

Civics Education Must Put Racial Equity First

Simply teaching how government works is not sufficient

By Scott Warren & Andrew Wilkes

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Civics education is popular again. As our democracy itself sits on a historic precipice, people from around the country are calling for a national renewal of civics education. However, more civics education by itself is not sufficient. This new political moment requires a new civics: one in which a quest for racial equity is front and center.

When it is taught at all, civics is predominantly presented as a stale and monotonous topic, in which democracy feels irrelevant to the majority of students' lives. Conventional civics focuses primarily on how government works and does not acknowledge the lived experiences of many of today's students.

That approach can harm our very politics. By definition, an effective democracy requires equal representation from all segments of the population. It demands the robust political participation from all voices and communities—a goal that we can only achieve through a shared commitment to racial equity. That promise does not yet ring true in our country.

A new civics education, which centers racial equity as a cornerstone of American democracy, must explicitly address the political and social marginalization of communities that have traditionally been excluded from the formal democratic process. In doing so, we can begin to dismantle the barriers to civic identity and participation faced by so many young people in this country, particularly by young people of color. In this equity-focused civics education, students can develop an understanding of democracy's relevance to their own lives.

Unfortunately, the word "equity" itself is now widely understood as a partisan ideal. In consequence, many education leaders and civics educators choose to approach the subject from a broad perspective, believing that a rising tide in civics will lift all boats. Without an explicit focus on educating for the promise of racial equity, however, there is a danger in perpetuating a democracy led by a privileged, often white minority, instead of a diverse, inclusive majority.

"Civics education should reflect the needs and demographics of the nation's public school children."

Civics education should reflect the needs and demographics of the nation's public school children, the majority of whom are students of color. In a country that has historically oppressed people who are not white, acknowledging this real history is crucial in cultivating an effective civics education.

Teachers can make civics education feel relevant by connecting the discipline to local issues and challenges that students encounter every day. Civics educators should use a pedagogy informed by racial equity to engage students in critical thinking and problem-solving. This project-based approach rooted in political participation is particularly necessary for students of color, who have traditionally been excluded from the formal democratic process. Our ultimate goal should be to create a democracy in which every civic actor can meaningfully take part in our political system.

Every school must foster a democratic culture in which every young person feels valued and respected. Many schools attended predominately by youths of color, such as "no excuse" charter schools, employ overly harsh school disciplinary policies. These policies are correlated to decreased community engagement, voter turnout, and trust in government. In contrast, private and suburban majority-white schools often have a reputation for progressive and liberating pedagogy that allows more student voice. To bridge this gap, every school must equip and empower students to care for their school community. District leaders, principals, and teachers can begin by instituting peer mediation, teaching social and emotional skills, and working with students on minor disciplinary incidents rather than taking punitive measures.

Before putting racial equity front and center, the field of civics education providers and advocates must also address the racial leadership gap within its own ranks. Districts whose leadership is primarily white may find it difficult to make equity a priority in their civics work—a difficulty compounded by the reality that many teachers have received little critical pedagogical support in the topic.

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Additionally, the executive leadership and governance of many civics education organizations are also disproportionately white, male, and older. These organizations are therefore missing the insight and experience that people of color and women could bring to the field. We do not highlight this reality to induce shame, but rather to invite all civics education organizations—including our own—to prioritize equity in their staffing, messaging, and organizational practice.

We work at Generation Citizen, an organization that was originally founded by mainly white leadership. Through the organization's evolution, it has faced an internal struggle to elevate equity and diversify its staff and leadership. And through our work in places as different as New York and California to Oklahoma and Texas, we have come to recognize that the entire country does not think monolithically regarding equity work.

Centering racial equity in how civics education is led and taught is an imperative for the field to be democratic. A new civics education must incorporate racial equity into our assessment of academic standards, curricula, policies, civic disposition, and school culture. Nothing less, and nothing else, will prepare a generation of young people to lead as inclusive civic actors in our increasingly diverse society.

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Driving questions for discussion:

“ A new civics education must incorporate racial equity into our assessment of academic standards, curricula, policies, civic disposition, and school culture. Nothing less, and nothing else, will prepare a generation of young people to lead as inclusive civic actors in our increasingly diverse society.” **Agree or disagree? Explain**

“These organizations are therefore missing the insight and experience that people of color and women could bring to the field.” **Dr. Marshall told the board that we often neglect the lived experiences of Black and Brown people. How does this work that you are doing helping JCPS to not neglect the lived experiences of Black and Brown students?**

Racial Equity Reflection Guide/DRAFT

2019-20

Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) vehemently believes that Racial Equity must be the focus of this system in order to witness and usher in academic change for all students. It is imperative that JCPS creates a climate that is fully comforting, complementary, and curricularly whole for all students, families, and staff.

Questions that principals can ask themselves and their staff to ensure that Racial Equity is in the front of thoughts and efforts in the schoolhouse are provided below:

1. How am I approaching teaching and learning from a strengths-based approach as opposed to a deficit approach to reach Racialized students?
 - a. **Strengths based leading/teaching:** Leadership that approaches Racial Equity with the belief that Racialized groups have diverse assets and abilities to learn at high levels. It removes deficit thinking about descriptors that assume Racialized students are lacking needed skills to learn at very high levels. How are the key policies and practices affecting Racialized students? (Use the Racial Equity Analysis Protocol [REAP].)
2. What quantifiable goals have been established to increase desired outcomes for Racialized students?
3. What quantifiable goals and identifiable practices have been established to decrease disproportionality in suspensions, alternative school placement, and referral to Exceptional Childhood Education (ECE)?
4. Is Racial Equity specifically addressed in our Comprehensive School Plan?
5. How are we engaging with families beyond traditional and compliant methods of communication?
6. How is curricular racial inclusion demonstrated across subjects and aligned?
7. How are the six (6) systems clearly demonstrating a focus on Racial Equity?

Questions that teachers can use and respond to in order to improve Racial Equity in their classrooms are provided below:

1. Are the lessons designed reflective of JCPS demographics (51 percent of JCPS is minority, foreign born, refugee)?
2. Do the lessons have a social-political aspect that allow students to bring in their own funds of knowledge and investigate race and racism?
 - a. **Race:** A social construct that artificially divides people into distinct groups based on certain characteristics, such as physical appearance (particularly skin color) ancestral heritage, cultural affiliation, cultural history, ethnic classification. Racial categories subsume ethnic groups
 - b. **Racism:** "The systematic subordination of members of targeted racial groups who have relatively little social power in the United States (Blacks, Latino/as, Native Americans, and Asians) by the members of the agent racial group who have relatively more social power (Whites). This subordination is supported by the actions of individuals, cultural norms and values, and the institutional structures and practices of society."
3. Is my lesson vetted and screened for wholeness and accuracy?
4. Does my lesson, novel, unit, etc., heroize the dominant white culture inaccurately and unnecessarily?

5. Is the lesson designed in such a way to create authentic learning understanding and create digital backpack-worthy artifacts that exemplify learning and understanding?

Diversity, Equity, and Poverty Programs posits that the need to improve outcomes for students' sense of belonging relies on more than just student compliance. Student behavior is predicated on adult behavior and high expectations. Inasmuch, one of the most important exchanges between a student and staff is the one between the student and the assistant principal. This relationship is powerful; it can be used to leverage achievement and improve performance of the performance of Racialized students. By adults' having high expectations, understanding their societal positionality, and understanding their own biases, Racialized students will begin to be viewed as assets and able to achieve.

Questions that assistant principals should answer while/when focussing on Racial Equity are provided below:

1. Do I have a relationship with the student that goes beyond being viewed as the disciplinarian and/or principal?
2. Do I have a relationship and understanding between the staff that I am an instructional leader who ensures safety; however, I fully expect Racial Equity in management, teaching, and climate of the classroom to be the responsibility of the teacher?
3. Do I know my own biases? [**Implicit Bias link**]
4. Am I aware of how my personal bias impacts my interactions with students? [**Year-long battery here**]
5. What steps am I taking to ensure that the Racial Equity Policy is fibrous and visible in every classroom? [**Racial Equity Policy here**]
6. Do I feel that I am given clear directives from the principal on what the goal is for Racial Equity in this school and how I am expected to exact that goal?
7. Does our PLC protocol include systematic procedures for discussing Racial Equity?
8. Is the systems' work fibrous in order to seamlessly infuse Racial Equity into each system? [Six systems here]
9. When doing walkthroughs, do I look for tangible evidence that racial inclusion is present?
10. When I provide feedback, do I intentionally include my expectations of Racial Equity? Do I showcase teachers and staff that embody Racial Equity through their actions in teaching and learning?

Questions that counselors must answer and address if they are to be Racially Equitable are provided below:

1. When counseling Racialized students, do I recognize the cultural and racial identity of the student?
2. When students voice problems, am I cognizant of the role that race/racism may play in their situation?
3. When counseling, do I differentiate my support, my advice, and my level of understanding in order to not diminish his or her need, race, and culture?
4. Do I counsel all my students in a manner that promotes college and career readiness?
5. Do I balance racial identity with individual identity for every student?

6. Am I familiar with the school Racial Equity policy, and do I have a role improving the school plan?

Strategies for creating racially equitable schools and classrooms are provided below:

1. Develop and demonstrate through action an appreciation for diversity.
2. Recruit, retain, and only hire teachers with a clear passion and understanding of who they are and why Racial Equity is the cornerstone to public school success.
3. Investigate your own personal and family bias.
4. Give and acknowledge diverse perspectives when teaching, making decisions, and communicating.
5. Create/Mandate a professional-development plan that teachers are expected to attend, reflect, and then practice in their classrooms.
6. Examine data to explore the intersectionality of race, income status, and culture.
 - a. Address inequities accordingly.
 - b. Equity scorecard here
7. Create a robust system for student voice—creating a safe place to talk, teach, and address race in every setting in the building.
8. Overhaul the curriculum to be more racially accurate.
9. Diversify your lessons to reflect different viewpoints at every opportunity.
10. Remove as much subjectivity in discipline and teaching as possible.
11. Have lessons and out-of-school opportunities that evoke a level of community pride, community responsibility, racial pride, and Racial Equity—daily.
12. Communication is available in multiple languages.
13. Culturally competent teaching and learning require focused activities and intentionally structured environments.