

Civics

Below are a few recent articles from local and national news sources about civic issues affecting teachers and students. In preparation for Day 6, all participants should read the following articles and think about ways to use children's books to teach and discuss these issues.

The Atlantic:

Civic Education in the Age of Trump

Public schools in the United States aren't teaching students how to engage diverse opinions.

[Jonathan Zimmerman](#) Apr 9, 2016 [Politics](#)

Little hands. A bad tan. And blood coming from wherever.

If you're put off by the crude tone of politics in the Age of Trump, you're not alone. According to a [recent poll](#) by Weber Shandwick, Powell Tate, and KRC Research, 70 percent of Americans think that political incivility has reached "crisis" levels.

The poll also found that Americans avoid discussing controversial questions, out of fear they too will be perceived as uncivil. The findings speak to a flaw with civic education, especially in the main institution charged with delivering it: public schools. Put simply, schools in the United States don't teach the country's future citizens how to engage respectfully across their political differences. So it shouldn't be surprising that they can't, or that that they don't.

Schools have sometimes been blamed for the meteoric rise of Donald Trump, whose legions of supporters allegedly lack the civic knowledge to see through his proposals to ban Muslims from entering the United States or to kill family members of terrorists in the fight against ISIS. But it's hardly clear that Trump supporters are less knowledgeable than anyone else. In [six state GOP exit polls](#), Trump was the most popular candidate among college-educated voters and came in second in another six polls.

Indeed, the facile dismissal of all Trump enthusiasts as bigots or ignoramuses speaks to the most urgent problem in American civic life: the inability to communicate with people who do not share the same opinion. Trump himself epitomizes that trend, routinely vilifying his opponents as "losers" or "dummies," or worse. And yet Trump's critics often use similar terms to tar his diverse array of devotees. This isn't a discussion; it's a shouting match.

Public schools aren't merely expected to teach young people the mechanics of government: how a bill is signed into law, what the Supreme Court does, and so on. They're also responsible for

teaching the skills and habits of democratic life, especially how to engage civilly with people from a different political camp.

Many districts have written policies promoting the teaching of “controversial issues” in schools. Typically, these policies affirm students’ right to discuss such issues as part of their preparation for citizenship. They also warn teachers against imposing their own point of view on students.

But there’s an enormous gap between policy and practice. Many teachers say they’d like to address controversial issues but lack the time; in poorer districts, especially, every available minute is devoted to preparing students for high-stakes standardized tests. Others admitted that they were not prepared to lead such discussions, which require deep background knowledge on the issues as well as the skill to manage diverse opinions about them.

Still other teachers said that their districts discouraged or even barred them from addressing controversial issues, particularly if the teacher displayed a liberal or unorthodox bent. After the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, for example, two teachers and a counselor in Albuquerque, New Mexico, were suspended without pay for hanging posters in their classrooms urging “No War Against Iraq.” School officials invoked the district’s “controversial-issues” policy, which declared that teachers “will not attempt, directly or indirectly, to limit or control the opinions of pupils.”

How will children learn to “engage those opinions” unless they do so in the classroom?

As later court filings confirmed, however, the district offered no evidence that the teachers were trying to do that; instead, the mere expression of their opinion was taken as proof of their propagandistic intent. Never mind that military recruiting posters festooned other parts of the school, or that one of the suspended teachers had organized a debate between herself and a pro-war colleague. Her poster was an act of indoctrination rather than education, officials said, and it had to be stopped.

Meanwhile, lessons that propagate conservative positions generally go unnoticed. In Morristown, New Jersey, one teacher asked a mostly black group of students to write an essay about “why they should not fear the police.” As an African American pastor told local school officials, who had established a policy encouraging “open dialogue and discussion” of divisive issues, the assignment took a truly controversial question—whether blacks had reason to fear police—and answered it from the start, before any real dialogue or discussion could begin.

Judicial rulings have also severely limited the free-speech rights of teachers in their classrooms. In 2007, a federal appeals court upheld an Indiana school board that had refused to renew the contract of a teacher who told her fifth-grade class—in reply to a student question—that she had driven by an anti-war protest and honked her horn in support. The Constitution “does not entitle primary and secondary teachers, when conducting the education of captive audiences, to cover topics, or advocate viewpoints, that depart from the curriculum adopted by the school system,” the court decreed. “Students...ought not to be subject to teachers’ idiosyncratic perspectives.”

To be sure, it's easy to imagine situations where teachers might impose their views instead of assisting students in formulating their own. But many school leaders simply don't trust teachers to know the difference. After the Ferguson riots, a superintendent in nearby Edwardsville, Illinois, prohibited teachers from mentioning the subject, lest they sway students in one direction or another. "We all have opinions on what should be done," the superintendent explained. "We don't need to voice those opinions or engage those opinions in the classroom."

But how will children learn to "engage those opinions" unless they do so in the classroom? That's become even more urgent over the past few decades, when Americans increasingly segregated themselves into communities of the like-minded. In 1976, 27 percent of Americans made their homes in so-called "landslide counties" that voted either Democrat or Republican by 20 percent or more; by 2008, 48 percent of Americans lived in such environments.

When divisive subjects do arise, Americans don't know how to discuss them. In the same KRC survey that revealed overwhelming concern about the incivility of modern politics, over a third of respondents said they avoid talking about racial inequality, abortion rights, or same-sex marriage for fear of the discussion turning "uncivil." And only one-third said that they do not avoid any issues because of worries about incivility.

Trump has played on that anxiety in his frequent broadsides against "political correctness," encouraging people to follow his lead and say whatever they think. And while there's a certain attractiveness to that kind of blunt candor, it's a poor formula for civic discourse. Nearly three-quarters of the people replying to the KRC survey said they supported "civility training" in schools. Let's hope they prevail on the schools to provide it.

The Gainesville Sun:

Brianna L. Kennedy-Lewis: Making black lives matter in Alachua County

By Brianna L. Kennedy-Lewis

Special to The Sun

Published: Tuesday, March 29, 2016 at 6:01 a.m.



Erica Brough/Staff Photographer

Members of the community bow their heads in prayer as they gathered at a March 22 town hall meeting to discuss the shooting of 16-year-old Robert Dentmond.

At a March 22 community meeting — hosted by law enforcement to discuss the tragic shooting two nights earlier of Robert Dentmond, a suicidal, black 16-year-old — Alachua County Commissioner Robert Hutchinson poignantly and accurately stated, “We have failed him.”

But how have we failed him? And how do we prevent further tragedy?

As a community, we failed Robert Dentmond and many other black children long before the night of March 20. Consider the following facts:

- Alachua County has the fifth-widest income gap in the nation, with the majority of black households earning below the median income.
- Black babies experience fetal deaths 2.6 times more frequently than whites in Alachua County.
- Black students in Alachua County schools make up 36 percent of total enrollment, 10 percent of students enrolled in gifted programs and 43 percent of those suspended from school.

- Black students in Alachua County are 4.8 times more likely to drop out of school than whites and 1.6 times more likely to drop out of school than blacks in the rest of Florida.
- Alachua County has the highest rate of disproportionate contact between black youth and police officers in the state of Florida.
- Twenty-three percent of Alachua County youth ages 15-19 are black while only 7 percent of University of Florida undergraduates are black.

While I understand some people's reluctance to connect Robert Dentmond's death to his race, these statistics undeniably show that we live in a county where black people are systematically disadvantaged. That disadvantage gets played out in schools, hospitals, government offices and other public spaces every day. We are used to it. We too often accept it. We allow our county to appear as though black lives do not really matter here.

In a context where black lives do not really matter, it becomes possible for police to react to a depressed black boy in a black community with an extraordinary show of aggression and violence. While the police officers involved in the shooting should be held to account, they are not the only ones to blame. To prevent further tragedy, we must change the situation that leads to these statistics because it is the culture of discrimination and dehumanization that leads to the destruction of black bodies.

So what should we do now? I propose three immediate actions and 10 long-term actions to respond to this shooting in a way that will begin to change our county into a community where black lives matter. The first immediate steps to take include:

- Schedule another town hall meeting with ample space and time, and a format that allows dialogue and a chance for everyone to speak.
- Change the procedures involved in 911 crisis response, incorporating mental-health workers and drawing upon current research that shows that both adolescent and traumatized brains function differently than those of non-traumatized adults.
- Compose a task force focused on eliminating racial disparities in Alachua County charged with coordinating current and future efforts to implement the actions below, evaluating these efforts and making adjustments when needed.

Long-term actions to implement include:

Education

- Ensure that the best teachers teach classes that have high percentages of black children. The best teachers are respected and admired by students and parents, and they have classrooms that are consistently abuzz with engaged student learning.

- Protect the time of school counselors so that they are able to provide mental-health services rather than being consumed by administrative tasks.
- Place the best school leaders in charge of struggling programs. These leaders think innovatively, have charisma and emotional intelligence, communicate effectively, recognize and support effective teaching, eliminate racial disparities on their campuses, and actively build bridges between the school and the community.

Community development

- Incentivize more Section 8 housing options and low-income housing placements in ways that racially balance communities so that they reflect the demographics of the county as a whole.
- Improve the accessibility and efficiency of public transportation.
- Provide jobs to black youth.
- Develop and support recreational activities and programs that promote interactions between many different stakeholders in each community. Make sure all young people have adequate access to constructive extracurricular and weekend activities.

Health care

- Eliminate wait lists for black youth needing mental-health services.
- Ensure that the best doctors and therapists treat black children. Determine who those practitioners are based upon community recommendations and patient health outcomes.
- Make care accessible, efficient and affordable.

These improvements in our public services could radically transform our county, making it an exemplar of parity and equity. We could be the model of a community where all lives matter, where children like Robert receive the support they need long before a crisis occurs, and where we band together in times of crisis in ways that strengthen rather than destroy those lives.

— *Brianna L. Kennedy-Lewis is an assistant professor of education in the School of Teaching and Learning at UF.*

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The Gainesville Sun:

Can we have an honest conversation about race?

By [Nathan Crabbe](#)

Opinion editor

Published: Friday, April 1, 2016 at 6:01 a.m.

Robert Dentmond's tragic death has caused an outpouring of intense emotions in our community, which can be seen in several pieces in Sunday's paper.

These emotions were also on display this week at The Sun's reader advisory board meeting. The group discussed The Sun's coverage of the fatal shooting of Dentmond by law enforcement, with some members questioning the way it has been reported.

One board member found the online headline "Officers kill Gainesville teen" to be in bad taste. He also took issue with the use of "toy gun" in describing what Dentmond was carrying when he was shot, arguing that it didn't accurately describe that it was a realistic-looking replica of an assault rifle.

Another board member said the The Sun has tiptoed around the racial aspects of a black teen being killed. Even if officers followed protocol, she said, that doesn't negate the grief and outrage being experienced in the black community.

Gainesville acts like it doesn't have the same problems as other parts of the country, she said, but racial biases and disparities are issues here.

"I would really like to see a headline that says, 'Can we have an honest conversation about race?'" she said.

My hope is The Sun can help facilitate a discussion of problems in our community that Dentmond's death has brought out, such as systemic racial issues and gaps in mental health care.

The Sun's editorial last Sunday outlined some ways these problems are being addressed and what more might be done, while calling on community members for more suggestions. Guest columns posted this week at Gainesville.com, which will be collected in Sunday's Issues section, further examine these problems and offer potential solutions.

UF education professor Brianna Kennedy-Lewis' column lays out a long list of shameful racial disparities in education, health care, wages and policing in Alachua County. She proposes 13 different changes for our community to make.

The mental-health issues surrounding the shooting are considered in columns by Meridian Behavioral Healthcare CEO Maggie Labarta and Judy Broward and Terrie Mullin of the National Alliance on Mental Illness Gainesville. These pieces also put forward solutions our community should consider, such as police creating a Mental Health Squad.

Alachua County Sheriff Sadie Darnell explains the reasons behind law enforcement actions in her column, while the Rev. Milford Griner remembers Dentmond while calling for a more constructive community meeting on his death. Barbe Hau writes about an artist's reaction to the shooting alongside her painting of Dentmond.

These columns shouldn't be the last word on these issues. My hope is for more readers, in particular black community members, to offer their thoughts on these issues and ideas for change. Guest columns and letters to the editor about these and other issues can be emailed to letters@gainesville.com.

We do need to have an honest conversation about race and problems related to the shooting, including another town hall that gives residents affected by these problems the chance to be heard. All of our community must participate in the discussion to make progress on the problems that led to a young man's life being cut too short.

— *Nathan Crabbe is The Sun's opinion and engagement editor.*

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