Learning about Race, Appreciating Our Country

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Parents, school leadership, and community members must come together to answer one question: What do we actually want all of our students to learn about the role of race in our country?

At a minimum, we want our children to be informed, engaged citizens. We want them to be exposed to and grapple with the observable realities of race relations as these have evolved since the Civil War.

But how do we weight different lived experiences? How much do we emphasize the effects of systemic biases that victimize black Americans, and where do black efforts to achieve full participation in U.S. democracy fit in to those narratives? How much discussion of white privilege? And how might we frame these discussions in ways that help otherwise contentious and polarized school board meetings reach more constructive outcomes about the teaching of race?

A conscious approach to these issues can form the basis of a “school board strategy” with two components:

• Ground discussions about race and inequality with discussions about socioeconomic class and inequality
• Emphasize the role of black Americans in championing democratic equality and leading movements to expand civil rights, rather than solely the victims of systemic oppression

Class and Race

Savvy, thoughtful educators can finesse—but not ignore—the issue of white privilege by first engaging students with discussions about socioeconomic class and how it affects Americans’ lives. As University of North Georgia’s T. Jameson Brewer and Kelly McFadden propose, a class-first approach can provide a foundation onto which the unique challenges facing black Americans can be layered, showing them in contrast to, but also in concert with, challenges facing the majority of white people. This method’s core intuition is that once white students are able to recognize that systematic injustice occurs along class lines, it becomes easier to accept data showing the existence of systematic racial injustice. Once Georgia students are allowed to examine the barriers facing low-income people, including whites—such as lack of access to health care, poor schools and technical training, environmental hazards, and job loss due to globalization—it becomes possible to discuss the additional barriers that have compounded injustices for black people. Demonstrable, teachable hurdles to black social and economic mobility include laws against voting and holding office, the difficulty in obtaining a quality education in the face of poorly financed segregated schools and denial of GI Bill benefits, and the practice of “redlining” that barred black families from obtaining mortgages in desirable neighborhoods.

The Past as Inspiration

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The examination of American history should neither demonize white students nor make black students out to be agency-less victims. A truly patriotic curriculum could lift up narratives of black Americans as persistent fighters for the civil rights and civic responsibilities we expect for all citizens. Finessing—but not ignoring—the realities of decades of policies designed to keep black citizens from full democratic participation, students would have the opportunity to grapple with the action-reaction cycle so key to our country's evolution: Each time black citizens have gained greater political voice and economic leverage, they have encountered combinations of voter suppression and violence. And they have responded to these challenges with new forms of resistance and engagement. These stories, and the historic characters in them, make positive beacons for students of all races to identify with, and provide examples with which to compare and contrast modern figures and situations.

Materials illustrating the expansive role of African Americans for such a curriculum might include cases from Georgia's history, such as:

Reconstruction (1865-1877) ushered in a growth of black elected officials (including the “Original 33” black members of the Georgia General Assembly), as well as organizations such as the African-American-led Loyal Leagues, and even militias to protect black state representatives. In response, white leaders “began to look for new ways...to control the recently enfranchised freed people.” This meant the imposition of a cumulative poll tax, expulsion of black office holders, as well as the establishment of all-white grand juries to exclude black citizens from local school boards. The leader of Georgia's 1877 constitutional convention was clear as to the intent of these measures: “...the Negro shall never be heard from.”

Within a very short period of time, black Georgians were indeed “heard from” again. In 1880, backed by persistently large voter turnouts and over 470 Republican newspapers, black voters became a durable political force, strong enough to take over the Georgia Republican Party, albeit temporarily. Added to this was an expansion of more class-based direct action, in the form of strikes and boycotts involving large numbers of black workers who had moved to expanding urban-based industries as alternatives to sharecropping and tenancy. Black and white Americans joined forces, albeit temporarily, in the Populists, a movement especially strong in Georgia, involving disgruntled farmers and an emerging blue-collar proletariat opposed to unfair prices, big finance, and race hatred laws.

The white response to advances in black political power was Jim Crow, with its enforced physical separation, its literacy tests, its stronger poll tax, and its “white primary,” a rule that allowed for the dominant Democratic party to exclude black voters from the only election that really counted in Georgia. The result was an astounding fall in black turnout in Georgia for presidential elections, from 42% in 1880, to 33% in 1892, to 7% in 1900, and 2% in 1912. (Similarly, black turnout in South Carolina fell from 96% in 1876 to 11% in 1898 following the state's introduction of a new poll tax and literacy test).

Black families responded in part by going North in the “great migration.” But although their proportion of Georgia's population fell from almost half in 1910 to 36% in 1930, black political power expanded, especially in the 1940s. Pressure from black advocates helped end Georgia's poll tax in 1945 and oversaw the banning of the white primary in 1946. Even more critical was black voter mobilization of state-wide organizations such as the All-Citizens Registration Committee, often led by black veterans linking voting to bread and butter issues such as GI benefits. The percentage of black registered voters jumped from well under 5% in 1940 to around 20% in 1950.

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One reaction to this black activism was the voter purge, seen most clearly in the 1946 gubernatorial campaign of Eugene Talmadge. Talmadge forces mailed out thousands of mimeographed challenge forms to supporters, while also engaging in manipulation of voting machines and the "loss" or destruction of purged voter names. Black votes were challenged en masse in more than 30 counties, and an estimated 15,000 to 25,000 were purged. This was followed by a 1949 “reregistration and purge law” that resulted in the purging of an additional 100,000 registered black voters.

Bolstered by key court decisions (e.g. 1954 Brown v Board of Education, the 1957 Civil Rights Act), black organizers pushed back against the voter purges. Groups such as the Southern Christian Leadership Council engaged in extensive voter registration drives across the South. The result was an increase of over half a million African-Americans on Southern state voting rolls, with black registrations in Georgia rising from 167,000 to 275,000 between December 1962 and May 1964.

This focus on black political engagement, when combined with an acknowledgement of class-based injustice, can form a robust curriculum that explores the role of race in America while suggesting how to battle injustice today. This framing provides students with models of political engagement that conform to our country’s highest democratic ideals while avoiding any semblance of a white privilege “blame game.” These stories are true, and they are inspiring.