “They discovered that there was a serious inequity between their public school budget and the budget of the white kids’ school across town,” Beeson says. “They started learning about other food equity issues as a result.”

Bills like the Stop WOKE Act are purposely abstract, thus increasing fear and uncertainty among teachers so they cower away from teaching the history of racism in the U.S. The laws are constructed in the passive voice to condition students to believe white people were not the primary actors in infringing on the freedoms and civil rights of Black people. If students believe that slavery and segregation were a matter of happenstance, then they have no ethical responsibility to change a society shaped by that history. Separating history from its contributing role in modern ethical dilemmas is an attempt to restrict the questioning of systems of injustice and to limit understanding of civic engagement’s direct connections to activism.

The idea of infusing education with progressive practices is often disingenuously presented as indoctrination. However, in 1893, the Committee of Fifteen, a subcommittee that analyzed the Conference on History, Civil Government and Political Economy, reported the importance of recognizing “the danger of too little stress on the progressive element in the growth of nations and its manifestation in new and better political devices for representing all citizens without weakening the central power.”

“The way to get students to learn about the power of government and civics is through issues that affect their own lives,” Beeson says—a method that stands in opposition to current efforts to hoist a malicious veil over historic inequities. It’s essential for responsible civics education to counter diluted models that do not address racist actions or the activities progressive movements can employ to defeat them.

We must meet the dictum to “prepare students for society” through education that supports building a multiracial, inclusive democracy and society for the betterment of *all* people. As Martin Luther King Jr. wrote in 1947: “The function of education, therefore, is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. But education which stops with efficiency may prove the greatest menace to society. The most dangerous criminal may be the man gifted with reason, but with no morals.” ●

**Anthony Conwright** (he/him) is a journalist and educator based in New York City.

# The Promise of Inclusive Education

Inclusive education builds critical thinking—the intellectual tools for reflection, continuous inquiry, constructive dialogue and the possibility of changing one’s perspective—and is an essential lever for democracy.

By **Gregory M. Anderson, Ph.D.**

Illustration by **Maggie Chiang**

**The ultimate value** of an inclusive education for K-12 students centers on the interdependence of our many different identities, histories, cultures, languages and religions. Indeed, if we take a deep breath and reflect on the composition of our nation, an inescapable fact cuts through the cacophony of noise underscoring debates about diversity and inclusion: We cannot avoid the rapid demographic changes—among and within groups of people—that are redefining our identities.

Consider, for example, this benign analogy: the proliferation of different flavors of ice cream. In any supermarket frozen food aisle, one is immediately accosted by the plethora of choices in the ice cream section. Traditionalists among us might reject any and all newfangled flavors, steadfast in their view of the ice cream universe as only representing a fundamental choice between vanilla and chocolate. Nonetheless, such binary thinking regarding preferences will not change reality. The number of available flavors is indeed multiplying, as more choices beget a greater demand for our individual preferences to be recognized and fulfilled.

Diversity is a catalyst for change—a force that, when coupled with the power of consumption and our specific identities, further affirms our own interests while enhancing the choices available for us to express them. This self-perpetuating momentum highlights the extent to which inclusive education, rather than representing a mandate foisted upon



students and parents, is an inevitable extension of the growing diversity of our society. This realization can serve as a starting point for constructive dialogue about inclusive education's intrinsic value and promise in the 21st century.

In seizing this opportunity for dialogue, however, we can neither disregard nor sugarcoat the

United States' long record of genocide, slavery, disenfranchisement, discrimination and inequality. For those of us whose histories, languages, religions, identities and cultures have been systematically excluded, misrepresented or de-emphasized in school textbooks, there is a deep appreciation for inclusive curricula capable of acknowledging all cultures, histories and lived experiences.

We live in an imperfect—and often hurtful and dangerous—society. Try as some might, we can neither wish away nor totally ignore the persistence of poverty, sexism, ableism, racism, homophobia, xenophobia, violence and police brutality. Expecting schools to shirk the responsibility of acknowledging and supporting students currently living in trauma and alienation is both unrealistic and cruel. Equally important, failing to affirm all students' voices, stories and struggles undermines their rights to learn optimally and betrays the core mission of education in a democracy.

### **Inclusive Education Is Crucial to a Diverse Democracy**

Ironically, the more that people democratically demand their different identities, choices and interests be included and affirmed in schools, the more others, who do not share those identities, choices and interests, feel threatened and potentially excluded. Fueled by political rather than pedagogical agendas, this cyclical phenomenon has generated widespread cognitive dissonance and conspiratorial accusations that previously excluded or marginalized identities are being prioritized via the diversification of K-12 curricula.

Lost among this sea of seemingly intractable disputes is a simple but profound fact: People do not change their minds about how they feel without first changing how they think, how they deliberate and how they process cognitive dissonance when confronted with opposing perspectives. The potential to unlock this sequential code is emblematic of the ultimate promise of inclusive education because its democratic value lies not in affirmation of specific identities over others but rather in the opportunity to learn from, and engage in, productive dialogues about our differences while in school.

Democracy cannot be sustained, let alone flourish, in the 21st century without open and robust spaces for rational discussion and analysis about our different experiences and viewpoints. This is an essential reason why inclusive education is crucial to our basic self-interests and our collective success. Our schools must furnish a diverse platform to teach



all students how to intellectually navigate a world full of profound challenges and an assortment of competing ideas, perspectives, cultures, religions, languages and philosophies.

A truly inclusive education is additive as opposed to reductive. An inclusive curriculum harnesses the power of our differences to test what F. Scott Fitzgerald claimed was a first-rate intelligence in a complex and ever-changing world: the ability to hold two or more opposing viewpoints, perspectives or ideas in the mind simultaneously and remain fully functional.

Inclusive education, if developed comprehensively, strategically and comparatively, can therefore be one of the most important democratic levers in the 21st century.

### **Inclusive Education Fosters Critical Thinking**

Inclusive education provides an adroit pedagogical vehicle for schools to maximize critical thinking opportunities for students. Critical thinking in the context of inclusive education can be defined and broken down in various ways, but for the sake of expediency, let's consider the following elements:

- The application and deconstruction of facts and procedures in the process of problem-solving.
- The capacity to be objective and defer one's own experience when listening to others and analyzing different perspectives or viewpoints.
- The utilization of abstraction and conceptual reasoning as a means to promote a mutually inclusive understanding without the benefit of a shared reference point or common belief system.

These aspects of critical thinking, when consistently reinforced in practice, create opportunities for students to view the world in entirely different ways.

Fostering critical thinking through inclusive education also debunks narrow-minded claims that diversifying the curriculum represents some kind of unilateral imposition of one perspective or identity over others. Instead, pairing critical thinking with inclusive education develops intellectual tools that generate authentic reflection, constant inquiry, and the possibility of changing one's mind or perspective while examining one's own identity.

James Baldwin, reflecting on the relationship between inquiry, identity and education, said: "The purpose of education, finally, is to create in a person

the ability to look at the world for himself, to make his own decisions, to say to himself this is black or this is white, to decide for himself whether there is a God in heaven or not. To ask questions of the universe, and then learn to live with those questions, is the way he achieves his own identity."

What is thus central to the pedagogical relationship between critical thinking and inclusive education is that such an education teaches all students in an increasingly diverse environment the importance of asking questions of the universe and learning to live with those questions—without forfeiting one's own identities or belief systems.

As Baldwin so eloquently reminds us, continuous inquiry and identity formation are not mutually exclusive outcomes, even when the relationship between the two processes generates cognitive dissonance among individuals and between groups of people. Moreover, linking Baldwin's insights on education back to Fitzgerald's insights on true intelligence, critical thinking allows students to transcend either/or solutions and to intellectually remain fully functional when they are confronted with two or more opposing viewpoints, perspectives or ideas at the same time.

The operative phrase to highlight here is remaining "fully functional." We are living in an era of seemingly endless competition for self-affirmation and individual expression that does not easily lend itself to consensus-building across difference. Indeed, a cursory glance at Twitter provides an ugly reminder of the dangers of unbridled individual expression when critical thinking is noticeably absent, and when the primacy of people's feelings and beliefs takes precedence over objective facts, accurate information and balanced perspectives.

### **Focusing on Labels Negates the Diverse Practices and Benefits of Inclusive Education**

In the U.S., it is not uncommon for parents to react poorly to the perception that schools are pushing a particular agenda or mandate regarding what their children must learn or believe about others. This tendency is most often triggered when singular labels applied to complex phenomena capture the public's eye and serve as lightning rods of contestation and controversy. Such is the case in Florida and elsewhere, as the pitched battles over critical race theory and LGBTQ+ rights so painfully illustrate.

Inclusive education is not solely defined by curricular debates or volatile reactions to changing student identities. The diverse field of inclusive education encompasses a wide variety of practices, bolstered by

an array of community, nonprofit and corporate partnerships and programs (both in and outside schools) that are committed to supporting student success. Moreover, the inclusive missions of these organizations, partnerships and programs are not myopically focused on specific students' identities, cultures or histories but instead are better understood as emblematic of place-based strategies designed to serve and support all students who reside within specific catchment areas.

One such place-based organization is Heights, which operates in the city of Philadelphia and offers a glimpse of the power and grace of inclusive education. The school district of Philadelphia is one of the largest public systems in America, serving a predominantly Black and Brown student population in an under-resourced city with one of the worst child poverty rates in the nation. Heights was recently created by merging two nonprofit education organizations that had bravely concluded that working separately to support public school students in Philadelphia was not enough. They recognized their impact could be progressively scaled up and improved by combining forces.

Heights' educational and equity mission is an ambitious one, centered on the long-term goal of making Philadelphia a national model for economic mobility for young people. In what amounts to year zero of the merger, Heights is already serving almost 4,000 students, with the potential to grow these numbers in the next 5 to 10 years. Heights' educational programming spans K-5, middle school, high school and dual enrollment, creating college and career pathways in partnership with 23 public schools. The organization provides scholarships; student stipends; academic, college and career counseling; Out of School Time programs and summer academic support; corporate and industry-specific internships; and 17 college and university partnerships.

The fact that first-generation children of immigrants and Black, Indigenous and other students of color are the primary recipients of these supports is a source of pride and a central aspect of Heights' mission. It is also a fact that the students the organization serves represent the demographics of the city's public schools. In fact, while Heights is working to create pathways that recognize students' individuality and self-worth, it is also committed to making the case that the organization's support will result in positive change and economic opportunity that benefit all Philadelphians.

## Recommended Reading on Inclusive Education Practices, Case Studies and Possibilities

### ***Inclusive Education at the Crossroads: Exploring Effective Special Needs Provision in Global Contexts***

By Philippa Gordon-Gould and Garry Hornby (2023)

### ***About Centering Possibility in Black Education***

By Chezare A. Warren (2021)

### ***Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain: Promoting Authentic Engagement and Rigor Among Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students***

By Zaretta L. Hammond (2014)

### ***Building a People's University in South Africa: Race, Compensatory Education, and the Limits of Democratic Reform***

By Gregory M. Anderson, Ph.D. (2002)

### ***The Chicana/o/x Dream: Hope, Resistance and Educational Success***

By Gilberto Q. Conchas and Nancy Acevedo (2020)

Organizations like Heights demonstrate that inclusive education extends far beyond the labels often used to typecast its purpose and limit a greater awareness and appreciation of its diverse impact. Heights is just one of countless local, regional and national programs and organizations that fall under the broad umbrella of inclusive education while annually serving thousands of students. Such organizations work tirelessly to nurture students' humanity and talents via targeted improvements in both educational and workforce systems—simply because these programs are desperately needed for the betterment of all citizens.

The lesson here is a basic one: The fundamental mission of public schools is to educate all students to the best of their abilities, but educators and school administrators cannot fulfill this crucial mission without our support as public education faces many serious challenges. The good news is that inclusive education provides a pedagogical platform broad enough to address these challenges—if communities and parents across the nation resist falling prey to political agendas that repress the inexorability of diversity and weaponize misunderstanding and fear. ●

**Gregory M. Anderson, Ph.D.**, (he/him) is a professor, education policy leader and former dean at Temple University's College of Education and Human Development.

# Why Civics Needs Social Justice Education

Social justice-oriented civics education is crucial for developing the civic knowledge, skills and dispositions people need to fulfill the potential of a multiracial and inclusive democracy.

By **Lee Anne Bell, Ed.D.**

Illustrations by **Ashley Lukaszewsky**

The Annenberg Public Policy Center's 2022 annual survey that measures civic knowledge found that fewer than half of adults in the United States can name all three branches of government. Only 20% accurately name freedom of the press and only 24% identify religious freedom as protections provided by the First Amendment. Over half *incorrectly* believe that the First Amendment means that Facebook must allow people to freely express themselves on its website.

Also noted is declining participation in places that bring people together to solve common problems—places like community centers, unions, local government, and cultural and religious institutions. Dubbed “civic deserts,” such places provide fewer opportunities for people, especially young people, to engage in civic or political life.





Increasing polarization and a decline in our ability and willingness to actively participate in public life have fueled recent calls for more emphasis on civics education and more opportunities for involvement in civic organizations. The very reason public education was established in the mid-1800s was to prepare citizens to participate in democracy. Without concerted effort, growing disconnection from democratic institutions and norms is likely to widen divisions that now threaten our commitment to democracy.

### **Definitions of Civics Literacy**

As traditionally defined, civics literacy requires cultivation of the knowledge, skills and dispositions essential for participation in democracy.

- *Civic knowledge* entails understanding how our political system works and knowing our political and civic rights and responsibilities—such as the right to vote and run for public office and our responsibility to respect the rights and interests of others.
- *Civic skills* include the ability to analyze and evaluate issues so we can thoughtfully articulate and defend positions on topics that matter to us. Civic skills enable us to participate in public processes such as monitoring government performance and mobilizing with others around issues of collective concern.
- *Civic dispositions*—such as public-spiritedness; critical-mindedness; and the willingness to listen, learn from, negotiate and compromise with others—are the basis for participating respectfully with others as equals.

### **The Purpose of Civics Education**

Civics literacy in practice can develop citizen power to keep government

entities in check, impede attempts to undermine democratic norms and processes, and create avenues for peaceful change. Civics literacy and engagement are the foundation for an effectively functioning democratic society.

While civic knowledge, skills and dispositions are necessary qualities, many argue that they do not go far enough in addressing structural injustices that prevent equal participation. Models of civics education need to consider dissenting voices and forms of resistance, acknowledge entrenched inequalities in society, and commit to addressing injustices. Doing so would better prepare all young people, particularly those from historically marginalized communities, to envision themselves as important political actors with valuable ideas and experiences to contribute.

A central purpose of civics education should be to prepare young people to participate actively and skillfully in our multiracial democracy to address problems and develop solutions together. This would include helping youth consider differentials in the power and ability to participate and challenge inequitable power relations that privilege some while marginalizing others. And civics education would give them the skills to recognize the experiences and perspectives of different groups in our society, understand their historical trajectories in this country, envision ways to live together that do not perpetuate dominance, and promote truly inclusive democratic engagement as essential to solving the problems we face as a society.

### **Social Justice Education and Civics Learning**

The purpose of social justice education—as defined in *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*—is to create a society where everyone



has fair access to the resources and opportunities to develop their full capacities and everyone is welcome to participate democratically with others to mutually shape social policies and institutions that govern civic life.

The process for attaining social justice is necessarily democratic because it is inclusive, respectful of human diversity and affirming of the capacity of people to join with others to create change for our collective well-being.

A social justice approach recognizes and values diversity: differences such as race, ethnic heritage, class, age, gender, sexuality, ability, religion and nationality. Equally important is an understanding of oppression and the multiple levels on which it operates—individual, interpersonal, institutional and societal—and recognition of how power is used to sustain inequalities.

Appreciation for diversity and understanding of oppression can germinate in spaces where people learn about the impact of oppression on various groups in our society, over time and in the present; develop an awareness of our linked fates in the face of daunting ecological, economic and social problems; and experiment with alternative ways to act in and on the world to promote social justice for all.

Accordingly, a social justice-oriented civics education would focus on promoting recognition and respect for different groups' histories and create learning spaces where diverse individuals can express their distinctive identities, experiences and perspectives. It would help young people learn to attend to group dynamics, supporting those whose histories and participation have been limited while encouraging those whose perspectives have been overvalued to share space more equitably.

## Social justice-oriented civics education that values the lives of all young people creates conditions that enable their human capacities to flourish.

Such spaces could enable young people to engage in dialogue in ways that do not diminish the humanity or dignity of anyone. Social justice-focused civic engagement would take as a given that racial and other forms of inequity are inherent obstacles to democracy and recognize that addressing them will ultimately lead to a more equitable society for all.

This is a strong starting point for imagining a social justice-oriented civics education.

*Social justice-oriented civic knowledge:* Historically grounded conversations about current events that highlight the agency and grassroots political action of historically marginalized groups could affirm youth from all social groups, particularly those who are from oppressed communities, and help young people see themselves as actors in history. Instruction in government, history, economics, law and democracy, while an important part of a civics curriculum, needs to explore critical and contested views of history—by, for example, examining flaws in how the Constitution was written and attempts to remedy these over the course of our history as well as learning about groups in every historical era who have challenged the country to live up to its ideals.

The prevailing model of civics education assumes a position of neutrality that tends to privilege the experiences of political actors from dominant groups. Instead, we need to treat the histories and lived experiences of historically marginalized communities as a necessary part of civic knowledge.

*Social justice-oriented civic skills:* A social justice orientation to civics would help young people develop analytic tools to examine issues of power and privilege.

Learning to ask critical questions would crack open the veneer of inequitable arrangements portrayed as unchangeable and help young people discern the powerful interests that lock advantage in place. They can learn to examine questions such as, “Whose interests does an oppressive status quo serve? Who benefits and who pays?” Such questions get at the heart of how unfair advantage entrenches in purportedly neutral systems to congeal into “the way things are.”

*Social justice-oriented civic dispositions:* Civics classes that focus on fostering inclusive, empathetic and equal relationships among students would promote a sense of belonging and safety that enables young people to grapple with oppression, reflect on histories of mistreatment, negotiate differences honestly, and work toward shared understanding and mutual empowerment. This would help young people recognize their agency and define the terms of their own political participation. It could also heighten political empathy across groups, especially among those from advantaged groups.

Social justice-oriented civics education that values the lives of all young people creates conditions that enable their human capacities to flourish. Classroom and community



forums could then become places where young people figure out who they are in relationship to diverse peers and how they fit within and can contribute to a more just society where all can thrive.

### **Social Justice-Oriented Civics Education in Practice**

A social justice-oriented civics curriculum grounded in the lived experiences, identities and histories of young people should help them investigate compelling and meaningful issues in their own lives. Such an approach would go beyond discussion of current events and controversies to surface concerns they and their communities face and avenues to impact the institutions that affect their daily lives. Engaging in creative political and cultural expression, democratic decision-making, and civic action to address relevant issues in their schools, communities and the broader society would develop young people's

civic muscles and could energize ongoing civic participation as a life-long commitment.

Meetings and classes, clubs and organizations, online and face-to-face networks, community action projects, and public protests are all contexts that bring people together to reflect on and identify the causes of the problems they face and generate possibilities for democratic change. Fortunately, examples already exist in storytelling and participatory action research projects that engage youth in identifying and addressing problems in their schools and communities.

Storytelling is one powerful way to engage young people in developing their civic selves. When they get together with peers to study the impact of oppression in their lives through sharing stories, young people begin to create a new consciousness, pride and sense of agency.

Storytelling helps them discover they are not alone in their feelings and experiences, break down barriers and build cross-group understanding, and develop a shared vision, sense of solidarity and collaborative action for change.

In one example from *Empowerment Through Multicultural Education*, girls in an urban elementary school shared experiences of success and failure in academics and sports, discussed how media images affect their sense of what girls and women can be and do, and role-played alternatives that helped them experiment with how to challenge limiting notions. They devised proposals to address the lack of extracurricular opportunities for girls in their community and presented these to their elected representative while on a field trip to the state legislature. Meeting with female legislators from diverse racial groups also excited their imagination for what roles they might play in



the future. One such result occurred when they organized and facilitated a career day for girls in their school that highlighted active roles for women.

Some community groups use storytelling as a participatory research method. Stories help to surface needs and concerns of young people, especially from groups that have been marginalized. Common themes are then used to design proposals and guide projects for change that build on and support youth leadership. For example, a participatory action research project in New York City, Polling for Justice (described in “Accountable to Whom? A Critical Science Counter-Story About a City That Stopped Caring for Its Young” by Madeline Fox and Michelle Fine) engaged predominantly Black and Latinx youth and adult researchers in examining the consequences of urban public policy in their communities, including encounters with the police. They then presented the data to the community at large, providing a counter-story that reimaged how institutions can be accountable to youth and their communities.

Social justice-oriented civics education offers an engaging, creative and powerful way to help young people develop the knowledge, skills and dispositions for active civic engagement. Such an education is essential for fulfilling the potential of a dynamic, diverse, multiracial democracy that can equitably meet the needs of all. ●

**Lee Anne Bell, Ed.D.**, (she/her) is the author of *Storytelling for Social Justice*, co-editor and author of *Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice*, and producer of the documentary film *40 Years Later: Now Can We Talk?*

## Resources for Further Reading

### **Annenberg Civics Knowledge Survey**

#### ***Civic Deserts: America's Civic Health Challenge***

By Matthew N. Atwell, John Bridgeland and Peter Levine

#### ***Teaching for Diversity and Social Justice, Fourth Edition***

Edited by Maurianne Adams, Lee Anne Bell, Diane J. Goodman, Davey Shlasko, Rachel R. Briggs and Romina Pacheco

#### ***Storytelling for Social Justice: Connecting Narrative and the Arts in Antiracist Teaching, Second Edition***

By Lee Anne Bell

#### ***The Storytelling Project Curriculum***

By Lee Anne Bell, Rosemarie A. Roberts, Kayhan Irani and Brett Murphy

#### ***Curriculum for Justice and Harmony: Deliberation, Knowledge, and Action in Social and Civic Education***

By Keith C. Barton and Li-Ching Ho

#### ***Education for Democracy: A Renewed Approach to Civic Inquiries for Social Justice***

By Steven P. Camicia and Ryan Knowles

#### ***Engaging Youth in Leadership for Social and Political Change***

Edited by Michael P. Evans and Kathleen Knight Abowitz

#### **“Accountable to Whom? A Critical Science Counter-Story About a City That Stopped Caring for Its Young”**

By Madeline Fox and Michelle Fine

#### ***The Color of Civics: Civic Education for a Multiracial Democracy***

By Matthew D. Nelsen

#### ***Empowerment Through Multicultural Education***

Edited by Christine E. Sleeter

#### **“The Need for Civic Education in 21st-Century Schools”**

By Rebecca Winthrop

# *Teaching Hard History: American Slavery*

**A comprehensive curriculum framework and resources for teaching this critical topic at all grade levels, helping students understand how slavery influences us in the present day.**

- The K–5 and 6–12 frameworks
- Student Texts Library
- *Teaching Hard History* podcast series
- Key Concept Videos
- Professional Development Webinars

Explore these resources at



**[learningforjustice.org/  
Hard-History-Fall23](https://learningforjustice.org/Hard-History-Fall23)**



# What Is Our Collective Responsibility When We Uncover Honest History?

Local history advocates say preservation, education and healing should include community redevelopment and respecting the agency of descendants of enslaved people.

By **Coshandra Dillard**

Photography by **Dan Anderson**

Since 2019, news reports have focused on the discovery of the *Clotilda*, the last known ship transporting enslaved Africans to the United States. In 2022, Netflix released the documentary *Descendant*, which features divers pulling fragments of the vessel from the Alabama River and explores how descendants living in Africatown—a community founded by some of the people held captive on that ship—engage with this history.

What is profound about the film is that residents ponder what is to be gained from pulling the *Clotilda* from the river and who will benefit from it. After all, they've long known the ship rested beneath the murky waters. For generations, elders in the community had been sharing stories about the people aboard the ship. The *Clotilda*'s rediscovery was confirmation for the rest of the world.

During another poignant moment in *Descendant*, Africatown community activist Anderson Flen visits the Equal Justice Initiative's National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama. He wonders



Joycelyn Davis, a descendant of *Clotilda* survivor Charlie Lewis, aims to strengthen her community and keep the history of Africatown alive.

if such places move people to action. While there, he says, “People come, and they see. Then what do they do? The real test, a lot of times, is not in coming. It’s, ‘What do you do when you leave?’”

That begs the question: What is our responsibility when we uncover history or examine it more closely?

Descendants of enslaved people have some ideas. While every person must decide what their own journey looks like, local history advocates say preserving and correcting history, educating your community about that



history, and finding ways to heal are some first steps.

### Valid Concerns

Africatown, a neighborhood in northern Mobile, Alabama, was formed by some *Clotilda* survivors. Residents today share concerns that the city stands to profit from potential tourism surrounding Africatown and the *Clotilda* story. They fear their stories—and their lives—will be ignored. History has proven their concerns are valid.

Cities across the country receive tourism dollars through museums and tours that tell the stories of enslaved Africans and their descendants. Yet in those cities, laws and attitudes that allowed slavery and segregation continue today, deepening oppressive conditions.

In the mid-20th century, Africatown’s population peaked at 12,000, but since then, policy decisions—like the construction of a highway that cut through the community, a lack of infrastructure investment and Mobile’s rezoning to accommodate chemical industries—have led to a dramatic decline (a fate shared by many other Black neighborhoods in the U.S. targeted by destructive urban planning). Today, only about 2,000 residents remain in Africatown. Some residents have grappled with adverse health outcomes from the toxic effects of paper plants polluting the land and air.

A descendant of Timothy Meaher—who in 1860 illegally smuggled Africans on the *Clotilda* into the U.S.—leased out the land in Africatown to a paper company in 1928. Since then, industries have thrived in Africatown while the people struggled. Thus, a cycle of injustice continues. Enslavement morphed into structural and environmental racism. This is not unique to Africatown.

Around the world—from Haiti to Selma, Alabama—Black people have exemplified resilience, resistance and self-sufficiency. Those communities, steeped in rich history, gave us all a template for liberation and upholding democratic values, models that are undermined or neglected by the broader society. Examining histories in these places helps us draw connections between slavery and the quality of life for descendants of enslaved people.

### Preserving and Sharing a Rich History

Joycelyn Davis, an Africatown resident featured in *Descendant*, considers Anderson Flen’s questions as she spreads the word—now her life’s purpose—about her ancestors’ history. Davis dreams of having sites, tours and events that draw people in, like the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute and Montgomery’s Legacy Museum.

“I can’t turn away from it,” Davis says. “I’m passionate about it because I’m still here. I have traveled the world with the film, and I see things. And it’s honestly most depressing when I get back home to see that we don’t have the things that our neighbor has.”

Davis is a sixth-generation descendant of Charlie Lewis, who helped establish Lewis Quarters, a section of Africatown. Zora Neale Hurston mentions him in *Barracoon: The Story of the Last “Black Cargo.”*

Residents of Africatown, the only U.S. community known to be established by immediate survivors of the Middle Passage, were filled with pride and built a community based upon their African values, cultures and traditions. Their community served as a haven from both white violence and the isolation of Africans born in the U.S. without a strong connection to the African continent.

Davis has lived in the area her entire life, and some of her family members still live in Lewis Quarters. She attends the church her ancestors founded, where a bust of Cudjoe Lewis (whose story is told in Hurston's *Barracoon*) has stood since 1959. Davis' grandmother, born in 1899, could easily trace the family's history. "We've just always been in tune," Davis says.

In Lewis Quarters, community members have hosted festivals where historian Lorna Woods shared the oral history of Africatown. A series of VHS recordings showing Woods sharing the stories was integral to *Descendant's* creation, thanks to the help of co-producer Kern Jackson, Ph.D., a folklorist and professor at the University of South Alabama.

Oral histories have been essential for Black people in the U.S. because their experiences—their contributions to society and even their very existence—were not always included in public records.

### Respecting Oral Traditions and Correcting History

Oral stories drew Phebe A. Hayes, Ph.D., to her work in Iberia Parish, Louisiana. Like Davis, she advocates for young people to learn the story of their families and communities from their elders, especially after Hayes stumbled upon a book at a local library that proved African Americans were deliberately excised from the official history of Iberia Parish. Her research—including some of her own family's stories—was the impetus for founding the Iberia African American Historical Society (IAAHS).

She says oral histories are valuable in guiding research. For instance, the library book Hayes found claimed to celebrate all doctors in her parish throughout history. However, 21 Black physicians were left out, including one who lived about a block from Hayes.

"If it hadn't been for those stories my grandmothers told me, it would not have been immediately apparent to me how wrong that book was in terms of leaving out all these Black doctors," she says.

Hayes learned the story of Dr. Emma Wakefield-Paillet, the first Black woman to get a medical degree from a Louisiana medical school and the first woman of *any* race. She was also the first Black woman to open a medical practice.

"Prior to this, someone else had been getting credit for this honor, so we corrected that history," Hayes says.

Hayes can't keep her discoveries to herself. Through her organization, the IAAHS, she shares findings with the community, holding talks and symposiums with the help of local experts.

"The history we're uncovering is local history that is owned by all of us," Hayes says. "And sometimes it's pretty history, and sometimes it's not so pretty, but at least we're being honest."

The National Trust for Historic Preservation invited the IAAHS for a residency at the visitor's center at the Shadows-on-the-Teche, a plantation home in New Iberia's Main Street District.

Until recently, the stories of that home focused on wealthy white enslavers, not the people enslaved there who made the wealth possible. Visitors now learn about New Iberia's role in the Civil War and how that affected enslaved people and Black soldiers.

"We're [helping] them to reinterpret the history of the Shadows," Hayes says, referring to those once left out of the records. "Just our existence in residency communicates to the public that we are changing."



Phebe A. Hayes, Ph.D., Iberia African American Historical Society (IAAHS)

### Our Shared Responsibility Outside of Schools

Learning and sharing honest history can happen at libraries, museums, historical society events and resource centers.

"Educators can make recommendations all they want," Hayes says. "The politicians will decide what they agree to, just like we see unfolding in some other states. To me, people have a responsibility as citizens to educate themselves, to continue to read."

In Mobile, Davis says she hasn't noticed a negative effect from the nationwide assault on teaching honest history, as the Africatown story is widely shared and included in local school textbooks. She says Black-led organizations are all in a position to fill in the gaps.

"[People] talk about things being whitewashed, but we can create our ways to teach our kids," Davis says.

It's been vital for Davis to engage local children with this history and move them from shame to pride. She recounts not embracing her ancestors' history when she was younger.

“It was taught like, ‘They were captured.’ We didn’t use the word *enslaved*. They were slaves. And then, people teased you if you had African [ancestry] in your family. If you had white people in your family, if you had Indian in your family, you felt some kind of sense of pride. How do we give our kids that sense of pride of what they did when they got here?”

Davis says she notices depression and low self-esteem in her community’s young people. She says it’s imperative for them to know they come from people who resisted and were resilient and proud.

### **Acknowledgment and Education**

People cannot heal if they don’t know what wounded them. And communities cannot reconcile if people don’t know their shared history. Acknowledgment and education are prerequisites to healing and reconciliation.

Jo Banner—who, with her twin sister, Joy Banner, Ph.D., operates the Descendants Project—works to reject the “narrative violence of plantation tourism” in Louisiana’s River Parishes by uplifting the stories of enslaved people and their descendants.

Headquarters for the Descendants Project is in an 1806 plantation home, but the sisters didn’t know the property’s history at the time of purchase. They also later learned that their ancestors were connected to that and other homes in the parish. The Banners say healing can happen in the very place where the injury occurred. The home today serves as a resource center for descendants of enslaved people.

“You can always use it for good, and you can add on to the history,” Banner says. “What we wanted to make sure is that we can use it to heal the community.”

From that home, they support the community’s well-being and aim to protect the environment, keeping large chemical plants from buying and polluting the land. Just like in Africatown, the region’s residents have experienced adverse health outcomes due to powerful industries—so much so, it’s referred to as “Cancer Alley.”

Banner, who’d represented plantation homes when she worked in tourism, saw history presented in ways that did not respect the humanity of enslaved people. Connecting with that history changed her work *and* her life.

“When I went to a plantation and I saw my ancestor’s name on the wall at a memorial, and his slave papers as part of the museum on display, that changed me,” Banner says. “I started to rebel in a good way.”

Banner bucked the old plantation tourism system, ultimately losing her job. Her insistence on the truth later birthed the Descendants Project in 2019. She has spoken at the United Nations about environmental injustice, and she challenges companies and organizations to prevent further harm to the land.

“I give testimony from the fence line and speak the truth, and I’ve done this in front of companies that I know their bottom dollar relies on the plastics and other stuff that’s poisoning us,” Banner says.

For healing, Banner also stresses the need for Black people to take control of their narratives and unapologetically be themselves.

“I think healing for us is really getting to a state where we were allowed to exist without us having to validate our existence,” she says. “We need the freedom to exist the way we want.”

### **In the Spirit of Sankofa**

On July 8, 2023, *Clotilda* survivors’ descendants honored their ancestors in ceremonies prior to the opening of Africatown’s Heritage House, a museum focusing on the people aboard the *Clotilda*. The official opening, on July 9, marked the day the ship landed on the Alabama shore. Curating the stories and educating the community are vital. Still, Davis contends that a greater priority is to redevelop their community. She longs for young people to embrace Africatown and fight to improve it.

“The history is rich, but it doesn’t match the neighborhood,” she says. “I’ve lived here all my life, and my age group and younger have been taught to leave. How do we teach our kids to love their neighborhood? We’ve been taught to leave the ‘hood’ ... but nobody has taught us to stay there and help redevelop it.”

Davis is eager to recapture the spirit of Africatown and other Black-founded communities that once thrived. She says she won’t rely on Mobile city officials to do the right thing.

“As you think about Tulsa and even Africatown, how people created their own, and they were not dependent on everything,” Davis says. “That’s how our ancestors were. They created their own. I really don’t worry about the city. We should, but I’m thinking of ways of doing my own.”

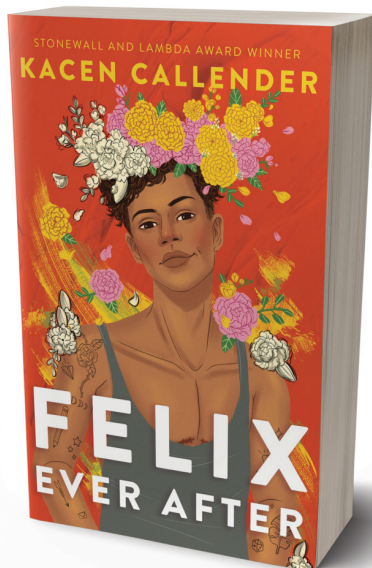
But she’ll continue to nudge people to act when learning about honest history at historical sites. Channeling Anderson Flen’s words, she stresses, “What are you charged to *do*?” ●

**Coshandra Dillard** (she/her) is an associate editor for Learning for Justice.

# What We're Reading

***Felix Ever After*** is a captivating coming-of-age story from the perspective of Felix Love, a 17-year-old transgender boy who longs to fall in love. Through Kacen Callender's richly crafted setting and dialogue, you can practically taste what it's like to be 17 in New York City. In this triumph of a novel, the author offers a window into Felix's many intersecting identities—Black, queer, poor and young—in a refreshingly unapologetic and deeply human way. (Teens)

"*Felix Ever After* is raw, funny, heartbreaking and almost impossible to put down." –Steffany Moyer



Deepa Iyer's ***Social Change Now: A Guide for Reflection and Connection*** offers guidance for individuals

and groups seeking to enact positive social change. Readers identify the role they might play within the social change ecosystems framework. Each of the 10 roles is described in clear detail, with thoughtful reflection prompts for readers to consider and actions they can take to connect with others and build a more just and equitable society. (Adult Readers)

"*Social Change Now* is a practical guide for anyone seeking to create a more equitable society." –Sarah-SoonLing Blackburn



In ***How the Word is Passed: A Reckoning With the History of Slavery Across America***, Clint Smith

takes the reader on an amazing journey. Starting from his hometown of New Orleans and traveling to places including Monticello, Whitney Plantation, Angola Prison, Blandford Cemetery and more, he highlights how stories of slavery were constructed in support of "white comfort." He challenges readers to confront the history of slavery "even if it means shattering the stories you have been told throughout your life." (Adult Readers)

"For all educators, and particularly social studies educators interested in unpacking an honest history about slavery in America, Clint Smith's book provides a powerful description of how slavery influences society today." –Kimberly Burkhalter



"Grandma is the original warrior," writes Junauda Petrus in ***Can We Please Give the Police Department to the Grandmothers?*** Illustrated by Kristen Uroda, this richly woven tapestry of words honors the liberatory inroads our elders made while also imagining a world where care and support rule the day. Beautiful imagery accompanies this magical aural experience. (Growing Readers)

"This loving work will spark imaginations and offer a fabulous example of how to freedom dream." –Crystal L. Keels



In ***Still Dreaming / Seguimos Soñando***, author Claudia Guadalupe Martínez and illustrator Magdalena Mora lovingly

capture one family's decision to stay together during the Mexican Repatriation, an undertaught period of history when Mexican Americans were expelled from the United States. (Growing Readers)

"This beautiful bilingual book will remind readers of the resilience and beauty of immigrant families who fight to stay together." –Courtney Wai



In ***Solito: A Memoir***, Javier Zamora describes his journey as a 9-year-old from El Salvador to "La USA" to reunite with his

parents. The coyote promises the trip will take two weeks, but it stretches into two terrifying months. To survive, Zamora leans on his new family, who encircle him with care and love. (Teens)

"Zamora's memoir humanizes the perspective of immigrants, particularly child migrants, who undertake dangerous treks into the U.S." –Courtney Wai



# What We're Watching

The six-part Hulu series ***The 1619 Project*** expands on the groundbreaking work of Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist Nikole Hannah-Jones and *The New York Times*. Episodes dive into themes of justice, fear, capitalism, music, race and democracy. The series reframes slavery as the true origin of the United States and centers on enslaved people and their descendants, whose contributions helped shape the nation. Hannah-Jones also uses her family's history, along with others, to weave in how the legacy of slavery affects life in the United States today. (360 min.)

Available on Hulu | High School and Professional Development



Get to know the life and legacy of a writer, cultural anthropologist and folklorist in ***Zora Neale Hurston: Claiming a Space***. From her studies at

Barnard College and Howard University to her contributions to the Harlem Renaissance, this film, produced by Randall MacLowry, examines Hurston's independence, courage and ingenuity as she trekked through rugged, all-male and white spaces during her academic training. She carved out her own lane in anthropology. In fact, Hurston was a pioneer in the discipline, challenging perspectives on race, gender and class through her work in the South and the Caribbean. A valuable resource for students, this film works to illuminate an American literary giant. (112 min.)

Available on PBS | Middle School and High School



***Joychild*** is a beautiful short film directed by Aurora Brachman about a young child who reflects on how

they disclosed their gender identity for the first time. The caregiver and child revisit this dialogue amid a montage of black-and-white footage highlighting their relationship and the child partaking in activities that bring them joy. It is evident when the child says "I'm not a girl" for the first time that it frees them to be their authentic self. This emotional retelling of such a transformative moment honors identity, belonging and the power of being true to yourself. (6 min.)

Available on PBS | Middle School and High School



***Lowndes County and the Road to Black Power\****, from directors Geeta Gandbhir and Sam Pollard, shows

the history of radical movement work by grassroots organizers, most notably the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), in rural 1960s Alabama. Just miles from Montgomery and Birmingham—cities whose voting rights campaigns received the help of charismatic leaders such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.—Lowndes County activists relied heavily on collective power. It's during this moment that the phrase "Black Power" emerges. This film, which includes archival footage, provides an essential piece of the civil rights movement story and uplifts the power of community organizing to create social change. (90 min.)

Available on Peacock | High School and Professional Development



***Rumble: The Indians Who Rocked the World***, a documentary from Rezolution

Pictures, showcases the fundamental role of American Indians in rock and roll music. Opening with the infamous Link Wray—a member of the Shawnee nation and credited as the inventor of the power chord—viewers are introduced to musicians whose Native American identity may not be pronounced. As Jesse Ed Davis explains, "Be proud that you are an Indian but be careful who you tell," because of the possibility of marginalization within the industry. Musicians including Jimi Hendrix, Robbie Robertson, Redbone and Buffy Sainte-Marie are celebrated to highlight the ways Native American music and musicians innovated the genre. (102 min.)

Available on Netflix | High School and Professional Development

\*This film contains material that may be unsuitable for younger children. LFI recommends that educators and parents or caregivers preview the film before deciding to show it to students.

# One World

"NOBODY'S  
FREE  
UNTIL  
EVERYBODY'S  
FREE."

-Fannie Lou Hamer



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**FOR JUSTICE**

Learning for Justice and participating artists encourage you to clip the One World page to hang on a classroom wall or communal space. It is created with just that purpose in mind.

**Fannie Lou Hamer** (1917-1977) was a prominent Mississippi civil rights leader who was renowned for her voting rights activism.

Illustration by **Morgan Taylor**

# Black Lives Matter at School

**Black Lives Matter at School is a national coalition organizing for racial justice in education.**

In this era of mass incarceration, there is a school-to-prison pipeline system that is more invested in locking up youth than unlocking their minds. That system uses harsh discipline policies that push Black students out of schools at disproportionate rates, denies students the right to learn about their own cultures, and whitewashes the curriculum to exclude many of the struggles and contributions of Black people and other people of color.

That system is also pushing out Black teachers from schools in cities around the country. Educators in the Black Lives Matter at School movement developed these demands for the movement:

- End “zero tolerance” discipline and implement restorative justice.
- Hire more Black teachers.
- Mandate Black history and ethnic studies in K-12 curricula.
- Fund counselors, not cops.



Learn more at

**[blacklivesmatteratschool.com](https://blacklivesmatteratschool.com)**



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