



TEXAS STATE TEACHERS ASSOCIATION / NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION  
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We need to make a greater effort to educate children against racism

By NOEL CANDELARIA

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As we grieve the tragic death of George Floyd, another, unarmed black man who died in police custody, we need to do more than protest in the streets. Peaceful protest is necessary, but it is not enough. We have been protesting the deaths and abusive mistreatment of black men and women (remember Sandra Bland?) as well as native and other people of color for too many years to count, and nothing seems to change.

As my 13-year-old daughter pointed out the other day, "It has never stopped, and we are still a racist country." The Civil War ended 155 years ago. Jim Crow laws were officially repealed a long time ago too, but institutional racism and racial prejudices persist.

That's why Floyd died, helpless under the knee of a white police officer in Minneapolis. That's why most of the poorest school districts in Texas are in communities of color. And that's why only 10 years ago the State Board of Education adopted history curriculum standards (since revised) that downplayed slavery's role in causing the Civil War.

Our public education system must take the lead in calling out and addressing the prejudices and fallacies that maintain this systemic racism. I agree with Dr. Grenita Lathan, interim superintendent of the Houston Independent School District, where Floyd attended school, that "a shift in the dialogue on race in our country begins in our classrooms."

"I am hopeful that the conversation taking place today will result in meaningful changes for our future generations," Dr. Lathan said in an interview with Houston Style Magazine. It will if we act.

Children must learn from an early age that the principle of equality on which our nation was founded means just that. Everyone, regardless of race, ethnicity, national origin, religion, sexual orientation or gender identity, is entitled to an equal opportunity at life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, including equal justice and economic opportunity, not just in theory but also in practice. Children also need to understand the reality and diversity of our history.

I am encouraged that the State Board of Education has approved courses in Mexican American and African American studies for high school students. The names of prominent Hispanics and African Americans also are included among Anglos in the curriculum standards for social studies courses. But we must do more to ensure our curricula and textbooks accurately reflect our history.

Our students must be taught to appreciate the contributions of the entire diverse group of individuals who built our state and country. For generations, for example, Texas students have been told of James Bowie's role as a defender who died at the Alamo. Bowie also was a slave trader, and students need to know the contributions that slaves were forced to make to begin building Texas' economy, the horrible, inhumane price slaves paid and the racism that forced a war over the evil institution.

Educators also must teach students how to recognize personal and social injustices and work to correct them, not look the other way.

Can we teach tolerance? We try by encouraging dialogue among students about racial injustices and leading by example. We must call out injustice whenever we see it.

State policymakers also must take additional steps to remove inequities in resources between low-income (mostly minority) school districts and wealthier districts. This is a part of institutional racism that shortchanges students for the remainder of their lives in terms of lost economic opportunities.

Reversing generations of racial prejudice, fear and hatred isn't easy, and what I am advocating will take time. But education is a proven solution to ignorance, and prejudice is a form of ignorance.