

Telling the truth

Local schools overhaul history curriculum

By Brielle Entzminger
reporter@c-ville.com

As protests against police brutality continue around the country, school districts are tackling another form of systemic racism and oppression: white-washed history. Since last year, Albemarle County Public Schools has been working to create an anti-racist social studies curriculum, elevating the voices and stories of marginalized people and groups, which are often misrepresented by (or entirely excluded from) textbooks. And now, the district is one step closer to implementing the curriculum—called Reframing the Narrative.

Last week, the district's history teachers—joined by over a dozen partner organizations and more than 100 educators from Charlottesville City Schools, Virginia Beach City Public Schools, and other districts across the state—met virtually to begin constructing a more comprehensive and inclusive U.S. history curriculum as part of the Virginia Inquiry Collaborative.

Fully addressing our country's legacy of slavery, racism, and inequity is not an easy task, and "dependency on textbooks of any kind will only preserve the status quo and dominant narratives," says Adrienne Oliver, an ACPS instructional coach who participated in the virtual workshops. "The current state standards continue to uphold such narratives, and so a heavy reliance upon outsourced materials is, in my view, antithetical to our work."

Rather than find new textbooks (Oliver says she has yet to see an anti-racist one), the curriculum will rely on relevant texts and resources, primary source materials, and classroom discussions and activities—all working to "resist a retelling of dominant narratives and put learning into students' hands," says Oliver.

After a team of editors reviews and refines the results of last week's workshops, inquiry-based U.S. history units, containing learning plans and assessment tools, will be uploaded onto an online platform for ACPS teachers,

along with those from CCS and other districts, to use starting this fall.

Under the anti-racist curriculum, all students will be able to see themselves in the history of the United States, examining it from a variety of non-traditional perspectives, says Oliver. Black and brown students, along with others from marginalized backgrounds, may feel more acknowledged and empowered, as they study untold stories of resilience and resistance.

The revamped history courses will also better prepare students, especially those who are white, to deal with uncomfortable issues in our country, points out Bethany Bazemore, who graduated from Charlottesville High School this year.

"The only way as a society we're going to get past this is if white people learn to be uncomfortable," says Bazemore, who is Black. "Black people have been uncomfortable for 400 years and counting."

"You need to understand and reckon with your history to really address the problems of the present," adds program leader John Hobson. "It's all connected."

Last summer, ACPS partnered with the Montpelier Foundation to jump-start the Reframing the Narrative program. With the support of a \$299,500 grant from the Charlottesville Area Community Foundation, history teachers from the division participated in professional development workshops at Montpelier, along with other field experiences and learning opportunities, during the school year.

Through these initiatives, educators "are able to understand possibly their own bias, and reflect and grow from there," says Virginia Beach social studies instructor Nick Dzendzel, a participant in the Virginia Inquiry Collaborative. "It provides a whole new atmosphere inside of a school [or] department for those educators to start pushing for what they know and want to be right for the students—and not just adhering to what's been done before."

The CACF grant also helps to pay teachers as they develop the new curriculum outside



JOHN ROBINSON

Adrienne Oliver, an instructional coach for Albemarle County Public Schools, believes all students will be able to see themselves in the history of the United States, once the Reframing the Narrative program is implemented.

of school hours, and funds student field trips to Montpelier, "centering the voices and experiences of enslaved people and the descendant community" at the former plantation, says Oliver.

Next year, the process will start over again, as Albemarle teachers update the division's world geography curriculum for freshmen and world history for sophomores. The following year, the eighth grade civics and 12th grade government curriculums will also get an anti-racist makeover.

In partnership with ACPS and other state school districts, Charlottesville City Schools also began updating its social studies curriculum last summer. Participating teachers (who receive a stipend) have taken professional development courses at the Jefferson School African American Heritage Center focused on local Black history, as well as curriculum-writing workshops and field excursions around Charlottesville.

Last year, CCS Superintendent Dr. Rosa Atkins was among those appointed to the

Commission on African American History Education, which is currently reviewing the history standards and practices for the entire state. By September 1, the commission will offer recommendations for enriched standards related to African American history, as well as cultural competency among teachers.

The white supremacist violence of August 11 and 12 was a catalyst, says Oliver, but these massive curriculum overhauls were years in the making. Grassroots organizers and activists, along with individual educators, have been advocating for and implementing anti-racist curriculums across Virginia for some time.

"If you're doing this [alone] in your own classroom, it's easy to get weighed down by barriers, by administrators, and by parents for working against the grain. It's hard to do that every day," says Virginia Initiative participant Sarah Clark, who teaches U.S. history in Virginia Beach. "But when you're involved in projects like this, it's like a rejuvenation...I'm not doing it alone." 🗣️

Abrahamse & Company

BUILDERS

Custom-Built Quality Since 1974

(434) 295-9379 | Abrahamse.com |

EXPECT TO SUCCEED!

- ONLINE ANYTIME and SCHEDULED TIME classes
- Financial aid and scholarships available
- Register now – classes begin **August 24**

PVCC
PIEDMONT VIRGINIA
COMMUNITY COLLEGE
Opportunity. Access. Excellence.



www.pvcc.edu/succeed



“Even if we did say that restaurants needed to close,” McKay says, “we need to be concerned about social gatherings where we don’t have authority.”

Around 40 percent of UVA upperclassmen live in off-campus housing, which further complicates the picture because the university has very little control over what happens in those houses and apartments. Harvard University made headlines recently for its COVID prevention plan, which allows only 40 percent of students to return to campus, something it can more easily do because 97 percent of its undergraduates live in university housing. At UVA, students can decide to return to Charlottesville even if classes are held completely virtually.

UVA English professor Herbert Tucker recognizes that students behave much differently outside the classroom than in it.

“I’ve been in the business long enough to know that no matter how much homework-doing students are on the ball...they behave very differently with each other when they’re out of class,” he says. “The students infect each other...these are not fantasies, these things are certainly going to happen more frequently. This isn’t rocket science here.”

“The extreme that everyone should imagine is a fraternity party,” Tucker says. “Those events are going to happen.”

And while Tucker says the faculty can “take care of themselves,” citing UVA’s flexibility in allowing faculty to teach remotely, he worries about the staff and community members that students could infect with COVID-19.

“They won’t enter the students’ minds,” he says.

Risk factor

Residents in neighborhoods surrounding UVA, like 10th and Page, are particularly at risk of serious health complications stemming from coronavirus. The virus disproportionately affects Black Americans and those with underlying health conditions.

Dr. Taison Bell, an infectious disease, critical care physician, and the director of UVA’s medical intensive care unit, recognizes that risk, and says Charlottesville has to develop a safety plan that “has to be, more so than we’ve done in the past, integrated into the whole plan for the city and the region.”

As for making students practice social distancing, Bell says it’s “a little unclear” what can and cannot be enforced.

“One variable, or a big part that the community is concerned about, is how younger people will behave during their free time,” Bell says. “Will they behave in a responsible way...Or will they be potential drivers of infection?”

For decades, area residents have watched UVA students party their way across town. Now, the university has put forward a coronavirus containment plan that relies in large part on students choosing to act conscientiously.

“If we’re going to have a substantial amount of students,” Bell says, “then there needs to be a collective understanding that [they] have to behave differently than they have before.”

Left out

Albemarle teachers, parents call out inequity in reopening plans



JOHN ROBINSON

Spanish teacher Filadelfia Soto is disappointed in the school district for not consulting with teachers on reopening sooner.

By Brielle Entzminger
reporter@c-ville.com

For weeks, Filadelfia Soto—along with hundreds of other teachers in Albemarle County—was left in the dark. She had received emails with “general information about school board meetings,” but nothing about how the school division planned to reopen in the fall, or when teachers could weigh in on the issue.

So when division staff rolled out three reopening scenarios—all allowing students to return to classrooms for face-to-face learning—at a July 9 school board meeting, she was as surprised as she was disappointed.

“They went from moving the opening date from August to September...and then all of a sudden they said we are reopening schools face-to-face,” says Soto, who teaches Spanish at Woodbrook Elementary School. When she heard the plans, she felt like she had no choice but to participate in risky in-person learning.

More than 600 teachers—nearly half of those in the division—share Soto’s sentiments, and signed an open letter criticizing their exclusion from the planning process, as well as a lack of consideration for their needs and concerns. Pointing to the rising coronavirus rates in the area, they believe the proposed face-to-face models are “unequivocally unsafe,” and have urged the school board to reopen schools virtually.

“Virtual is not the ideal learning environment for all students, but we must begin there. The rising rates of illness and death across Virginia and nationally do not make me feel confident entering into a building,” says Adrienne Oliver, an instructional coach for ACPS. “We need to begin there also because we’re going to end up there in some capacity.”

“Black and Latinx people...are [disproportionately] dying from this illness. To have a school that could potentially be filled with vulnerable students in any capacity places the burdens of the illness upon them.”

ADRIENNE OLIVER, ACPS
INSTRUCTIONAL COACH

Oliver and her colleagues also believe face-to-face learning puts marginalized communities, specifically those of color, in greater danger.

“It will be our most well-resourced families who opt their children out of that learning environment because they have the means. Which means you’ll then have school buildings that are filled with students who depend upon the resources that the school system can provide for them,” says Oliver, who is Black.

“Black and Latinx people...are [disproportionately] dying from this illness. To have a school that could potentially be filled with vulnerable students in any capacity places the burdens of the illness upon them,” Oliver says.

In response to community backlash, the district sent out a survey to teachers on July 10, asking them for their thoughts about reopening, and if they’d like to be part of a reopening task force. And on July 14, Superintendent Matt Haas announced he would draft an online-only option for the school board to consider at its July 30 meeting, when a final decision will be made.

But there is still a lot more equity work to be done, teachers say. Though ACPS sent out a survey to families last month, asking them if they preferred a hybrid or online reopening, the response rate was only 50 percent, says instructional coach Dr. Vicki Hobson.

“The voices of our most marginalized families...need to be central in the decisions that affect them. We need to find out what it is that they want and need, and how we can support that,” adds Hobson.

“We also need to consider how we’re asking for information. Some families don’t have access to devices or the internet in order to respond to an online survey,” she says. “We need to [have] alternative ways to get information, such as personalized phone calls with those we haven’t heard back from.”

In addition to contacting every family, the district should hear from all staff members, as well as community members and organizations, Oliver says.

Though distance learning did not go well for her eighth grader in the spring, parent Amanda Moxham believes that a virtual reopening is safest.

“We’ve been paying attention to the data locally around the number of cases and increases, and looking at the spikes across the country. And knowing that so many students will be returning to UVA this fall, there are [a lot of] dangers that exist,” says Moxham, who is a community organizer for the Hate-Free Schools Coalition of Albemarle County. “I don’t want to contribute to forcing teachers back into a physical school building who are not comfortable being there...[or] to increasing case numbers.”

Moxham is hopeful that teachers will be able to create a more effective distance learning model, such as by implementing live classes, before school starts on September 8, but is also frustrated with the district’s lack of outreach.

“What could have saved a huge amount of time was...[if] they had actually talked to the teachers first,” she says.

For the students who cannot learn from home, the district could work with community members and organizations to create alternative, yet safe learning options, suggests Moxham. For example, it could assign certain teachers a small group of students, and allow them to teach at outdoor locations.

But regardless of the school board’s decision, the district needs to figure out “how to make virtual learning equitable,” says Hobson. It should not only gather feedback from families about their experience with it in the spring, but also train teachers, set up more Wi-Fi hot spots, and distribute more laptops.

“We have a chance to do so much better than the virtual learning that we provided in the spring,” adds Oliver. “We see this as an opportunity to shift educational practice for the better.”

Read 'em and weep

UVA library employees fear for their safety

By Brielle Entzminger
reporter@c-ville.com

Late last month, UVA had to put Clemons Library in time out for bad behavior. The university shut down its largest study area for two hours, in an attempt to air the place out after staff noticed that just 75 percent of students were wearing face coverings. Then, four days later, the same thing happened, this time with 9 percent of students disobeying the requirement that they wear masks in indoor common spaces.

The situation in the libraries has left library employees worried about the health and safety of students and staff.

“Indoor spaces are the least safe spaces regarding coronavirus and transmission,” says one full-time library employee, who wishes to remain anonymous. “We knew there would still be risk, and we knew people would break the rules.”

While library staff have taken a range of precautions, such as spacing out furniture, visitors can still come in close contact with each other, he says.

Working in person is technically voluntary, but library staff have felt pressure from the dean of libraries and the rest of the UVA administration to show up.

“I have more colleagues now who are working in person, who don’t have the luxury to work from home, [who] are full of fear and anxiety, fearing for their potential job security,” he says. And with the libraries already understaffed due to a hiring freeze, “they are stretching us very thin.”

“What’s worse is that there’s no transparency,” he adds. “Staff are not being told how many times we would go through this... before UVA would even question libraries being open anymore.”

UVA Libraries communications director Elyse Girard says that if the university ever moves into its “short-term restricted operations” phase, which would implement a set of additional restrictions, library spaces could be closed to the public. And while materials would be available for contactless pickup, all other services would be moved online.

There is currently no specific threshold that would move the university into this phase.

Every hour, an employee—often a student—walks around the library and records how many people are wearing face coverings. If compliance is less than 95 percent, a warning is issued over the intercom. And if that number does not rise to at least 95 percent after several more checks and warnings, the library closes for two hours.

One student says the plexiglass shield at the front desk, where she sits during most of her shift at Clemons, helps her to feel comfortable



STAFF PHOTO

Clemons Library was temporarily closed recently because several students removed their face masks while studying.

working in person. However, she is occasionally required to do mask checks, which she says have caused her stress and anxiety.

During her shift last weekend, she says Clemons almost had to shut down when a group of students inside of a study room would not put their masks back on—even after she gave a warning over the intercom.

Though employees are not required to approach individuals who aren’t wearing a face covering, another student worker, whose shift was scheduled to start, spoke with the group directly, in order to avoid another closure.

“It’s pretty frustrating seeing people [not complying], especially since we have signs everywhere and make announcements on the intercom pretty often. People for some reason think that they’re an exception,” she says. “I don’t really feel unsafe in my job... but I’ve also never been there when we had to shut down.”

“Students in Clemons have sort of figured out the routine and how the library workers are counting,” explains another full-time library employee who also wished to remain anonymous. “So they’re taking their masks off and putting them back on when they see a librarian coming to count...Most students are doing what they’re supposed to be doing, but there’s [usually] a couple who are not.”

“In an ideal world, the university wouldn’t have come back and tried to have people

on Grounds at all this semester,” she adds. “I’m hoping that looking towards the spring semester, there are ways that...maybe there are fewer students on Grounds, and we can have fewer—or no—library spaces open.”

In mid-September, United Campus Workers of Virginia at UVA also published an open letter demanding the libraries be shut down, and all employees—including students—be allowed to work remotely.

“We’ve spent decades and millions of dollars buying electronic materials, books, journals, and other databases,” explains the first employee, who is in favor of closing the libraries. “And we provide virtual reference services.”

But for the student worker, shutting down the libraries could put her out of a much-needed campus job. “I’m not on work study,” she says. “A lot of student workers rely on the libraries being open.”

When asked about safety at the libraries, Girard emphasized that the university aims to “keep students and the UVA community as safe as possible” by complying with social-distancing guidelines, as well as the mask mandate.

To ensure that face coverings are not removed—unless a person is alone in a private space—food and drink are not allowed in the libraries, she added.

Down between the shelves, however, “people are feeling rather expendable and sacrificial,” says the first employee. ☺

A little



birdie



told



us...



There’s a whole bunch of news you’re missing! Follow @cville_weekly, and @cville_culture to get the latest scoop on what’s going down in Charlottesville.

cville

“We knew there would still be risk, and we knew people would break the rules.” UVA LIBRARY EMPLOYEE