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African American role models: Despite state law, 'it's not taught'

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Twenty-five years ago, Florida's lawmakers sought to improve the lot of black students by guaranteeing that they'd see themselves reflected in their daily studies. After decades of lessons that overlooked key moments and contributions in history, schools would weave those elements into coursework in all grades and all subjects — not just social studies, but math, English and science, too.

Research in recent years appears to back their intentions.

Giving students a more complete — often more accurate — view of the world has, in certain studies, driven higher attendance, grade point averages and high school course credit, scholars report.

"Children get lifted up, empowered by seeing themselves and their ancestors as successful," said Debbye Raing, the black woman first tapped to put the law into action in Palm Beach County.

Raing knew it would be a challenge. Not only would she have to rewrite almost every corner of the county's K-12 curriculum, but she would also need to get buy-in from the teachers who would ultimately control what was taught in the classroom.

The law required this so-called "infusion" of African and African-American history into public education. But teacher training was not required. The material has never shown up on any state mandated tests. And no penalty looms if the districts or its teachers fail to deliver.

Predictably, results are decidedly mixed.

"Even though it's been 25 years, we still have people in the district that haven't heard of it," Raing said.

"No doubt about it, it's not taught. Definitely not infused," says School Board member Debra Robinson.

'It's acknowledging everybody'

When the parents of minority students are invited to weigh in on the subject, as they were at a recent Saturday morning town hall, they complain that their history and culture continue to get short shrift.

"It's tiring to explain why this is needed," said Roseline Joseph, mother of a 6-year-old boy in a predominantly white elementary school. "It's difficult when he doesn't see himself in the teacher, he doesn't see himself in his classmates. I need him to understand what really happened in history. ... It's not about dividing everybody. It's acknowledging everybody."

The current leader in the district's multicultural education department, Brian Knowles, would give the district a little more credit.

"We have some schools that do an excellent job of it — and others that don't. It's an even split. ... 50/50," Knowles said when pressed for an estimate.

Each principal must sign off on the school's annual improvement plan and confirm teachers are not serving up the Eurocentric material of years past. But when it comes down to it, administrators have no way to objectively measure whether or to what extent a teacher indeed mixed those multicultural elements into his or her lesson plans.

Still, Palm Beach County is often touted as a leader among districts in this arena.

Its approach to embedding lessons of not just black history, but Hispanic culture, gender studies and the Holocaust — all now required by state law — has been sought by other districts throughout Florida.

"They are one of the best in the state," said Tony Hill, chairman of Florida's African American History Task Force and a former state senator from Jacksonville who signed off on the law in 1994.

Knowles said his phone lights up with schools seeking training ... in February, which is Black History Month. Calling then is OK, he said. "But we need to do better. The law is not suggesting we teach the history of African people. It's required instruction. And it's not something we should be doing just in February."

In a district of roughly 12,000 teachers and 3,000 administrators, training for everyone in the best of circumstances would be challenging. But this training is voluntary and competing with every other training a teacher must attend in a year.

"I have given I don't know how many of these in my career. Who shows up? Those who are attitudinally predisposed to learn about the subject," Diaz said. "If you think African-American history or Latino history is fluff, are you going to show up for that workshop? No.

"It's also critical for administrators to show up. If you have a principal with little or no background, someone who doesn't encourage teachers to follow the state mandate, that's a problem," Diaz said.

But when it's not something the state tests, something that your evaluation hinges upon, it is difficult to make it a priority, said Justin Katz, president of the county's teachers union and a former high school U.S. Government and Economics teacher.

"It's a sad reality that what's on the tests often drives curriculum rather than the other way around," Katz said. "This is the prime argument against the obsession over standardized testing."

Mandatory training?

Years ago, board member Robinson advocated mandatory training for all, and then she said she witnessed the backlash. It was a day-long summer training for administrators with a presenter from out of state.

"He was very collegial, non-confrontational, friendly, 'Let's walk this path together' approach. Despite all that, because this was mandated, they wrote up very negative reviews," Robinson said.

"It's inherently difficult to change the paradigm. If we were taught X, Y and Z in our youth, we believe this. We have not been taught the contributions of African-American people, of Hispanic people. We have people who deny the Holocaust — I don't understand how we do that," Robinson said.

"In topics, especially about race, when you mandate something you create resistance," Robinson said. "You don't change people's hearts and minds like that. If it was something non-emotional, so to speak, you may be able to get away with that (mandatory training)."

With a student population that is 28 percent black and 34 percent Hispanic, that shift in hearts and minds is vital, advocates agree.

"I was already raised black and proud," Robinson said.

The elected official who quotes a black history fact at the opening of every board - except in February — didn't get that knowledge from school. Nor did her three children, each of whom graduated from Palm Beach County schools after the law passed, she said.

One effort Robinson believes would have potential: naming a champion of infused curriculum on every campus. The move would convey the importance of lessons that include minority populations and give teachers a go-to person when trying to figure out the logistics of doing it.

"I'm hopeful because I can see progress we have made in this arena," Robinson said. "When we get the textbook publishers to embrace history in what I would call 360 degrees, we will get exponential forward progress. That is really one of my areas of focus now."

The district's curriculum team agrees.

The state's task force chairman Hill believes it is up to school boards — the textbook companies' customers — to push for that change.

"We just have go to keep plugging at it," Hill said. "Once teachers get acclimated to the curriculum, they enjoy it. African-American history is American history."