



Equipping Leaders to Better Prepare Children & Youth for College, Careers, & Citizenship

Leading for Black Lives in Education

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Lead /lĕd/ verb – to be a route or a means of access to a particular place

Rethinking Schools (<https://www.rethinkingschools.org/books/title/teaching-for-black-lives>), a publisher committed to equity and to the vision that public education is central to the creation of a humane, caring, multiracial democracy recently published **Teaching for Black Lives** (<https://www.rethinkingschools.org/books/title/teaching-for-black-lives>) a collection of writings highlighting the ways educators and administrators can and should make their classrooms and schools sites of resistance to white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Teaching for Black Lives challenges educators and administrators to examine the role schools play in perpetuating anti-Blackness and offers concrete examples of what it looks like to humanize Black youth in schools and Black people in curriculum and teaching . The day this book was placed in my hands I had the opportunity to meet with Deborah Menkart and Allyson Criner Brown of **Teaching for Change** (<https://www.teachingforchange.org/>) during Washington D.C.’s participation in the **National Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action** (<http://www.dcareeducators4socialjustice.org/black-lives-matter-week-action>) to ask about the growing movement towards including ethnic studies, culturally relevant curriculum, and culturally responsive teaching in schools. I arrived early and as I waited they gave me a copy of Teaching for Black Lives. I skimmed through the content pages to find a selection and paused at the section titled “Teaching Blackness, Loving Blackness and Exploring Identity” in that section, was a poem by Clint Smith, a contributing writer, doctoral candidate at Harvard University and author of Counting Descent, the poem’s title was “Ode to the only black kid in the class.” I stopped because I didn’t expect to find myself in the pages of this book. I grew up and attended public school in Tulsa Oklahoma, and spent most of high school isolated from the rest of the school with twenty-five other students in advanced placement classes, “too black and too white all at once” Smith writes, but as exceptional as my placement intended for me to feel I, as well as many black youth in public school saw my culture represented with stories of slavery and in the context of the condition of oppression. I sat with myself, that book and my questions:

What is culturally relevant curriculum and what are culturally responsive teachings?

A route. Deborah Menkart began by sharing with me about the origin of Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action, that it is a direct response to racism and violence against Black people and its intersections within education manifested in school discipline policies. During D.C.'s participation in the National Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action more than 450 educators at 130+ schools across the D.C. area engaged students in lessons about structural racism, intersectional Black identities, Black history, and anti-racist movements. Educators taught lessons that corresponded to the 13 principles of the Black Lives Matter movement and had three demands: (1) end zero-tolerance discipline and implement restorative justice (2) hire more Black teachers (3) mandate Black history and ethnic studies in kindergarten through twelfth grade. The case for teaching Black history also finds roots in Negro History Week a precursor to Black history month, introduced by American historian, author, journalist and Dean of Howard University, Carter Godwin Woodson, as a celebration of what Black people had done all year long. Educator and historian W.E.B DuBois also advocated for teaching Black history in public schools to challenge the narrative of black inferiority. Woodson and Dubois saw then what educators and advocates see now in public school curriculum and textbooks: gaps and opportunities "kids get a sense that their heritage has no academic value," Deborah explained, Allyson continued saying "If you do not learn anything about yourself, your people, your culture, your history, your community, if that is not a part of your learning that comes from the school then that means it is not valuable. And if your culture and your history and your poetry are not valuable, well, then what does that say about you?" **Dignity in Schools Campaign** (<http://dignityinschools.org/crctk>), provides the following definition: Culturally relevant teachings is pedagogy that empowers students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically by using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes. Culturally relevant curriculum challenges the dominant narrative in schools told through curriculum, it acknowledges the role race, dominant culture and oppression plays in the education of children and how education as an institution of our society, has helped to support and perpetuate racism. Culturally relevant curriculum are teachings, lessons and experiences that affirm students in the classroom; their community and acts as a mirror in which they can see themselves, their lives and their communities in the learning process.

What can educators and administrators do?

Engage the whole school. It is important for students, teachers and administrators to understand their roles in organizing in support of Black life and Black communities and against anti-Black racism. Education has the capacity to be and must be transformative, encouraging academic excellence that embraces critical skills for progressive social change . We believe educators and administrators want to meet the needs of all students and need to feel confident that they can and have access to the support they need. Here are some ways to start:

- Make culturally responsive teaching a district-wide focus. Teaching for change's family engagement work partners with whole schools and thinks about how does the whole school and all the variance in that community adopt culturally responsive teaching?
- Provide training and support the adults in the lives of students. Include trainings in culturally relevant teaching as a part of credentialing and teacher performance expectations. Culturally relevant models must be embed in practice so that it is not an add-on for educators.
- Use the research. **New research** (<http://www.nber.org/papers/w21865>) shows that ethnic-studies classes boost student attendance, GPAs, and high-school credits for key student groups.
- Engage with families and the community as part of your culturally responsive teaching. Family engagement is a non-negotiable! Engage respectfully with parents and caregivers to help them better understand what their children are learning. Provide tips and materials to support learning at home, such as month-by-month family activities that are aligned to culturally relevant curriculum.

What can family members and community members do?

Lead. You belong to this learning community too. Families and community members have been leading the fight to end systemic racism and to build an educational justice movement that values Black lives. Parent organizer and member of the Dignity in Schools Campaign, Hashim Jabar, came to this work as a parent in Dayton Ohio pushing back against school push out. Through his work at West Dayton Youth Taskforce and Racial Justice NOW! he was able to run a successful campaign to introduce culturally relevant curriculum in Dayton Public Schools, winning a change in course of study to include two books as required reading: *Mis-Education of the Negro* and *Up from Slavery*. Dignity in Schools campaign has put together a toolkit which explains how culturally relevant curriculum fights the school-to-prison pipeline as well as provides research and scholarly articles, and a guide for advocates, including how to add books to your school's course of study, how to approach your school board and superintendent, how to change curriculum, and how to measure how culturally responsive your school is.

Below are resources referenced above and additional tools you can use:

- **Teaching for Change** (<https://www.teachingforchange.org/>).
- **Teaching for Change's Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action** (<https://www.dcareaeducators4socialjustice.org/black-lives-matter-week-action>) resources for Educators
- **DC Area Educators for Social Justice** (<https://www.dcareaeducators4socialjustice.org/>), Resources to support social justice in the classroom
- **Anti-bias education for young children and ourselves, NAEYC** (<https://www.teachingforchange.org/teacher-resources/anti-bias-education>) (National Association for the Education of Young Children), with resources and booklists curated by Teaching for Change
- **Culturally Relevant Curriculum and Culturally Responsive Schools Toolkit** (<http://www.rjohio.org/crctk>)/Racial Justice NOW!/West Dayton Youth Task Force Dignity in Schools Campaign
- **Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy** ([http://lmcreadinglist.pbworks.com/f/Ladson-Billings %201995%29.pdf](http://lmcreadinglist.pbworks.com/f/Ladson-Billings%201995%29.pdf)), Gloria Ladson-Billings, American Education Research Journal, Fall 1995
- **The Causal Effects of Cultural Relevance: Evidence from an Ethnic Studies Curriculum** (<https://www.nber.org/papers/w21865>), Thomas Dee, Emily Penner, National Bureau of Economic

Research

- **Teaching for Black Lives** (<https://www.rethinkingschools.org/books/title/teaching-for-black-lives>), Dyan Watson, Jesse Hagopian, Wayne Au, Rethinking Schools 2018
- **Beyond Heroes and Holidays, A Practical Guide to K-12 Multicultural, Anti-Racist Education and Staff Development** (<https://www.teachingforchange.org/books/our-publications/beyond-heroes-and-holidays>) Enid Lee, Deborah Menkart, Margo Okazawa. Washington, DC: Teaching for Change, 1998
- **Teaching and Mentoring for Racial Justice** (<https://drive.google.com/file/d/0B6uUa2krEBR6NTVvWTIKbW9jRjAzNG0tWU41X09iV0hlaXJ3/view>)

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