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Contents **Features**



36 Higher Expectations

At a small charter school on the ground floor of a large apartment complex in Minneapolis, a group of new American parents is organizing to bring about vastly improved educational outcomes for their children. Their efforts to navigate the murky pathways to change reveal as much about systemic power as about their mettle.

44 Foundations of Justice

"For literally every injustice, there is an architecture planned and built to sustain and perpetuate that injustice." That's the mantra of an influential New Orleans architect and designer who is working with allies to consider how changes to the built environment could lead to progress on climate change, integration, mass incarceration, and public education.

52 Two Steps Up, One Step Back

Last year's graduating seniors are doing more than taking 2020 in stride. They are caring for the people in their lives. And they're converting disappointments, surprises, and tragedies into life lessons for the rest of us.

Contents

8 CENTER STAGE

When the world around them paused, these Appalachian dancers pressed play and kept the beat going.

10 A DAY AT WORK

Mobile mental health specialist Esther Kwak (San Antonio '10) is adjusting to working from home. Find out how she delivers urgent mental health services to students.

15 MEDIA

Author Jennifer De Leon (Bay Area '02) used to write only characters who blended in with the white on the page, quieting her Latinx identity in stories. Not in her debut novel.

18 HISTORY 101:

THE AMERICAN DREAM MYTH

How long will it be until a preponderance of students reach adulthood having explored history fully and honestly?

20 SOCIALLY CONSCIOUS SOCIAL STUDIES

Teachers at a Nashville school are looking to Africa to explore a richer picture of history.

22 CAREERS

From courtrooms to Capitol Hill, these alumni are doubling down on the law to double the odds for children.

25 CAREER COACH

Tap into your real social capital. (And stop counting that other guy's followers.)

26 CHANGE IS COMING TO PHILANTHROPY

When people proximate to injustices are trusted with funds that have no strings attached, they see fresh possibilities.



28 A CALCULATED EFFORT

Computational epidemiologists think it might be possible to model how to make justice go viral. Your TI-84 can't handle that math, but please meet FRED.

30 5 QUESTIONS

Justin Pinn (Miami-Dade '13) says filling vacant volunteer advisory board seats can change outcomes in a community—save lives, even—and he's looking at you to sign up.

31 VOICES FOR EQUITY

This new opinion series features writers exploring their pasts and present to explore what a better future might look like for children. In this issue's series: the long-lasting damage of mascots that mock heritage, the missed moments in virtual learning settings, and the grace that teachers need during this time.

58 COUNSELING SESSIONS

How does college counseling look when the future of college is unclear?

58 FROM HARVARD YARD

Freshman Nia Burch moved from Texas to Massachusetts, knowing she wouldn't step into a Harvard classroom. She has no regrets.

60 COMMUNITY NOTES

We're all in this together. Notes from your peers across the country to keep you company.

62 DOUBTS BEFORE I DO'S

It wasn't exactly love at first sight, but now it's a love for life.

78 REGIONAL ALUMNI CONTACTS

Got questions? They've got the 411.

80 NEW, BUT NOT UNPREPARED

First-time principal Courtney Ochi (San Diego '14) did not expect things to go this way, but the corps prepared her for the unexpected.

81 ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF NATIVE LAND

Stories in this issue come from across the country. We recognize the original stewards of those places.

ON THE COVER: Hamdi Hussein is the mother of three children at Cedar Riverside Community School in Minneapolis, where she is part of a parent-led effort to turn outcomes around. Photograph by **Nina Robinson.**

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Teach For America Alumni Magazine

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University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) is using a federal grant to help 70 teachers in the Brownsville and Edinburg school districts begin to teach a history of the Rio Grande Valley from a Mexican American perspective. The three-year American History and Civics Education National Activities grant from the U.S. Department of Education supports a professional development program for teachers called Historias Americanas: Engaging History and Citizenship in the Rio Grande Valley.

The state of Texas gives districts the option of teaching Mexican American and African American studies courses, but a history text specific to the Rio Grande Valley does not exist, said Maritza De La Trinidad, associate professor of Mexican American Studies at UTRGV and the project director for Historias Americanas. The Valley covers more than 4,000 square miles. Its history includes the settlement of the Rio Grande Delta by Indigenous people, colonization by Spain, the Mexican American war and Mexican revolution. Yet De La Trinidad hears from students who are taking the course in Brownsville and Edinburg schools that “we live in the Valley and we don’t know anything about our own history.”

Other places have mandated the teaching of a more inclusive history, but that doesn’t mean it happens. In 2015, the state legislature in Washington decreed that all districts had to teach either tribally-developed curriculum or the state education department’s curriculum, “Since Time Immemorial: Tribal Sovereignty in Washington State.” While pursuing her master’s degree at the University of Washington, Lindsey Hand (Washington ’17) looked at the struggles teachers have in meeting that mandate.

She was motivated by her own experience as a teacher at Chief Kamiakin Elementary School in the rural school district of Sunnyside, Washington. The school did not include social studies in its curriculum, Hand said. And the way classes were structured, she struggled to find time to incorporate it.

“We have a legal mandate (to teach) this awesome curriculum that really centers Indigenous peoples within the story of Washington, and within the colonization story of the United States,” Hand said. “I just kept finding roadblocks and was like, ‘Why can’t I use this? I believe in it.’ I think that was a big part of why I wanted to study it [in graduate school] and see how other teachers were adopting it.”

In her research, Hand found that the state legislature made no provision to track whether or where the curriculum is being taught. One of her key take-aways is that teachers, much like parents and community members, have power to push for changes like closing that mandate loophole.

Pugh agrees. “There is a strength in numbers,” she said, “and it builds a sense of urgency.” •

Socially Conscious Social Studies

By **Laura Zingg**

MANY SCHOOLS HAVE spent years evolving their vision for what a truly liberating education could look like: one where students consider a broad scope of history and a breadth of perspectives to understand their world more deeply, and ultimately interrupt systems of racism and oppression.

One of those schools is Purpose Prep Academy, a K-4 school with a majority of Black students in North Nashville, Tennessee. Working groups of students and families have been collaborating with educators there to look critically at the school’s social studies content. They saw an opportunity to expand students’ understanding of Black history beyond the historical period of slavery and the 20th century civil rights movement.

Lagra Newman (L.A. ’05) is the founder and head of school at Purpose Prep. She believes that while it’s important for students to build their knowledge of American history and how it’s been shaped by racism and oppression, young students should not be learning about people from Africa for the first time through the context of slavery. “It



For more on anti-racist curriculum, see teachforamerica.org/antiracist-schools.

is unjust for students to learn their history starting in 1619,” the year the first enslaved people were brought to Virginia, Newman said. “Especially from the viewpoint of how they were viewed by society at that time.”

Before school started last year, teachers immersed themselves in

learning about Africa. Now, starting in kindergarten, students learn about Africa’s complex diaspora, culture, and history. They begin to understand the continent’s role as a global leader of commerce, art, and intellect. This context will help students in later grades build a deeper understanding of the complicated history of colonialism and slavery.

“I think it shifts the conversation and allows students to be really critical of those systems of oppression only after developing a really strong foundation of self, which is so critical for all children,” Newman said. At the same time, decentering white colonial narratives does not mean removing those perspectives.

“With anything, we want to expose students to multiple perspectives. That’s an important part of our framework,” Newman said. “So it’s not void of the perspective of the colonizers, because students need to know that, too. But I think the problem is when you don’t have an Indigenous perspective, and only the colonizers’, you’re not able to critically reflect on the damage that was done, what was lost, what was gained. That type of critical thinking is not available to you.”

Shauna Russell is the director of academics at Purpose Prep and helped lead the revisions to the school’s social studies curriculum. She notes that being critical of dominant perspectives not only gives students a more complete, nuanced understanding of the world as it is currently constructed. It helps them develop their agency and voice. “Students need to be able to speak the language of the systems around them in a context that gives them the skills, knowledge, and confidence to deconstruct them as they grow,” Russell said.

Students are also both making their own history and understanding how others their age made history. Together with their families and school staff members, they raised funds to help allay the Flint water crisis and took a field trip to learn from the Flint community. During a unit on Black history, students learned about Claudette Colvin, who at 15 years old was the first Black person to refuse to give up her seat and move to the back of the bus during the civil rights movement, nine months before Rosa Parks did the same.

“Exposing them to those examples and empowering them lets them know that they are important,” Newman said. They can take action to influence history immediately. •

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