

Gallery Walk Excerpts

Angry that public schools here have always taught American history through a **Eurocentric** prism, parents of black children began pleading with local school officials to offer a course in African-American history.

That was nearly 40 years ago.

From a New York Times article, “Philadelphia Mandates Black History for Graduation”

This article was originally published on June 25, 2005 and was written by journalist, Michael Janofsky.

"You cannot understand American history without understanding the African-American experience; I don't care what anybody says," said Paul G. Vallas, the school system's chief executive, who is white. "It benefits African-American children who need a more comprehensive understanding of their own culture, and it also benefits non-African-Americans to understand the full totality of the American experience."

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Critics of the policy shift say it will further polarize the city by focusing attention on just one race and not dealing with other racial and ethnic groups like Mexicans, Chinese or Poles.

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Supporters say the course will place a new emphasis on historical African-American figures like Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells and Dr. Charles Drew, whose contributions to American life and culture seldom get more than a brief mention, if that, in the current textbooks that many schools use.

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The Philadelphia School District includes 185,000 students, two-thirds of whom are African-American, and only two in seven are white or Hispanic. The School Reform Commission, a panel that sets policy and is now composed of three whites and two blacks, voted 5 to 0 in February to make the course mandatory in all 53 high schools after some in recent years had offered African-American history as an elective.

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The speaker of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives, John M. Perzel, an otherwise strong supporter of the city's schools for recent improvements in test scores, asked the commission to reconsider making the course mandatory. Mr. Perzel, a Republican who represents a district in northeast Philadelphia that is largely white, said in a letter to the commission chairman, James E. Nevels, that he was concerned that the mandate "will divide, rather than unite" the city "and thereby erode the positive learning environment."

An aide to Mr. Perzel said the letter was prompted, in part, by complaints from constituents. Mr. Perzel declined a request for an interview, but his sentiments appear to reflect discomfort among some whites elsewhere in the city.

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Standing outside a recreation center in Fishtown, a largely white working-class neighborhood, Mike Budnick, 16, called the requirement "a bad idea" and said he was not especially interested in learning about black culture or heritage.

"I'm more interested in our history," he said.

A friend of Mr. Budnick, Arbi Ferko, also 16, said, "It's not our history to learn," and pointed out, as other critics have, that the school had not sought to create courses on the history of other groups.

Supporters of the course are dismayed by such views, insisting that in large measure, African-Americans, like no other ethnic group, have been cheated by contemporary textbooks and social studies curriculums that introduce students to blacks in this country as slaves from Africa with no prior language, culture or heritage.

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"Too often, African-Americans are marginalized in American society," said Sandra Dungee Glenn, a commission member who was the driving force behind making the course mandatory. "People's views and understanding of who we are focus on us as descendents of slaves. It begins and ends there, giving us inferior status."

The course is designed to alter those perceptions by reviewing the origins of civilization in Africa and early developments in African history before tracking the movement of Africans to North America as slaves.

From that point, the course follows the progress and travails of blacks throughout American history with a special emphasis on their contributions.

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Patricia Thomas Whyatt taught the course at Strawberry Mansion, a nearly all-black school of 900 students, and found that even her own students had misconceptions of their race.

By the end of school this month, she said, not only had perceptions changed but self-esteem had improved as well.

One of her students, Christopher Davis, 18, said: "In American society, we're known as gangsters, drug dealers and killers. People don't know all about our heritage, what we stood for, our accomplishments as a culture. I feel better now because I know a little bit more about how we lived before we got here."

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The effort to infuse African American studies into the curriculum dates back at least to the 1960s. Philadelphia was not immune to the wave of Black Power insurgence that washed across the nation during that decade. This was evident when 3,500 students walked out of Philadelphia classrooms on November 17, 1967, to demand an end to cultural exclusion.

The **incendiary** climate was indicative of many African Americans' expressed desire to affirm their cultural identities.

From an article in The Notebook, “New Course Grew out of Years of Struggle”

The Notebook is an independent newspaper that reports on the Philadelphia Public Schools. This article was published on November 24, 2005 and written by Yulanda Essoka.

According to Dungee Glenn, there have been “attempts to put African American history on the side, never as a central issue. It's never been infused in our curriculum.”

This failure motivated her to begin working on a focused African and African American history initiative three years ago. As an alumna of Girls High, she recalls being frustrated in high school when – no matter what the subject – little was included in class discussions about people who looked like her.

As she visited schools throughout the city in her SRC role, the commissioner says she observed students' lack of motivation about their education and noted that “not much seemed to have changed.” She attributed this disconnect, in part, to a flawed curriculum that did not reflect African American students' existence.

“There's nothing to ground kids,” she states. “The only messages about Black existence are negative media images.”

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Essoka.*

To gain a comprehensive perspective on the issue, she began to review research on the nexus between self-esteem and student performance and concluded that self-esteem “really did have a link to academic outcomes,” along with teacher perceptions.

She notes, “History gives people a sense of themselves and who they were and what they have become. It gives a sense of where they fit in. Most people have a slavery perception [about African Americans].” Therefore, it is “important to correct misconceptions and misperceptions that most people have of people of African descent.”

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Dungee Glenn says that the mandatory high school history class allows a “specialized focus in the context of world and American history.” The commissioner notes that African American history is a “particularly important component of [world and American history] and therefore should be a separate course at the high school level.”

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According to the resolution, the stipulated infusion is designed to “ensure that all students and teachers gain intellectual respect for children of African descent.”

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Since the unanimous February vote affirming the resolution, there has been local, national and international interest, with school districts in California, Massachusetts, Michigan and Wisconsin examining the initiative in Philadelphia. Dungee Glenn has even been contacted by Silvia Galleta, the Secretary of Education for the state of São Paulo in Brazil.

Aside from a few SRC speakers who expressed disagreement with the mandatory course and one caller on the commissioner's WURD-AM radio show, *School Days*, the direct response Dungee Glenn has received has been overwhelmingly positive, she says.

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But there are opponents to the policy – most visibly Pennsylvania House Speaker John Perzel and Chester Finn of the conservative Thomas B. Fordham Foundation. Both have argued that the resolution, by elevating the history of one group, discriminates against and minimizes other cultures whose history is not mandated.

However, Dungee Glenn maintains that just because the District's world and American history courses are not named for particular racial groups does not mean they are not also racialized.

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Dungee Glenn states that the goal of the course is “to bring onto the world stage the history of a continent that has been deliberately excluded – the history of an entire race that has been excluded.”

Dungee Glenn believes the content of the new course is important to cover regardless of districts’ racial composition because there is a need to be “honest with children and honest in education.” And, in the past, she says, the School District of Philadelphia has presented “misinformation and outright lies.”

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Dungee Glenn believes “this course is a very appropriate response to [the] needs of children’s education right here and right now. Perhaps five years from now we’ll be able to blend, infuse and include more critical elements.”

“This course will get more scrutiny to make sure that it’s accurate and not about self-promotion,” she adds.

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Nicholas Torres, President, Congreso de Latinos Unidos

“We live in a community that is Latino American and African American. I think it's shortsighted of the School District to mandate one and not mandate the other. . . . We are a nation of diverse communities. Do we need to emphasize different cultures – African American, Latino American? Yes, we do. How we do it is the area we are debating. We should teach cultural pride and celebration of diversity. There should be a core curriculum and then there should be electives. It should be set up like college.”

–CN8's *“It's Your Call with Lynn Doyle,”* Sept. 13, 2005

**Gary B. Nash, professor emeritus at UCLA and
director of the National Center for History in the
Schools**

“It does put Philadelphia into an elite group of school districts that are taking the study of history very, very seriously. . . . Each district is entitled to experiment. If I were on a school board, I would be torn between pumping up regular courses and the approach taken here.”

–Philadelphia Inquirer, June 22, 2005

J. Whyatt Mondesire, President, NAACP Philadelphia

“American life is inconceivable without its Black presence. The sheer intelligence and imagination of African Americans have disproportionately shaped American culture, produced wealth in the American economy, and refined notions of freedom and equality in American politics. Consequently, the teaching of African and African American history reminds us that there would be no American culture without Black America.”

–Testimony before Philadelphia School Reform Commission by NAACP, June 15, 2005

Chester Finn, President of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation

“Philadelphia is setting a woeful precedent. If it holds firm to this mandate, it will either anger 35 percent of its own students by ignoring their stories, perhaps driving them out of the public schools and further segregating that system. Or it will have to follow its required course in African/African American History with scads of others, tailored to singular histories of other groups and places.”

*–Newsletter of the Thomas B. Fordham Foundation,
June 16, 2005*

Mark H. Morial, President and CEO of the National Urban League

“This isn't a brief for 'division.' Rather, it's a frank acknowledgement that we can't honestly face our present and our future until we've honestly faced our past.”

—*www.civilrights.org, posted June 29, 2005*

John Perzel, Speaker, Pennsylvania House of Representatives

“I would like to see students master basic reading, writing, and arithmetic. Once we have them down pat, I don't care what they teach... They should understand basic American history before we go into African American history.”

–Philadelphia Inquirer, June 22, 2005

Donald H. Smith, past president, National Alliance of Black School Educators

“What the School Reform Commission has done in Philadelphia is heroic and may lead the nation in reforming curriculum so that it is just and truthful.”

–CN8's *“It's Your Call with Lynn Doyle,”* Sept. 13, 2005

Yulanda Essuka, on Editorial Board for The Notebook

Given students' lack of exposure to African and African American history, false perceptions are not surprising. So it is important to rectify the inaccuracies that often result in students buying into myths and stereotypes about Blacks, thereby perpetuating prejudice and racism.

For decades the District curriculum has portrayed Black people as entering the historical world stage as slaves and as impediments in history, rather than contributors to it. By correcting this false notion and providing a broader historical lens for students to view themselves and each other, everyone benefits.

African Americans hail from a rich African legacy, but this is often overlooked. Before being captured and transported to the shores of America as a cheap source of labor, Africans had already navigated the oceans as captains of their own ships. Long before colonization, Africa had a developed civilization. However, Africans' achievements were denigrated despite their contributions, because when Europeans colonized Africa, they also colonized the interpretation of history. These are the roots of racism that permeate society and make teaching the African and African American experience to students so important.

- *The Notebook, November 24, 2005*

Ron Whitehorne, a retired teacher, is a *Notebook* editorial board member. In the 1960s he organized “liberation schools” that taught African American history to hundreds of White high school students in the Philadelphia area.

An African American history course offers many opportunities to make connections with the experience of other ethnic groups. For example, the annexation of the Mexican southwest, a central event in the experience of the Chicano people, was driven by the expansionist aims of the slave owners who needed fresh land for cotton and new states to maintain their dominant position in the national government. And there is the experience of the Irish, who were effectively pitted against Blacks and often sought to gain respectability and status by championing White supremacy. Yet another example is the anti-Chinese riots in the West and exclusionary laws that developed alongside the effort to impose Jim Crow on Blacks in the South.

The history of African Americans also offers some insights into how change happens. The abolitionist and civil rights movements are positive examples. And this history, while revealing the strength of racism in our national life, also demonstrates that Black-White unity is possible and critical to moving our society forward.

An African American history course does not ensure that these themes and connections will receive full treatment, as evidenced by the “heroes and holidays” approach prevalent in many of our classrooms. But, when compared to the traditional American history curriculum, the new course provides a better context for the development of a critical history.’

- *The Notebook, November 24, 2005*