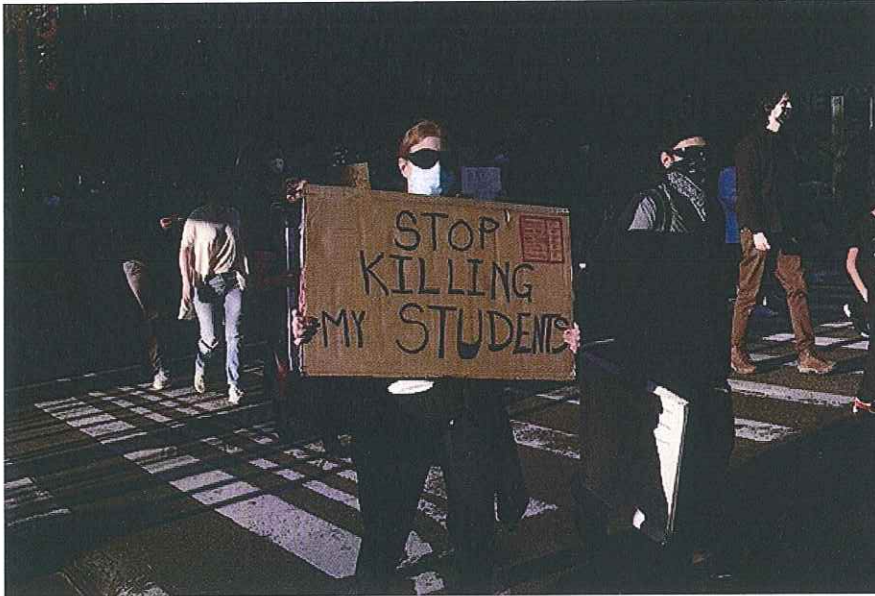


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'Teachers Cannot Be Silent': How Educators Are Showing Up for Black Students Following Protests

By [Madeline Will](#) on [June 1, 2020 5:46 PM](#)



By *Madeline Will and Sarah Schwartz*

Protests against police brutality have erupted across the country over the past three days, leading to tough classroom conversations about race, racism, and police violence.

Teachers, already struggling to reach students during the coronavirus pandemic, are now searching for ways to help them work through their feelings about the protests and the police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and other unarmed black men and women—without being with their students in person. The death of Ahmaud Arbery, a black man who was shot while jogging by two white men in Georgia earlier this month, has also inflamed national tensions.

It's a daunting conversation to have through a screen, many teachers said. The death of Floyd, a black man in Minneapolis who died last week as a police officer knelt on his neck for nearly nine minutes, has sparked national outrage. Protesters took to the streets in dozens of U.S. cities over the weekend, chanting phrases like "No justice, no peace," and "I can't breathe."

In many cases, peaceful protests turned into violent unrest, with police shooting tear gas and rubber bullets into the crowds and protesters setting fires, smashing storefront windows, and looting stores. More than 4,000 protesters were arrested, according to the Associated Press.

Black teachers are facing an additional burden when discussing these events with students, said Evin Shinn, an 11th grade U.S. history and language arts teacher at Cleveland High School in Seattle. He's one of only three black teachers at his school, and he feels called upon to address the protests and police brutality with his students, despite the emotional toll. Ninety percent of students at his school are students of color, and 20 percent are black.

"It's hard because as a teacher, you're not a therapist, you're not a social worker, you're not a doctor or a nurse—but those are all roles we take on when you become a teacher," Shinn said. "Particularly as a black educator, it's so important to show up for students in moments like this."

He messaged his students on the app Remind and told them he wasn't assigning any work this week. Instead, he wrote that students should do something to stop racism—like write a letter to elected officials, make a protest sign, or write a poem reflecting on inequities and the protests.

Then, he messaged his black students individually to see if they were OK and if there's anything he could do for them.

"I was very open," Shinn said, telling students that "I'm feeling definitely sad, and I'm feeling hopeless and angry, and I feel rage. How are you doing? How are you feeling?"

Students told him they felt like this was "one big emotional rollercoaster." One student said they were staying off social media because there's "a lot going on, and it's really sad."

"Usually, I'm there to process with students," Shinn said. "There's something about showing up and being in that space together and trying to figure out what it's going to look like together, and we don't have that space."

On Wednesday, he'll hold a virtual class meeting for any students who want to talk and process their emotions.

Abdul Wright, who teaches 8th grade language arts in North Minneapolis, also dropped his planned lessons last week. As protests filled the streets in his students' neighborhoods, he devoted his virtual classroom to discussing the death of George Floyd, and the response from the community. Right now, in his class, Wright says, "nothing else matters."

"I have to find a way to make meaning of this in a way that creates a better society for them," he said. Still, the idea of creating a lesson around these events drained him. Wright is black, and most of his students are as well.

"When you lived it and endured it, what it means to live unjust experiences, it triggers you. My people and the people in my community, we carry so much trauma," he said.

In a virtual meeting with his students last week, Wright introduced the Martin Luther King Jr. quote about riots: "A riot is the language of the unheard." He gave students space to talk about their feelings toward the protests that have, at times, turned violent, with protesters setting fires and breaking into businesses.

Students disagreed about protest tactics—some said that confrontation and damaging property would make protestors "look bad," Wright said. But another student said that protestors shouldn't be seeking public approval, and that black people have been criticized for protest of all forms. "It doesn't matter," Wright remembers her saying, "we're going to look bad regardless."

For many teachers, however, the school year is over, and they don't have the opportunity to hold complex class discussions.

Patrick Harris, a 6th and 7th grade English and social studies teacher at the Detroit Achievement Academy, had wrapped up his virtual classes last week. This week was meant to be spent preparing for his end-of-year conferences with students and their parents.

But after protests spread throughout Detroit over the weekend, Harris, who is black, asked his students, who are mostly black, to write a reflection. So far, he said, students have commented about how unfair the killing of Floyd—and other unarmed black men and women—was.

"They're confirming that this is something we've always seen—this is not a new image," he said. "They're not shocked by the revelation that black people are being assaulted by police officers, killed and murdered by police."

Right before school buildings shut down due to the coronavirus outbreak, Harris had wrapped up a unit about the origins of race, where students learned about DNA and skin color, the history of the racial hieroglyphy, and the concept of race as a social construct. He hopes students will be able to draw connections between that foundation and what's happening now.

If school buildings were open, Harris said he would be helping students make those explicit connections, as well as creating space for students to express their feelings and frustrations.

"The one thing that's the hardest with distance learning is that students are not able to be around their peers as often, and they're not able to talk to them and process in kid language," Harris said, adding that while he knows students are likely texting with each other, "there's nothing like the classroom in really guiding a safe space, [with] the teacher being a facilitator who's pushing them to go deeper."

'George Floyd Could Be Me'

In Minneapolis, teachers' first priority is helping their students and their neighborhoods survive, Wright said. Staff at the charter school where he works have gone out into the community to support clean-up efforts during the day, picking up trash, organizing food donations, and checking in on local businesses.

"Our school is closer than any other to the epicenter of the protests and the police violence. Our students are just hugely affected. This is their community," said Corinth Matera, an English teacher and journalism adviser at South High School in Minneapolis. "It's the Target where they work burning down, or the grocery store they were just at with their mom being taken over. And a lot of students saying, 'George Floyd could be me.'"

Many of Matera's students are protesting, or supporting community relief efforts. "I got an email from a student yesterday saying, 'I got shot by a rubber bullet and I can't feel my hands, so I probably can't finish my essay,'" Matera said.

Teachers at South voted on Monday to award all students credit for the 4th quarter, which ends this week. The staff had already discussed the option in weeks prior, in light of the pandemic, but the weekend's events "crystalized" a final decision, she said: "We don't want any student to

For now, teachers at the school are focused on emergency aid, Matera said, like getting food and necessities to families now that many grocery stores in the city have been closed or burned. But the protests have underscored how important it is for white teachers to examine their own practice, said Matera.

"We have too many white teachers in Minnesota. I am a white teacher. And I have been, and other folks have been, calling on our fellow white teachers to really challenge them to see where we are doing damage to our students of color," she said. "We need more teachers of color, but we also need, as white teachers, to examine ways in which we're complicit in the institutions that are perpetrating this violence against our students."

Meanwhile, in Louisville, Ky., Matthew Kaufmann, the state's high school teacher of the year, **was arrested on Sunday** while participating in a protest over the police shooting of Breonna Taylor, a 26-year-old black woman, in her apartment. Many students and recent graduates were also out there protesting, said Emilie McKiernan Blanton, a high school English teacher.

Kentucky teachers **have had experience protesting in the past couple years** over changes to their pensions, so they gave their students tips, Blanton said, such as bringing water and an external charger for their phones. She's friends on Facebook with several former students who posted about being tear gassed at the protest. Blanton sent them her phone number and told them to call her if they need a ride, or if they're arrested and need to be bailed out.

"They're doing peaceful assembly, it just happens to be next to something dangerous," she said. "I'm very proud of them. I'm always proud of my students when they stand up for themselves and do what's right."

A 'Teachable Moment'

It's important for teachers to address issues of race and racism with their students, educators say, both in these last few weeks of school and when classes resume in the fall.

Educators. This is a teachable moment. Don't be afraid to teach about the meaning of justice and the murder of George Floyd by the police. Our students are watching.

-- Pedro Noguera (@PedroANoguera) **June 1, 2020**

Here are some resources from nonprofits and media outlets that can help guide classroom conversations on race:

- The Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture launched an online portal called **Talking About Race** that's designed to help steer conversations about racism, racial identity, and the way these forces shape every aspect of society.
- PBS NewsHour Extra **released a lesson plan** for grades 6-12 about the death of George Floyd. The plan includes a news video (that omits the footage of Floyd's death) and discussion questions about the protests, police brutality, and media literacy.
- The New York Times' Learning Network shared an article about the protests, along with discussion questions, and **opened comments for students to share their opinion.**
- The Pulitzer Center partnered with the New York Times to turn the 1619 Project, a collection of essays and literary works observing the 400th anniversary of the beginning of American slavery, **into a curriculum for teachers of all grade levels.** The curriculum includes reading guides, activities, and other resources about the history of race in America.
- Teaching Tolerance, a project by the Southern Poverty Law Center, periodically updates **its package on teaching about race, racism, and police violence.**

Educators **also shared book recommendations** on Twitter, both for their students and for themselves. And Joe Truss, a middle school principal in San Francisco, **tweeted a list of actions** for white teachers to take now—including learning about restorative practices and redesigning curriculum to empower and engage students of color.

Think about how you can elevate and center the black experience in your curricula, year around, not just negative stories of oppression but lift up stories and examples of resistance, affirmation, and empowerment.

-- Joe Truss - Culturally Responsive Leadership (@trussleadership) **June 1, 2020**

Harris, the Detroit teacher, said it's the responsibility of all educators to "adopt an anti-racist approach" and amplify the voices of the marginalized in their classrooms. To start the conversation, he said, teachers should ask their students, from kindergarten on up, two basic questions: Is this fair? And how does this make you feel?

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Teachers cannot be silent during this time, Harris said. Teachers have to take a stand. Students are absorbing this, [and] they're going to ask themselves later on in life or even now, "What was my teacher doing during this time?"

Image: Protestors in New York City rally against the death of Minneapolis man George Floyd at the hands of police on May 31. —John Nacion/STAR MAX via AP

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Bald Eagle • 3 days ago

What about the unarmed white men and women killed by police? There are more of them, but they don't count? Why don't we talk about all people?

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John Bingamon  Bald Eagle • 2 days ago

Maybe because you are 2.5 times MORE likely to die from interaction with police if you are black, than if you are white? That doesn't bother you??

Oh, and by the way: you DO know that there are more white people than black in the US, right? Like, nearly 6 times as many -- and yet the total number of white people killed by police is only double that of black. So yeah, it is MUCH more dangerous to interact with the police as a black person than a white one.

You want to talk about overall deaths during police encounters, for "all" people? Fine. Have you been doing so on a frequent basis prior to this? Why do you bring it up now, in a discussion about the ADDITIONAL risk posed merely for having darker skin? Do you have a problem with discussing that difference? Do you feel that it just doesn't matter?

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Bald Eagle  John Bingamon • a day ago

You do know that Blacks commit more than 50% of violent crimes and are only 13% of the population? 9 unarmed Blacks were killed by police this year and 26 white men were. That's not the point, anyway. What makes Floyd's murder more meaningful than Dorn's In St. Louis? 77 year old Black former police captain shot by rioters and left to die on the street. Doesn't his life matter?

I've been asking these questions for more than forty years.

Are you one of those ONLY BLM white liberals that is so enraged by your white privileged life?

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Bald Eagle • 3 days ago

I really want to know what happened to judging a person by the content of their character, not the color of their skin.

"I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character."

Martin Luther King, Jr.

This was the most important statement about race made in the last 100 years, maybe ever. Apparently, today, it is not important. Everything is judged by race and skin color, and I mean everything.

Martin Luther King's life, lessons, and sacrifice was wasted.

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