

# A conversation on equity and education

BY RACHEL AUSTIN  
STAFF WRITER

As conversations in school board meetings and government settings continue to dominate headlines and foster hostility, a town hall was held to help inform folks of what is going on and how to get involved.

The Virginia Chapters of the Mid-Atlantic Region of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. and Virginia Association of Chapters of Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity Inc. hosted a Public Virtual Town Hall meeting with a focus on “Educating Our Future (K-12) Through Equity & Inclusion” on Feb. 6 virtually on the Virginia Phirst Pham Facebook page and YouTube channel.

These incorporations are nonpartisan and invited different voices involved with education in Virginia to weigh in on the subject. Two panels discussed Virginia’s current state of education related to their field.

The first moderator, Traci Deshazor, former deputy secretary of the commonwealth, started the first panel discussion on the hot topic of Critical Race Theory and why some have concerns.

Dr. James Fedderman, president of the Virginia Education Association, said Critical Race Theory does not exist in Virginia public schools, and the term is being used to cause divisiveness. Students are only being encouraged to think critically when learning the truth.

Dr. Janice Underwood, former chief diversity, equity and inclusion officer for the governor of

Virginia, also weighed in on Critical Race Theory. She said that is why people are scared of it, because they do not understand it and are scared of looking uninformed or racist. According to Underwood, legislatures and teachers need to be able to define it and use it in a sentence, just like third-grade students with their vocabulary words.

“Critical Race Theory is a legitimate framework that comes out of the critical theory scholarship,” she said. “It is a research methodology at the post-graduate level used to examine the way systems of race and racism were legally used to create inequality in all of our systems in formula and formal policies and practices.”

When asked about how COVID-19 has affected the mental, emotional and educational well-being of students, Pam Croom, president of the Virginia Parent Teacher Association, brought up staffing and making sure essential staff is there for students and having mental health teams at schools. She also brought up that some schools have part-time principals who need to be full-time.

Secretary of Education Aimee Guidera answered a question on Gov. Glenn Youngkin’s administration’s plans for education and approach to charter schools. During his 2021 campaign, there was a great focus on education.

“We are focused very much on restoring excellence for every single child,” she said. “Restoring also may not be the best term, because for lots of communities there hasn’t been excel-

lent education. And one of the things we are going to be spending a lot of time on is getting better about being transparent about which schools and which students are being well served and which ones are not.”

Regarding charter schools, according to Guidera, data has shown that not all students are receiving equal opportunities and hopes that charter schools will help performances improve. However, many of her fellow panelists disagreed.

The panelists agreed that a big step in making a safe and good school is to have the community involved and for those with and without students in the school system to be involved to make sure the best is happening for the students. Panelists encouraged folks to stay in the conversation by joining PTAs and being present, supporting teachers, demanding ARPA funds to be used for education and supporting genuinely helpful legislation.

Before closing the first session, a viewer’s question was presented to the panelists. The question asked how communities can assist teachers and schools to bridge the gap between school years.

Fedderman answered that it is about community schools giving all the elements needed. When parents are involved, there are less misconceived ideas pinning teachers and parents against each other, as collaboration breaks barriers and creates essential, meaningful relationships. According to Fedderman, this can happen in public schools.

“Children are like cred-

it cards; we can either pay now or pay later,” said Fedderman.

The second panel was led by Da’Quan Love, executive director of Virginia State NAACP, and consisted of Virginia legislators and discussed education-related bills they have recently encountered.

Sen. Mamie Locke of District 2 spoke about Senate Bill 1196. This bill would require educators who are seeking or renewing their license to complete cultural sensitivity training to ensure that teachers are aware of the cultural differences of students in their classrooms.

Delegate Briana Sewell spoke on the House Bill 4 roll back efforts of 2020, addressing the school-to-prison pipeline. This legislation could hold lifelong consequences for students who could get something on their permanent record as teachers are pressured to over-report incidents that could have a different approach.

Jeff Bourne talked about legislation for the state to properly fund schools. He talked about possible charter schools and how he does not see why they cannot invest more into the public schools instead of dividing attention elsewhere.

“There is a culture war going on, and our public schools are ground zero,” said Bourne.

The panelists agreed that they do not have any productive bipartisan laws at this moment, as education is getting over-politicalized and many of these issues were present before COVID-19.

Underwood and

Fedderman rejoined the panel as they discussed the final questions. One viewer asked why the title of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Officer was changed to Diversity, Opportunity and Inclusion Officer.

“I was told we want to be inclusive of all Virginians,” said Locke. “I said, ‘OK are you telling me that the word equity is not inclusive of

all Virginians?’”

When asking for a definition of the two words and how they saw this working, she did not receive an answer. Underwood also responded that opportunity is what everyone wants, but equity is how to get there.

To watch the full town hall or stay informed on future events, follow VA Phirst Pham on Facebook and YouTube.

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# Suffolk teacher earns Green Star

**BY RACHEL AUSTIN**  
STAFF WRITER

As many teachers reward their students with a gold star for a job well done, a Suffolk teacher received a green star for doing good work for the environment.

Each year askHRgreen.org recognizes 10 teachers in Hampton Roads that go above and beyond to teach their students to have a cleaner and greener impact on the environment. One of these winners is

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# Teacher: Awarded for work

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Suffolk's Tonya Bagley.

Bagley teaches at King's Fork High School and is the advisor of the Ecology Club that partners with the Nansemond River Preservation Alliance. She also is a Nansemond River Preservation Water Quality and Oyster Restoration Committee Member.

"I'm so excited to receive this award," said Bagley. "It's not just me; it's a group effort. I have a special team of students, teachers and community partners who all work together to make these projects happen."

With the Ecology Club, Bagley has her students do various projects, including oyster restoration efforts and putting in a moist buffer at Sleepy Hole Park. She also equips her high school students to be able to go into the middle schools and teach about the watershed and other environmental science topics. According to Bagley, it's a win-win situation where the middle schoolers get excited about it from the older students and the high schoolers get a confidence boost in their knowledge.

According to Bagley, this is not an award



SUBMITTED PHOTO

Tonya Bagley, recipient of askHRgree.org's Green Star Teacher award, mentors her students at the Nansemond River Preservation Alliance's oyster reef.

she got on her own. She acknowledged the many people who help her make these projects a success, including her principal, fellow teachers, the city of Suffolk and the parents.

"What's cool about the program is the parent involvement," she said. "When students came for our oyster reef project they brought parents, grandparents and nieces

and nephews. It's truly a group effort."

Each recipient of the Green Star award gets \$1,000 for supplies, resources or to fund a green student-driven initiative. Bagley plans to use the money to help fund an outdoor classroom. This classroom will consist of a greenhouse with various plants that the students will be able to take care of

and learn from throughout the whole year. This project was delayed due to COVID-19, but she hopes this grant money will make this project a reality.

"We have a ton of support from Suffolk and King's Fork," said Bagley. "Everyone works together and gets along really well, and it's a thing to be recognized. I'm super thankful."



# Suffolk seniors balk over end of tradition

BY RACHEL AUSTIN  
STAFF WRITER

Saying they were inspired by lessons on “civil disobedience,” some seniors at Suffolk’s public high schools are demanding that a “wrong” be righted.

A long tradition for Suffolk Public Schools seniors is getting out a week early after they have finished their exams. At the beginning of the school year, the class of 2022 was told that their last day would be June 3. However, last week, seniors say they were told their last day of school would be on June 10, the same as everyone else and the day before they walk across the stage to get their diplomas.

Feeling wronged, four senior girls at Lakeland High School decided to do something about it. Alexa Snyder, Savannah Stevenson, Hannah Bass and Maddie Truitt created a petition on Change.org in an effort to get their week back. Even though it started at Lakeland, the girls reached out to friends at King’s Fork and Nansemond River high schools who have diligently spread the word as it

affects them all.

“We want to show that we have been wronged for not having the same opportunity as other seniors,” said Snyder. “In our government class, we learned about civil disobedience when groups have been wronged, and my friends and I feel that we have been wronged.”

The petition received nearly 700 signatures in only four days. Many comments from classmates and community members echoed support for keeping the senior tradition. Some comments validate the annoyance of such a late announcement and others point out that this senior class has already missed out on so much due to COVID-19.

The week reportedly was taken away from the seniors because they are not having final exams. According to Snyder, the seniors last year did not have final exams but still got out a week early.

“We applaud our students for advocating for themselves,” said Anthonette J. Ward, community engagement officer of Suffolk Public Schools. “SPS made the calendar adjustment to provide

staff with an opportunity for lost planning time. The early release every other Wednesday does this, which is why we can’t give the seniors additional days at the end of the year. Students and the school community must remember that exams were eliminated, which also eliminated the exam week, and we have 990 clock hours necessary for the Virginia Department of Education for accreditation purposes.”

The students say they are still working with Suffolk Public Schools to see if their petition will carry any weight. They plan on meeting with Lakeland Principal Douglas Wagoner in the coming week to see how far the movement can go. They say they have also received advice and support from School Board members Dr. Judith Brooks-Buck and Sherri Story.

“I am happy to be a Suffolk Public School graduate and I hope they will look at our petition and come to a decision,” said Snyder.

Those interested in signing or learning more can do so at [tinyurl.com/SPS2022Petition](https://tinyurl.com/SPS2022Petition).