

OPINION

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Teachers Can Help Held Discrimination

Lessons learned in the classroom

BY OLIVIA ALPERSTEIN

We all remember the teachers who most influenced us. Life lessons learned in the classroom stay with you for decades. I was lucky to have several great teachers, but my fifth grade teacher stands out the most.

Nancy Livingston taught for 25 years in Princeton, N. J. at Littlebrook Elementary School, where the mascot is a giraffe and the school motto is “Stick your neck out for others.”

Ms. Livingston always stuck her neck out for us. I’m willing to bet that every one of her students remembers her.

From the first day of school, she spoke candidly about what makes us all different and how learning about our differences makes us better people. She spoke about discrimination in the



context of history lessons and taught us basic principles of social justice. She made us laugh, and she made us think.

There aren’t enough Ms. Livingstons. While there are strong, visionary teachers who talk to students about discrimination, there are also those who stay silent amidst incidents of bullying and prejudice. Some teachers even become perpetrators themselves.

Teachers can shape a student’s perception of the world and their place in it. Not every teacher feels responsible for explaining the nature of discrimination, or showing students how to counteract it. It’s not usually part of the lesson plan.

That could change.

In a new letter from former Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and his successor, Acting Secretary of Education John B. King Jr., the Education Department is openly calling on teachers,

staff, and school officials to “ensure that young people are not subjected to discrimination or harassment based on race, religion, or national origin.”

King and Duncan were explicit about the effects of such a toxic environment: “If ignored, this kind of conduct can jeopardize students’ ability to learn, undermine their physical and emotional well-being, provoke retaliatory acts, and exacerbate community conflicts,” they wrote.

School isn’t just a learning environment — it’s a social environment where we learn stark lessons about privilege and status. Peer pressure, bullying, racism — these are the most impactful extracurricular activities students may encounter.

Every nation needs more people who are willing to fight for a better future. Where better to learn about how to stand up for what’s right than in a classroom where you learn anyway?

It’s wonderful that two of the most prominent K-12 leaders can recognize

the influence that educators wield. Yet Duncan and King are too vague. They don’t make any specific demands, outline any strategies, or even recommend changing any policies. As leaders in their field, they can and should do more to eradicate discrimination in schools.

For starters, the Education Department could declare a long-term mission to eradicate discriminatory educational policies. Many schools are already dumping these policies, which harm students of color and students with disabilities. Some schools are even revamping curricula and disciplinary policies to account for the impact of trauma on students’ behavior and ability to learn.

I hope all education leaders and officials, along with our lawmakers, act. The Ms. Livingstons of the world are watching.

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Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Gospel of Action

We are the heirs to the change he sought

BY MARC H. MORIAL

There is no shortage of words in the English language to describe Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. By now—over five decades after his fiery delivery of the iconic “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C.—you may feel as though you have heard them all: leader, hero, visionary, champion, inspiration, pacifist, orator and preacher, to name a few.

Of all the possible descriptions and titles that have been assigned to Dr. King, history has proven that his legacy endures in our collective American imagination and our national politics not because of what he was, or who he was, but because of what he did. Dr. King changed our society with action. Soaring rhetoric may move our hearts and imagination, but it is action that translates our seemingly impossible dreams into reality.

Dr. King’s all-too-short life was a monumental one that moved our nation to enact large-scale, course-correcting policies like the Civil Rights



Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act, and genuinely contemplate a day when we would “transform the jangling discords of our nation into a beautiful symphony of brotherhood,” but he departed from this earth with unfinished business.

Our nation has made undeniable progress since Dr. King described his

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dream of an America set free from the bondage of racial animosity, injustice and economic inequality. Today, people of color are achieving milestones that would have been impossible without the decades-long accumulation of constant acts of courage to make change happen.

But Dr. King did not dedicate himself to a life of action only to create wealth and opportunity for a privileged few, to diversify the palette of America’s

corporate offices, or even the White House. While Dr. King would have likely been proud to live in a country that judged an African-American not on the color of his skin, but the content of his character, and elected him president, he would be disheartened to witness the mounting rollbacks in voting rights, disappointed to stand at

the cusp of the ever-widening chasm of economic inequality, and disillusioned at the loss of Black lives at the hands of law enforcement. Progress must not grow into passivity. Complacency will only serve to erode the gains our nation have made and can make under the constant vigilance and activism of its citizenry.

In his last State of the Union address to Congress, President Barack Obama acknowledged the necessity of ev-

ery day acts of courage and quiet citizenship to move our nation closer to fulfilling its founding promise of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness for all its people. “What I’m asking for is hard. It’s easier to be cynical; to accept that change isn’t possible, and politics is hopeless, and to believe that our voices and actions don’t matter. But if we give up now, then we forsake a better future,” he said.

That better future is what Dr. King saw on the mountaintop. He did not live to get there with us, but his clarion call to justice lives on. We, as the heirs of the change he sought, can make the holiday named in his honor a more meaningful one by engaging in civic, community and service projects. We can do what Dr. King did for a lifetime: serving others. But this is about more than a day. Full, unfettered access to voting will not be restored in one day. Police brutality in communities of color will not end in one day. Economic inequality will not be resolved in one day. It will take days, years, decades and perhaps generations, but if we are wedded to the idea of a more perfect union, it is imperative that we continue Dr. King’s long and worthy climb to the mountaintop.

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