



ARTICLE

## Black Lives Matter Week of Action

This February, schools across the country will work in solidarity to launch a shared set of lessons and examine their schools' policies in pursuit of social and educational equity for their black students.

December 4, 2018 | By Coshandra Dillard



Topic: Race & Ethnicity, Rights & Activism

---

It began in Seattle.

On a September morning at John Muir Elementary School, a group of black men stood at the entrance high-fiving students. Some of the men beat ancestral drums with wide smiles on their faces. Others wore Afrocentric clothing. They praised each child who approached the steps of the school.

The event, called Black Men Uniting to Change the Narrative, was organized to uplift black youth in the community surrounding John Muir. Teachers at the school—where students of color, half of whom are black, are in the majority—were eager to partner with the community group. They had focused on race and equity in their professional development for years; they were ready.

But the jubilant rally wasn't just a celebration of the students. On this day, it was also an act of resistance against hate. Just hours before, the school had been threatened by people who'd learned that teachers at John Muir intended to wear "Black Lives Matter—We Stand Together" shirts. One person even sent a bomb threat.

But the school's joy would not be contained. After local authorities confirmed there was no legitimate threat, community members showed up as planned, and John Muir teachers soon found that thousands of educators across the greater Seattle area stood in solidarity with their message.

In spite of the threats (or, perhaps, fueled by them), a local group of union teachers called Social Equity Educators (SEE) encouraged teachers in the district to follow John Muir's lead and host a Black Lives Matter at School Day. On October 19, 2016, thousands of teachers wore Black Lives Matter shirts to school.

Seattle high school teacher Jesse Hagopian, a founding member of SEE, worked closely with the group to encourage participation.

"It was clear that educators wanted to show their students how much we care for them," Hagopian said. "That was an incredible eruption that showed there was a real urgency felt by educators to support their black students' lives in the face of things like the dramatic, disproportionate discipline that exists in the Seattle schools and across the country, but also with so many examples of police brutality going unchecked."

Inspired by the principles of the Black Lives Matter movement, participating educators focused on three policy demands to facilitate ongoing action at Seattle schools: 1) support ethnic studies in school; 2) replace zero-tolerance discipline with restorative justice practices; and 3) recruit more black teachers.

The Seattle action caught the attention of national media, which inspired Philadelphia teachers to plan a similar event. But they went a step further: Instead of one day, they organized a Week of Action in 2017. The idea continued to grow in places like Rochester, New York, and Montpelier, Vermont, before spreading to classrooms in more than 20 cities during the 2017–18 school year.

In 2019, the Week of Action is scheduled to begin on February 4.

## The Week of Action Blueprint

Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action is a time set aside to affirm all black identities by centering black voices, empowering students and teaching about black experiences beyond slavery. The lessons emphasize social justice and ethnic studies, but in addition to classroom work, teachers like Hagopian are organizing, planning, protesting and addressing real-world issues that affect black students.

"I think the pedagogy in the classroom is important, but it rings hollow if you're telling your kids, 'Here are the great movements for social and racial justice,' and engaging them in those conversations, but then not doing it yourself in your own life,"

Hagopian says. “I think it’s incumbent upon social justice educators who are teaching this stuff to also live it, and that means getting involved with the Black Lives Matter at School movement, to get involved with the movements for structural change.”

In Washington, D.C., the nonprofit organization Teaching for Change and the Center for Inspired Teaching have convened a working group of teachers to plan the local Black Lives Matter Week of Action. They collaborate with the local Black Lives Matter chapter, BYP100, and other activist groups. Teaching for Change staff suggest starting February off with more in-depth lessons about black history and black experiences, such as the lives of black Muslims in the United States and “Resistance 101”—tools that help students recognize their power by identifying with young activists throughout history. Educators can share ideas with their network and at curriculum fairs.

Teaching for Change Executive Director Deborah Menkart and Coordinator of Teacher Engagement and Professional Development Rosalie Reyes say they want to ensure all students have a positive racial identity that is visible to the world. “I think one of the goals is that this does become the norm, that we shift the weight of the curriculum from the classroom ... rethink some of the resources that we are using and that we’re making sure that the students are seeing themselves in their curriculum, in their literature,” Reyes says.

**“I believe that once all folks start to respect and regard black people as human and as worthy of the respect and honor that other races sometime see, then we all are going to benefit.”**

High school humanities teacher Charlie McGeehan is among a network of educators in Philadelphia that was moved by the energy brewing in Seattle. Teacher Action Group—Philadelphia and the Caucus of Working Educators, which had been working on racial justice issues, connected with Hagopian during their planning process. As a teacher who sees issues of economic inequality, mass incarceration and police brutality often arise in his classroom, McGeehan felt it was important to get on board.

“Whenever I bring up a topic like police brutality, I have students who consistently can bring those experiences of times when they themselves experienced that police brutality,” he says.

## Humanizing Black Lives

As Reyes points out, students are more likely to engage in lessons when they see themselves reflected in the curriculum. According to a Stanford Graduate School of Education study, graduation rates dramatically increase for *all* students who take ethnic studies classes.

The education nonprofit Rethinking Schools published *Teaching for Black Lives*, a book that supports Week of Action teaching and learning efforts. The editors of *Teaching for Black Lives* say the book is one way to offer that engagement. Editor Wayne Au, a professor at the School of Educational Studies at the University of Washington Bothell, said 4,000 books were sold in the first three months after it was published in April 2018, and that they've received orders and inquiries about the book from across the country.

*Teaching for Black Lives* is divided into five sections that examine activism, black history, intersectional identities and issues such as anti-blackness, gentrification, the school-to-prison pipeline and mass incarceration. It fills in the gaps about key historical events and recognizes many black identities and narratives that students aren't usually exposed to. For example, the book features issues rarely examined in traditional texts, such as the true history of the Black Panther Party and the FBI's COINTELPRO campaign to dismantle black activist movements. *The Color Purple*—literature filled with intersectional identities—is used to connect to the #MeToo movement.

These lessons not only benefit black students but can also be transformative for non-black students, particularly white students. Due in large part to school and residential segregation, white students often get a narrow view of blackness from their lived experiences.

"I think [*Teaching for Black Lives*] has the potential to help win over students of all races and ethnicities to understanding the importance of supporting the struggle for black lives," says Hagopian, who is also one of the editors. "As the founders of Black Lives Matter have said, 'When black people get free, we all get free.'"

Editor Dyan Watson, an associate professor at Lewis & Clark Graduate School of Education in Portland, Oregon, agrees that the book's content is valuable to non-black students.

"When you systematically deny the dignity of one group, your dignity is also compromised," she says. "So, I believe that once all folks start to respect and regard black people as human and as worthy of the respect and honor that other races sometimes see, then we all are going to benefit."

## White Teachers, Black Students

McGeehan is like most teachers at Philadelphia public schools—white and teaching to mostly black students. He’s been instrumental in exemplifying to other white teachers the importance of anti-racist work in the classroom and organizing for the Week of Action.

But McGeehan knows that being an effective and empowering teacher for his students requires learning from and listening to them, their families and to members of his school communities.

“As much as I probably wouldn’t admit it at the time, I do think that when I first came at teaching, I came at it from a savior complex perspective,” McGeehan says. “I do think that for white teachers, coming in with a savior complex and seeing students from a deficit perspective is a real, serious issue that takes a long time to break,” he continues. “I’m trying to think about what my ‘a-ha’ moment was, and I don’t know. I think it’s just been a long process, and it’s involved a lot of different types of learning.”

The Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action is a good time to reflect on how white teachers can teach about black lives more accurately and more empathetically. Wayne Au says they must go on their own journey to learn about the politics of whiteness and white supremacy. And Hagopian points out that thousands of educators around the country have their backs.

“With the visibility of this movement and the visibility of this book that’s here to support the movement, they shouldn’t feel completely isolated,” he says.

## Keeping the Momentum

The Black Lives Matter movement is seen by some educators as a continuation of the civil rights era—a time when young people feel empowered enough to pick up where activists of the 1960s left off. Teachers know they can’t miss this pivotal moment in history, which is unfolding before our eyes daily.

Teachers who do this work get a lot of support, but occasionally, there is pushback in the community or from a school administrator. Nonetheless, they continue advocating for equitable schools, rather than environments that mirror society’s inequities.

“There’s a whole lot more work to do, but I do think it’s a growing movement, [and] we know nothing changes unless there are people organizing and engaged,” Menkart says. “So, the fact that the Black Lives Matter Week of Action got so much support and is growing, the fact that there’s now the book *Teaching for Black Lives*, will really help give people the tools to make that possible.”

## What Teachers Can Do

Black Lives Matter at School's Week of Action is a movement sweeping across some of the country's largest school districts. But you don't have to live in a large city or be a member of an organization to join in this effort. The goal is simply to challenge structural and systemic racism while centering the lives of black students inside and outside of the classroom.

To join this effort, begin with these six steps:

1. Mark your calendar. The Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action is slated for February 4–8. Connect with a local collective of social justice educators, or organize teachers in your school and urge school administrators to get on board. You don't have to have the blessing of national organizers, but if you need support, contact them for assistance.
2. Order *Teaching for Black Lives* and use it as a guide in the classroom.
3. Compile teaching materials for the week of action and beyond. Visit the Black Lives Matter at School website for lesson plans successfully implemented in Seattle schools, or find resources at DC Educators for Social Justice website.
4. Seek support from the community. Reach out to parents, community members and even Black Lives Matter chapters who can enlighten educators about the most pressing issues in your community.
5. Follow the Black Lives Matter at School movement on Facebook and Twitter and use the hashtag #BlackLivesMatterAtSchool.
6. Show solidarity by urging all teachers to wear Black Lives Matter at School T-shirts. You can customize your own or obtain the official T-shirt here.

## 13 Guiding Principles

Focusing on the following 13 themes, organizers have assigned the study of each to specific days throughout the week:

**Monday:** Restorative justice, empathy and loving engagement

**Tuesday:** Diversity and globalism

**Wednesday:** Trans-affirming, queer-affirming and collective value

**Thursday:** Intergenerational, black families and black villages

**Friday:** Black women and unapologetically black

*Dillard is the staff writer for Teaching Tolerance.*

