

WHOLE HISTORIES

A STUDENT-POWERED GUIDE ON IMPROVING RACE AND HISTORY EDUCATION IN YOUR SCHOOL

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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE WHOLE HISTORIES CAMPAIGN

Studies show that many school [textbooks fail](#) to comprehensively cover the history of racism in America. Meanwhile, [7 in 10 young people](#) are seeking more ways to learn about race, its history, and its implications for today.

On April 1, 2021, DoSomething.org and The Allstate Foundation launched the Whole Histories program. This program was designed to empower students in the movement to fight erasure and to advocate for a more inclusive and accurate curriculum relating to race, racism, and history.

Through the Whole Histories program, tens of thousands of students nationwide submitted their ideas for textbooks and lesson plans that better cover subject areas, historical figures, and events related to race. By the program's close on June 1, **we received 67,007 student responses**. Using their submissions, along with the guidance of educators and experts, we've created this guide to elevate student voices and provide school districts with actionable ways to advocate for more inclusive curriculum in their schools.

PROGRAM HIGHLIGHTS

67,007

responses were collected from
students aged 13 - 25 years old

WHAT WE HEARD FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

PROMPT #1

What is one subject area, historical event, or historical figure concerning race/racism you wish you would have learned more about in your school curriculum or textbook? How did you end up learning more about this subject, event, or figure?



The Civil Rights Movement was the most discussed topic in students' responses, which suggests that this period in history serves as most students' **primary (if not exclusive) introduction to Black history.**

In their responses, we saw the Civil Rights Movement referenced as both a positive and negative example of racial education in students' personal experiences.

"Everyone learns about the same thing: Martin Luther King Jr., Harriet Tubman, Rosa Parks — it is the same content every year. I appreciate these individuals, but I think we need to dig deeper when learning about historical figures, events, etc. For example, Claudette Colvin, a 15-year old African American woman who was influenced by Rosa Parks [and] Amelia Boynton Robinson, another civil rights activist. We need to learn these underground figures/events because everyone knows only the bare minimum."

PROMPT #1

Students were interested in digging deeper to find positive narratives about the contributions and achievements of Black Americans. In their responses, they spoke about the formation of Black women-led civic organizations, the underrecognized work of Black inventors, and the role of Black activists in the movement for LGBTQ liberation.

While Black history was discussed most frequently in students' responses, Native American and Asian American history were also commonly discussed.

A common theme among self-identifying students of color was the feeling that, by not seeing their own cultures represented in history curricula, they themselves were being erased or ignored.

"I wish in school there was a more accurate education about the genocide that happened to the Native Americans. As a Native American myself it was hard hearing school constantly saying I don't exist anymore and seeing my peers not only believe them, but at times pretend to be Native and appropriating our cultures."

"I wish my school curriculum covered more information regarding the US' history with Asian hate. In regards to the way Asians were depicted in WWII times and the Chinese Exclusion Act, both topics were barely addressed. As an Asian American, I had to search the internet on my own or hear stories from older Asian friends/family who are living primary sources. Only from the victims of Asian discrimination and hate have I been able to learn more about this history."

MOST COMMONLY NAMED PEOPLE IN STUDENTS' RESPONSES:

01. Martin Luther King Jr
02. Rosa Parks
03. Christopher Columbus
04. Jim Crow
05. Claudette Colvin
06. Harriet Tubman
07. Malcolm X
08. George Floyd
09. KKK
10. Frederick Douglass

PROMPT #1

Several students expressed a **desire to learn about figures beyond those who they were most frequently taught about**, including Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, and Harriet Tubman. Malcolm X and Claudette Colvin were among the most commonly suggested names of figures they'd like to learn more about instead. The pair were most often spoken about as obscure figures within history who students wished to learn more about. Although, it should be noted that both of these figures are recognized for their contributions to the Civil Rights Movement — once again anchoring students' knowledge of Black history to this period.

"In my historical classes we learned a lot about Martin Luther King Jr. but we rarely learned about Malcolm X who was a great leader for the African American community, and brought awareness of systemic racism to many Americans. I learned about Malcolm X when I read a book about his life, it was eye-opening reading about his journey."

"Claudette Colvin, the first woman of color to refuse to give up her seat, even before Rosa Parks. I ended up learning about her from informational articles that were rising back during summer 2020 while the BLM movement was in its peak. I had never heard of her before that."

Among the top 10 most commonly named people, George Floyd was the only individual from the present day. His prominence within student responses shows the impact that George Floyd's murder and the ensuing Black Lives Matter (BLM) protests of 2020 had on students' understanding of race and racism in the US.

It also indicates an acknowledgment from students that **contemporary histories have a place in students' racial education**. Several students explained that their interest in history concerning race and racism could be traced back to the summer of 2020, which led them to seek out alternative sources for this kind of education.

"I wish I could have learned more about the events regarding George Floyd and the BLM protests. I believe it is just as important to learn about modern history as it is ancient history and to be informed on current events in order to learn from them. I was able to learn more about this myself by researching and finding several different unbiased sources to learn from."

"Current racial inequality issues. Schools skip over the modern-day issues and make us believe that it isn't an issue anymore. Especially when there was the BLM movement over the summer and prior to that in the school year of 2020. Schools didn't teach us the current events, and so I learned about them by myself."

PROMPT #2:

What is one way your school curriculum, teachers, or textbooks did a good job teaching you about race or racism in the US?

Forty-one percent of young people had positive feedback about the racial education they received. These students felt their schools and/or teachers successfully covered these topics.

Some students spoke about individual teachers who made a positive impact on their racial education, suggesting that their experience was not necessarily the norm across classrooms.

“While my schools and textbooks as a whole did not do a strong job of teaching about race or racism in the US, individual teachers that I had during my school career made a meaningful investment in this way. In particular, my 8th grade US History teacher made it a priority to help his students gain empathy and understanding for all people groups within the US by presenting all perspectives from specific historical events. His investment made a significant impact on me.”

“I once had a teacher who would remind us of the grand scope and timeline of history. For example, if we were talking about the world wars, he would bring up that segregation was still being practiced heavily at the time. It really made our understanding of how recent it was that civil rights were granted. This also helped to show us that while it may seem we’ve gotten very far, there’s still much more we can do.”

Others spoke about specialized programming across their school’s curriculum, particularly around cultural events like Black History Month.

“During Black History Month, my school would incorporate Black history into every subject. For example, in English we would read the memoirs of Frederick Douglass, and in science learn about the contributions of African Americans. We would also have research papers on figures that weren’t as well known. My school was a diverse school, both among the teachers and the students. Therefore, it did not focus on racism towards only Black people but to Asians and other marginalized groups as well.”

Forty-eight percent of young people had negative feedback about the racial education they received. These students felt their teachers did not successfully teach them about these topics or broader understandings of race or racism in the US. They could not name a positive example of racial education from their personal experiences, frequently referring to their education in this area as “the bare minimum.”

PROMPT #3:

What is one way you'd like to see your school curriculum or textbooks improve its content on race and racism in the US?

MOST PREVALENT TOPICS IN STUDENTS' RESPONSES:

01. Modern-day impacts of racism on racial and ethnic minorities
41% of responses
02. Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement
22% of responses
03. Inclusive histories for all racial and ethnic minorities, including Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latinx Americans
15% of responses

The overarching message from young people in their responses to this prompt was a desire to be exposed to more **“accurate depictions”** of US history. The word “accurate” and its variations frequently repeated across responses

*“I would like to see textbooks recognize that Christopher Columbus did not discover America, he invaded it and killed thousands of Native Americans. **I would also like to see a historically accurate version** of Thanksgiving. The Pilgrims did not eat in peace with the Native Americans, but used the feast to celebrate their “win” after slaughtering hundreds of Native Americans.”*

*“We need to help write history **based on the minority’s point of view** so we can get a more accurate representation.”*

One way students suggested this could be done was by introducing a more contemporary perspective. Students wanted more discussion of current events concerning race, as well as of the lingering impacts of racism and historically racist power structures that are felt to this day.

*“I wish my school curriculum would focus more on the lasting impacts of racism in America. So many textbooks gloss over such extensive periods of oppression, and **they act as if the Civil Rights Act of 1964 was the total and utter end of racism and***

PROMPT #3

segregation nationwide. However, that is so far from the truth, as lasting effects of oppression still exist everywhere: modern police brutality, unemployment, poverty, and even misogyny, all stem in some form from racism, and schools must teach this."

"I would like for classes that deal with current issues, such as World History or Human Geography, to include more first-hand insight from people of color on their own experiences in modern times. I believe it is very important that schools inform their students of current events, and the current impacts of racism, and I think the best way to do this would be by discussing current events and hearing directly from individuals affected by them."

Once again, the Civil Rights Movement and Civil War were discussed frequently. To make curriculum covering these events more inclusive, students suggested expanding curriculum to cover the events and figures taught about in school, and improving language in curriculum to better or more accurately reflect the injustices that were inflicted during these times.

"I would like the language to change and not be passive about slavery or civil rights infractions. I want to see textbooks assign blame and be really honest about the past instead of trying to make events seem less recent or not as detrimental to groups of people. I want it to be honest about the flaws of our leaders in the past."

"One way I would like to see my curriculum to improve its content on race and racism in the US it just go more deeper into it, like talk about Juneteenth or Emmett Till's murder and how it sparked many things for the Civil Rights Movement."

Finally, students expressed an interest in learning about the histories of a variety of ethnic and racial minorities, including Black, Latinx, Asian, and Native American histories. Overall, there was a call for curricula to not glorify the actions of colonizers and enslavers, and instead celebrate the contributions of all Americans.

"I'd like the curriculum to be more inclusive. Not to just focus on slavery as the only thing in African American history. Include the history of Hispanics and Asians, not just immigration. Include the history of the Native Americans and indigenous people, not just "Indians" and Christopher Columbus."

"I want them to be more inclusive, diverse, and authentic when discussing history. Yes, this is the US, but we are a conglomeration of every other nation in the world and it's time we showcase every student's background and what we've learned from those moments in history."

HOW YOU CAN TAKE ACTION

BUILD ACCURATE, ANTI-RACIST, & ANTI-BIAS CURRICULUM.

This process starts by challenging your own biases and assumed knowledge — even, and perhaps especially, those that you hold unconsciously. Really question the truths you take for granted before disseminating them to your students.

“I want educators and students to challenge what has been falsely presented for centuries as ‘normal’ and ‘the standard,’” says **Dr. Kimya Nuru Dennis, activist, educator, and founder of 365 Diversity**. “For instance, Black people are descendants of thousands of years of histories, sciences, mathematics, arts, and literatures on the Afrikan continent... Most people complete K-12, college, terminal degrees, and even become a schoolteacher based on the falsehood that white people either created or are the main developers and main presenters of histories, sciences, mathematics, arts, and literatures.”

Student engagement is one of the best ways to ensure that you aren’t holding all of the knowledge in a classroom. Give students opportunities to think critically about information and draw their own conclusions.

“Resources need to be diverse in style. Providing students with a variety of primary sources allows them to develop their own thinking and produce knowledge themselves,” says **New York history teacher Katherine Bateman**. “Resources can include texts, images, documents, fiction, paintings, newspaper clippings, advertisements, political cartoons. This diversity allows lessons and curriculum to feel inviting and accessible.”

“Present multiple perspectives so students can begin to recognize when information gets distorted or misrepresented to serve white supremacy,” says **Dr. Jen Newton, assistant professor in special education at Ohio University and the co-founder of Teaching is Intellectual**. “Use language that is both accurate and humanizing (e.g. ‘enslaved’ rather than ‘slaves’). We must all move past the individualized perspective of racism and shift to seeing how systems are designed to oppress Black people and people of color. Then we must actively dismantle those systems and shift power toward equity.”

Building inclusive lesson plans extends beyond just the material you teach to the way that you teach it. Question how your delivery may advantage or disadvantage certain students, and then explore alternate methods.

“Be open to shifting how you teach. Our system of education is linear and rewards credentialing (getting As, high test scores, honors/accelerated classes). Unfortunately, these measures track more often to family income than to learning,” says **Liz Dempsey Lee, K-12 educator, adjunct faculty at Lesley University, and educational consultant**.

“Traditional approaches to teaching can increase inequity among students while other approaches (inquiry-based/hands-on teaching) help all students learn more.”

RESOURCES:

[Critical Practices for Anti-Bias Education](#) (*Learning for Justice*)

[Resources for Educators Focusing on Anti-Racist Learning and Teaching](#) (*Early Childhood Education Assembly*)

[Classroom Resources](#) (*Learning for Justice*)

[Curriculum, Lesson Plans, and Classroom Resources](#) (*Black Lives Matter at School*)

[Resources for Teaching About Race and Social Justice](#) (*United Federation of Teachers*)

SEEK OUT DIVERSE PERSPECTIVES.

There is no such thing as impartial history, and our understanding of history only gets more accurate when we hear it told from a variety of perspectives. Start with an audit of your own curriculum, textbooks and school materials to determine who is telling the histories your students are learning, and which perspectives you're omitting or uplifting in the process.

“Investigate the demographics and cultures represented in the authors, publishers, works cited, and reference pages of materials in school libraries, publishers used for the schools, textbooks, and articles used for the classrooms,” says **Dr. Nuru Dennis**. “If nearly everything used in your classroom is created and/or presented by power majorities (white people, men, cisgender, heterosexuals, religious majority, language majority, able health, formally educated, wealthy) then it is impossible to create an inclusive and equity curriculum.”

The [Zinn Education Project](#) encourages teachers to shift the focus of history education from those in power to the ordinary people who powered movements and shaped our society. Challenge your students to question who gets to make history, and who gets to tell it.

“Resources have to reflect a diversity of people across time and place. These resources have to show a variety of people contributing to the making of history,” says Bateman. “These resources also have to give a full picture of the subjects depicted in the resources, inviting a complicated analysis of historical figures. A study of history should also avoid focusing primarily on important individuals, as this often lends itself to a very white and male-centric telling of history. Instead, history should focus on movements and people contributing to change.”

Beyond the authors and sources in your curriculum, seek out diverse perspectives in your own school and community, and invite them to help find the gaps that need to be filled.

“Inclusivity in schools also requires paying attention to whose ideas, beliefs, and preferences are valued, and whose are not heard at all. I ask schools to pay attention to who is in the room and at the table, literally and figuratively,” says Dempsey Lee. “Once you determine who has a voice, figure out who is NOT in the room and at the table. Reach out to these students and families and ask questions. Above all, listen to what they say.”

RESOURCES:

[Historic Topic-Based Resources for Teachers](#) (*Facing History & Ourselves*)

Teaching Materials by [Time Period](#), [Theme](#), & [Resource Type](#) (*Zinn Education Project*)

[Facing History Library](#) (*Facing History & Ourselves*)

[Responsive Non-Fiction Resources](#) (*The Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning*)

CREATE REAL-WORLD CONNECTIONS.

As findings from the Whole Histories program show, students are eager to connect what they’re learning in the classroom with current events happening outside of it. According to [Facing History & Ourselves](#), teaching and discussing current events with students can help students build critical thinking, emotional engagement, ethical reflection, and civic agency.

Approaching these conversations can feel challenging, so invite students to help create the norms to ground these conversations and set expectations for their participation.

“Establishing ground rules for discussion and a class contract at the beginning of each year allows students to understand and develop skills for engaging in debate in a way that honors a diversity of opinions and approaches,” says Bateman. “This can make classrooms feel more inclusive and can provide students with language and framework to voice discomfort and challenge discussions that feel unsafe or outside of the class contract.”

Civic education is also a crucial tool to educate and empower students to apply the knowledge and skills they’re learning in the history classroom to the world around them.

“This can include understanding school policies about discipline, becoming aware of the responsibilities of the local school council/committee and learning how to share student perspectives, and investigating stances on diversity, inclusion, and equity in their town or city,” says Dempsey Lee. “For example, in one community, a 10th grader and an 8th grader researched the impact Christopher Columbus had on indigenous populations, presented their information to the local school committee, and requested the name of the fall holiday switch to Indigenous People’s Day. The School Committee made this change.”

RESOURCES:

[Connecting Current Events and Curriculum](#) (*Facing History & Ourselves*)

[Tips for Current Events Lesson Plans](#) (*Learning for Justice*)

[Resources for Civic Education](#) (*Facing History & Ourselves*)

COMMIT TO TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE.

In the same way that we ask students to apply the lessons they learn, educators have the responsibility to apply the lessons they teach. Inclusive curriculums are just the first step to making schools more equitable for all.

“It’s not enough to learn about the impact of systemic racism and ableism — we must make institutional changes that reflect what we’re learning,” says Dr. Newton. “Analyze behavioral referral and special education referral data for disproportionality of race and gender. Lead as an interrupter of the school to prison pipeline by considering the biases of teachers and systems that disproportionately harm Black and brown and disabled students. Remove all school resource officers immediately.”

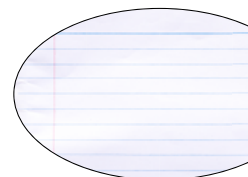
This kind of change doesn’t happen overnight, so above all, educators and administrators must commit to upholding anti-racist values and practices in schools from the top-down, engaging all stakeholders along the way.

“Teachers must ask themselves how much they are willing to contribute to this change at every level of the school — beyond a few courses — and what they are willing to sacrifice if these changes are refused by school decision-makers,” says Dr. Nuru Dennis. “This is a long process that requires annual reviews the same as every other annual program assessment for accreditation. Inclusion and equity are not quick, not easy, there will be opposition and discomfort, and the people truly invested will collaborate and invest.”

[Racial & Social Justice is Education Justice](#) (*National Educators Association*)

[Teacher Leadership Resources](#) (*Learning for Justice*)

[School Climate Resources](#) (*Learning for Justice*)



ABOUT DOSOMETHING

DoSomething.org is the largest tech-forward nonprofit exclusively for young people and social change. DoSomething's (DS) digital platform is activating millions of young people to create impact, offline and on, in every US area code and in 131 countries. DoSomething members have clothed half of America's youth in homeless shelters. They've cleaned up 3.7 million cigarette butts. And, in 2020 alone DS registered 255,991 new voters! 71 percent of whom confirmed that they actually voted. Young people have the power and the passion to transform their communities — DoSomething helps them get it done. Let's Do This.

ABOUT THE ALLSTATE FOUNDATION

[The Allstate Foundation](#) accelerates positive change by empowering and educating the most vulnerable, inspiring today's visionaries and promoting community leadership. The Foundation champions SEL and service-learning programs to empower youth to build the just, equitable and healthy world we all deserve. In partnership with nonprofit organizations, the Foundation creates a continuum of this programming to support youth in school, after school, at home and in their communities.

