

Tackling racism in the classroom

By Merri Rosenberg
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“What comes to mind when you hear Native American, indigenous people, Indians?” teacher Jenice Mateo-Toledo recently asked 20 sixth graders in Hastings Public Schools.

The students bent their heads and wrote responses on their papers. Tribes, feathers, teepees and “savages” were mentioned in the discussion that followed, as well as the Redskins football team.

Then the students watched a video in which various Native Americans told personal stories. Asked again what they associate with Native Americans, students used different words: culture ... family ... doctor ... resilient. And someone noted that some consider the Washington Redskins to have an offensive and racist brand.

And there was empathy for an ethnic group that has felt marginalized.

As one student said, “This gave a whole other perspective, where you see them as normal people.”

This lesson is part of a unique curriculum that Hastings has embraced since 2017, when the middle school launched a three-year required course for all students, starting in sixth grade and continuing through eighth grade, on “Sparking Courageous Conversations: Discussing Race and Racism.”

Located in southern Westchester County, the 1,600-student district is 74% white, 12% Hispanic, 5% Asian and 2% black, according to State Education Department data. Only 4% are economically disadvantaged and 1% are English language learners.

In part, the course was a response to some disturbing incidents in the district. In September 2015, a teacher of color (who has since left the district) observed incoming seniors singing a rap song using the “n” word. Frustrated by the administration’s response, which suggested the teacher deal with the students directly, the teacher and two colleagues launched a “Race Matters” committee.

One of the recommendations was to offer a classroom curriculum based on race and racism. Three teachers volunteered to teach a 10-week class. To prepare, they attended, over the course of a year, multiple workshops, training sessions and courses at Columbia University’s Teachers College and Queens College. They also attended a conference sponsored by the Center for Racial Justice in Education (formerly known as Border Crossers) as well as the National Association of Independent School’s annual People of Color Conference.

Hastings isn’t alone in feeling a need to address racial incidents in schools, which can involve jokes, name-calling, offensive language, bullying with a racial component and other incidents.

In late June, a New Jersey mother



Book clubs for students and teachers grew out of a “Race Matters” committee in the Hastings Public Schools. Students read books such as *Piecing Me Together*, about a black girl who is labeled “at risk” and is sick of being singled out as someone in need of fixing. Students also read *The Night Diary*, about 12-year-old girl who tries to understand the racial tensions that led to the formation of Pakistan in 1947, while teachers read *Waking Up White*, written by an arts administrator and teacher who made efforts to reach out to students and families of color but felt poorly received until an “aha!” moment shifted her worldview.

was beaten by a 13-year-old boy who had been bullying the woman’s son, a day after she complained to the school about the alleged threats which included telling her son to “go back to Mexico.” Also at the end of June, the Webutuck Central School District in Dutchess County began looking into an alleged threat after a racial incident involving online comments made in a “chat” involving a group of students.

In the Hastings district, staff and administrators decided to approach the issue of racism by doing what they do best: educate. “We need to talk about race and education,” said Gail Kipper, principal of Farragut Middle School. “A district has to look at the community and contextualize the curriculum. You need a committed board of education and administration.”

In the Sparking Courageous Conversations class, students spend 80 minutes every other day discussing both the history of racism and current events.

Some students were nervous at the outset, Kipper said. “They didn’t have the skill set or vocabulary to address these issues,” she said.

To help students become comfortable tackling these tough topics, teachers set clear expectations and rules. These

include encouraging students to speak and listen to each other with respect and allowing silence to think about especially challenging statements or comments. If a student says something that is not well-received, the class ethos is for all to learn to be comfortable with discomfort.

The class is a challenge for the teachers, too. For instance, teachers admit having their own biases. This is a way to encourage students to take a deeper look at implicit biases they may have, said Assistant Principal Christopher Keogh.

Educators used to think they should be blind to color, but that’s changing, he said. Instead of aspiring to be “color-blind,” teachers and students now discuss being “color brave” and being willing to engage in “courageous conversations.”

Added teacher Carolyn Denton, “It’s explicit education about race, on becoming racially literate.” Partly, it’s student driven: “We get to know what the kids want to talk about.”

What merits discussion? Topics like immigration, stereotypes and visibility, symbols of hate and racism, colorblindness, and identities and labels, among others. For the seventh and eighth grade, the curriculum addresses such concepts as ally-ship (learning

how to stand up for students who may be marginalized), beauty standards, holidays and cultural appropriation, and institutional racism (see related story, page 9).

Also of interest are small indignities called “micro-aggressions.” For instance, a joke told during lunchtime might remind minority students that there is a dominant culture and that they are not part of it.

“Even if students are saying something joking, or as a micro-aggression, that’s not acceptable,” said teacher Stephanie DeFino.

Hastings also has a multicultural book fair, featuring works by authors of different ethnic groups and backgrounds. The district is working on hiring practices to ensure a more diverse staff, continuing to work on parent and community outreach and establish district protocol to address hate and bias incidents.

In response to some students’ desire to go beyond the curriculum, for example, a book club gave them the opportunity to discuss books such as *Piecing Me Together* by Renée Watson, about an African-American girl navigating her identity and her family.

Detra Price-Dennis, an associate professor of education at Teachers College, Columbia University, led the book club with Mateo-Toledo and Keogh from April 2017 through December 2018.

Price-Dennis told *On Board* that she believes Hastings ought to be a model for other districts. Teachers in many districts care about racial literacy and “want to know what to do,” she said.

“Racial literacy is important,” she added. “It doesn’t treat race as a burden but racism as a burden.”

Districts that offer an elective on racial literacy need to explain the concept to parents, Price-Dennis said. “Kids will say something parents may not want to hear.”

For instance, a student may want to talk about whatever was last discussed in class, and some parents might not view that as ideal dinner conversation.

Hastings has formed partnerships not only with Teachers College, but also with the Center for Racial Justice and Facing History. All faculty, not just those teaching the course, are required to have professional development on topics including understanding implicit bias and providing diverse experiences. Other mandated experiences include having teachers attend author presentations with students during the multicultural book fair, as well as presentation by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre.

“Hastings has a deep commitment to humanity,” said Price-Dennis, the Columbia professor. “I love what they’re doing in Hastings, combining a knowledge base and deep community.”