

EDUCATION

History comes alive at the Gordon School; middle schoolers discuss the lessons of the inauguration

Linda Borg The Providence Journal

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EAST PROVIDENCE — In a school dedicated to justice and diversity, a group of seventh-graders reflected on a presidential inauguration that, for so many people, represented a return to those very values.

The Gordon School, a private, co-educational school whose commitment to multiculturalism is central to its mission, invited middle-school students to reflect on the message of the peaceful transition of power Wednesday.

But this school, unlike several public schools the Journal contacted, chose not to show the inauguration of President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris live out of an abundance of caution. Instead, teachers showed excerpts from the inauguration during the last class period, after teachers had a chance to screen the broadcast.

“I watched the Challenger explode,” said Gabe Burnstein, middle school director. “I was in first grade. It was absolutely traumatizing.”

“We want to protect them as children and inspire them,” he said. “But we also want to make sure every child sees [the inauguration]. This is a historical moment — the inauguration of the first Black, female vice-president — we want everyone to witness that moment together.”

The Gordon School has used the entire presidential campaign as a teachable moment, part of a larger conversation about the Constitution, and later, the articles of impeachment.

Wednesday morning, the entire middle school met over Zoom to discuss the peaceful transfer of power.

“We looked at letters from presidents to their successors,” Burnstein said. “Our conversation this morning was how do we win or lose with dignity and grace?”

The school wanted to make sure that students understood that former President Trump's decision not to attend the inauguration was an aberration, not the norm.

Twenty-two-year-old Amanda Gorman's spoken poem, "The Hill We Climb," was perhaps the breakout moment of the inauguration, a litany of justice denied but also a soaring message of hope.

More: Amanda Gorman performs powerful poem at inauguration: Read the full text of 'The Hill We Climb'

Tamar Paull, a seventh-grade humanities teacher, played the poem, then asked students to respond.

"As you're listening to this, consider our conversations about the Declaration of Independence, about Animal Farm ..." she said.

One part of the poem resonated with her students:

"The loss we carry, a sea we must wade. We've braved the belly of the beast. We've learned that quiet isn't always peace."

The poem, Paull said, is meant to be a performance. Notice the rhyming words, the alliteration.

The belly of the beast alludes to the insurrection, one student said. Another thought it referred to the pandemic's surging death toll, while another said it speaks to Trump's presidency.

What about the phrase, "In the norms and notions of what just is, isn't always justice."

"Just is" refers to "the things we cannot change," said one girl.

"She's speaking about the justice system," said Alejandro Quintero Cashore. "How people of color get harsher sentences. That just is, it's not justice."

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"Look how her poem turns," Paull said. After speaking about inaction and inertia, the poet says, "if we merge mercy with might, and might with right, then love becomes our legacy and change our children's birthright."

Wednesday, Gordon students listened to Gorman's inauguration poem. Thursday, they will write their own.

Linda Borg covers education for the Journal.