

BLACK LIVES MATTER WEEK OF ACTION IN PHILADELPHIA SCHOOLS¹

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1→ La traducción de este artículo al español está disponible para su descarga gratuita en www.lapes.org; a tradução deste artigo para o português está disponível gratuitamente para download em www.lapes.org.

WHO IS THE CAUCUS OF WE AND WHY RACIAL JUSTICE?

The Caucus of Working Educators (WE) formed in 2014 and the members include counselors, nurses, teachers, paraprofessionals, non-teaching assistants, secretaries, psychologists, librarians, and support staff who work with our students every day. Additionally, support members include parents, community organizers, and higher education faculty. This unique grouping provides a powerful network that actually connects public schools to the greater community attempting to close the great divide that has always existed.²

The group formed out of conversations that Philadelphia Federation of Teachers (PFT) members were having in many different settings – in their own buildings, through district events, via grassroots teacher networks like Teacher Action Group and Teachers Lead Philly, and most importantly, through our collective work as members of the PFT.

As a result of these conversations, a diverse group of working educators came together to start this group. They represent the many different professions, school and neighborhood settings, levels of experience, and personal identities that exist within the PFT.

In 2015, the Racial Justice Organizing Committee was formed to make sure that WE remained true to its mission being grounded in racial and social justice. The racial justice statement was a result of these early meetings, which included educators, community organizers, higher education faculty and parents. The complete racial justice statement is as follows:

The Caucus of Working Educators believes that purposeful action needs to be taken in order to eliminate the adverse outcomes derived from perpetual structural racism evident in public education.

- **WE** want public school-based policies that resist the criminalization of students of color.

2 → For more information see the Caucus of Working Educators website: <https://www.workingeducators.org/>.

- **WE** want curriculum and pedagogy that recognizes the collective contribution of all groups to modern society.
- **WE** want a full and fair funding formula that can provide for all of the needs of our students and schools.
- **WE** want standardized testing to end and no longer be used as the criteria to shutter schools since these tactics adversely affect low income, Black, and Latinx communities.
- **WE** want to attract, develop, and retain more teachers of color.

WE are aware of the barriers that all of our students and families face that limit their chances and opportunities to achieve academic success and a positive sustainable quality of life.

WE support all organizations and collective work that are against stop and frisk policies, support the fight for fair and safe housing, support a living and sustainable wage for all citizens, and the right for all to have access to affordable and equitable healthcare. The Caucus of Working Educators believes that this Racial Justice Statement promotes equity, human life, educational and social justice, and will develop the necessary knowledge and actions necessary to eliminate the barriers created by prejudice, stereotyping, discrimination and bias in Philadelphia and beyond.³

The Racial Justice Organizing Committee most recently created norms for monthly meetings and to guide our work. Two of the most important ones are:

- We actively work towards lifting up and centering the experiences, knowledge, joy, struggles, and histories of Black women, desiring to build and rely upon the leadership of Black women in a genuine way that is not tokenism.
- We place great importance on building a community that honors

3 → The racial justice statement is no longer included in Working Educator's platform and so no longer on their website. This is now the work solely of the Racial Justice Organizing Committee. See <https://sites.google.com/view/racialjusticeorganizing/>.

and prioritizes developing deep relationships and transformative growth over quick and shallow transactional relationships.

The ongoing work of the Racial Justice Organizing Committee is to make sure that the caucus remains diligent and focused on developing and demonstrating an anti-racist lens when it comes to actions and decisions. “Unions must make an effort on the front end to build a real relationship with Movement for Black Lives groups and members, and partner with them in developing common good bargaining demands that start to go on the offense against Wall Street and structural racist power structures.”⁴ This work is evident in our current contract committee conversations that started with the 2019 annual Caucus of Working Educators convention that produced actual platforms with a racial justice lens.

WHAT IS ORGANIZING AND WHY IS IT IMPORTANT IN EDUCATION AND COMMUNITIES?

Teachers in the United States are undervalued, unheard, and underpaid, and our students are negatively impacted by being excluded from the decision-making policies and practices. The strong financial and political influences from corporate education reformers (billionaires, philanthropists, corporate lobbyists, and for-profit providers) have used teachers as a scapegoat, which results in educators being forced to complete more accountability paperwork and data-driven scripted instruction. Teachers are not treated as professionals and the loss of autonomy has made the teaching profession undesirable to newcomers. Reformers have made promises of massive change through the standardization of standards, curriculum, and testing; however, the failed promises have pushed insurgent teachers to organize and contest the working conditions, teaching as a profession, and social and racial justice issues that are barriers to providing our students with the

4 → For Maurice Weeks and Marilyn Sneiderman, “Why Labor and the Movement for Racial Justice Should Work Together”, *In These Times* (September 2, 2016). http://inthesetimes.com/working/entry/19427/why_labor_and_the_movement_for_racial_justice_should_work_together.

education they need and deserve.

Teacher activism has a dual function. It first allows teachers to organize for the purposes of using their professional knowledge to advocate for better learning conditions for our students and peers. Educators understand that the data from the mandated standardized testing is not a measurement of achievement. Teachers fight for the implementation of holistic student-centered approaches to education, where engagement, creativity, inquiry, and critical thinking are paramount. We use our voices for students with disabilities to have the resources they need. Overall, we resist and vocalize against policies that harm our children and prevent them from receiving an equitable high-quality education.

The second purpose of teacher activism is to challenge structural oppression that affects schools and students. Structural oppression is directly connected to white supremacy. According to Sharon Martinas and the *Challenging White Supremacy Workshop*,⁵ white supremacy is defined as the ideology that white people and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions are superior to People of Color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. White supremacy culture is an artificial, historically constructed culture which expresses, justifies, and binds together the United States white supremacy system. And since the United States practiced the enslavement of Black and Brown bodies for capitalist benefit, the racialized structure was maintained by practicing and believing racist sentiments about Black and Brown people. Today, this is seen in American public education in the lack of equity that exists between school districts that are predominately African-American versus those that are mostly white. It can be seen in staffing, building conditions, services, and the treatment of students, educators, and staff.

Philadelphia is one of the first cities to make African-American studies a high school graduation requirement, but it did not come easy. On November 17, 1967, three thousand students poured out of several high schools to protest conditions for black students at the then old Board of Education building formerly located on the Parkway. They

5 → <http://www.cswsworkshop.org/>.

brought a list of 25 changes and requests, which included the development of Black History curriculum to be taught in school and the wearing of African garb. In response to this peaceful protest, 100 police officers under the command of Police Commissioner Frank Rizzo attacked the students with nightsticks and dogs. Several students and adults were seriously injured and arrested. Frank Rizzo would later become Mayor of Philadelphia. During this same time Black postal workers were also protesting treatment on the job and combined their efforts with the students. It was a pivotal time because it was the first time that black parents, black teachers, and black students worked with the school district to figure out what and how this could work. The action resulted in Black studies programs being created at universities also. Black studies did not become an official requirement for Philadelphia public schools until 2005. The community often comes together with schools when there is a problem to be solved because it is only a concerted organized effort that leads to the smallest of change.

As a result of this, teachers in urban centers like Philadelphia, Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles are in a battle for immigrant youth and sanctuary protection as they are currently under threat to be deported. We are pushing back against educational policies and curriculum that disproportionately leaves black and Latinx students at a constant disadvantage. Teachers are advocating for LGBTQ+ youth who are systematically ignored in policies, curriculum, and schools. Teachers are no longer willing to be silent, we are educated and trained to understand our students. We are on the frontline of the battleground, so we organize and fight for our students. The fight is just not professional, it is political.

WHY BLACK LIVES MATTER WEEK OF ACTION?

Timeline:

9/16/2016 Event at John Muir School in Seattle
(bomb threat)

10/19/2016 The Seattle Education Association stages
an action in response to the September incident

11/2016 Thousands of teachers wear BLM t-shirts
Racial Justice (WE) starts planning an action
inspired by Seattle

1/2017 Black Lives Matter Week of Action begins

2/2018 Black Lives Matter Week at Schools is now
national (in over 20 cities)

In the fall of 2016, a group of educators in Seattle staged a Black Lives Matter Action in response to an incident that occurred at one of their local schools. Hundreds of teachers brought light to a racial incident by wearing Black Lives Matter shirts in solidarity with the students who were affected. The Caucus of Working Educators Racial Justice Organizing Committee was inspired by this work and sat down to figure out what a similar action could look like in Philadelphia. We decided it should last a week and that it should be centered on the 13 guiding principles developed by the original organizers of Black Lives Matter. It was also vital that the week felt inclusive and not just limited to schools or educational settings/issues. We wanted this to be a partnership with the Philadelphia community of parents and organizers that are often ignored when it comes to issues of public education, hence the name Black Lives Matter Week of Action.

During January in 2017, the week in Philadelphia brought on some very interesting pushback, which we prepared for in regard to re-centering the narrative on the truth. The week brought to the forefront the importance of Black Lives and how this movement is THE movement of this time. It included a robust curriculum, FAQs for educators, in-school and community events scheduled during the day and evenings. Each day had two or three principles as a theme (i.e. Black women, Black families, Trans-Affirming). Shortly after the week ended, other school districts and teacher caucuses from outside of Philadelphia began to contact us to develop a national cohort. Members of the Racial Justice Organizing committee submitted a proposal for the 2017 Free Minds, Free People conference and conducted a presentation about Black Lives Matter Week of Action. This resulted in over 20 cities wanting to be involved and the National Black Lives Matter Week of Action

(Black Lives Matter Week at Schools) was born. In 2018, we focused on the following 3 demands: ending zero-tolerance discipline for students, hiring and retaining Black teachers, and organizing anti-racism training and multicultural studies in the curriculum. These demands inform our work going forward as we work to improve the educational environment for all students.

The demands came about in the planning process for the second year of Black Lives Matter Week of Action. Coalitions and relationships must be developed along the lines of common goals (political, grassroots, community and most importantly **parent and student** voices). Research must be conducted to support the need for the demand in order to provide tangible data (for example, the demographics of teachers for the Black Educator demand). Always make sure that a connection is made to other cities with similar demographics and issues along with fellow teachers' unions to show solidarity. Combine public panels with press, publications (articles) and outreach, in order to create public consensus. Take advantage of opportunity (School Board meetings and political relationships). Always identify accountability partners or members (for example, Racial Justice is one for WE).

13 GUIDING PRINCIPLES AND CURRICULUM DEVELOPMENT

In 2015, the Black Lives Matter Global Network was organized by Patsisse Khan-Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi as a chapter-based, local organizing structure as a response to the murder of Trayvon Martin. The 13 guiding principles grounded the work that continues, "Imagining and creating a world free of anti-Blackness, where every Black person has the social, economic, and political power to thrive."⁶

The 13 guiding principles are:

- 1 Restorative justice
- 2 Empathy
- 3 Loving engagement

6 → <https://blacklivesmatter.com/what-we-believe/>.

- 4 Diversity
- 5 Globalism
- 6 Collective value
- 7 Queer affirming
- 8 Trans affirming
- 9 Intergenerational
- 10 Black Families
- 11 Black villages
- 12 Black women
- 13 Unapologetically Black

The essence of Black Lives Matter means to structure your life purpose for humanity, which influences your daily practices. The guiding principles embody the respect, value, and love we have for humanity. However, the actions, laws and policies that govern our society have historically devalued the lives of Black and Brown people. Centering Black lives means to acknowledge their existence, to vigorously fight for justice and freedom of all Black lives, and to ensure dignity and peace in our interactions with one another.

When the Black Lives Matter Week of Action was first organized in 2017, it was vital that curriculum was developed in order to provide access and opportunity for school involvement. It was equally imperative that the work was grounded in the 13 guiding principles of the original movement. In Philadelphia, this was the next step in increasing and deepening the African-American studies requirement (high schools only) by adding more robust curriculum. Over the years, we have developed a curriculum that spans early childhood to higher education and includes all of the principles. 2019 included a challenge for all participating schools nationwide to look at their schools and identify, in their own creative way, how Black Lives Matter is demonstrated there. Or how can the school improve the way that Black Lives Matter within and outside of its walls. The final work was displayed in a public digital folder. This creates solidarity across all of the participating cities, but it also provides educators the opportunity to utilize unique, teacher-created curriculum that centers on Black Lives. Another great example of decolonizing the lessons.

MAJOR WINS THAT HAVE OCCURRED SINCE 2017

- Bread and Roses awards the caucus a \$10,000 grant to continue racial justice work (2017)
- The National Education Association (NEA) adopted the Black Lives Matter in Schools (2018)
- Philadelphia City Council signed a unanimous resolution making the first week in February, Black Lives Matter Week of Action (2019)
- Soft endorsement from Joyce Wilkerson, the Philadelphia School Board President: “We support and encourage our teachers to responsibly engage students around important issues to develop critical thinking skills and a respect for the exchange of ideas. While Black Lives Matter in Action Week is not in the official curriculum of the district, we certainly support our teachers in this endeavor” (Jan 2019)⁷
- The complete Anti-Racist training (20 hours) was rolled out for core caucus members (June 2019)
- Anti-Racist training (written by Racial Justice) was a part of the New Hire training (August 2019)
- Petition against gun violence (2019)
- Healthy Schools petition with approximately 2700 signatures and presented to the Philadelphia School Board (2019)
- Demographics of teachers were finally posted in a report from the Office of Research and shared on the main School District of Philadelphia page (2019)

MAJOR STRUGGLES OF THE WORK

The Black Lives Matter Week of Action should not solely emanate from the Racial Justice Committee and yet each year that is exactly what happens. Even the work and participation of our majority black members is concentrated at the racial justice meetings where 8 out of the 10 core members are black. This is very different from the larger WE

7 → https://www.phillytrib.com/news/local_news/activists-urge-school-district-to-adopt-black-lives-matter-week/article_8f23b1a5-98ed-524f-a072-b852224f96cf.html.

membership, which still finds maintaining black membership difficult. At the 2019 Black Lives Matter week debrief, the same theme of disconnection and not being sure if it is a priority continued to ring true. Yet, nearly 750 people attended the weekly events and 100% of attendees felt that they were included, whether they were educators or not. This is exactly what the goal of organizing should look like. It is also an effective tool to have a debrief after any and all major actions or work. We find that racial justice issues are raised by the racial justice organizing committee and brought to the larger core, but when racial justice problems arise in the larger group, they may go unnoticed.

Labor unions have constant dissonance when it comes to race, despite the fact that union jobs are mostly black and female members. Historically, teacher unions were not concerned with social or racial justice, and when social justice became a primary focus for progressive unionism as seen in Chicago, Los Angeles, and Minnesota, it ignored the main tenets of racial justice. In Chicago during teacher strikes of the 60s, it was not uncommon for black teachers to either cross the picket lines or be at odds with their white peers due to demands that fell across racial lines (class size, busing, and redistricting). “Their unwillingness to put race and racism on the table as legitimate concerns of parents and students—has made them vulnerable to neoliberalism’s audacious and effective usurpation of the rhetoric of equal educational opportunity historically associated with progressive movements.”⁸

This is one of the reasons that all teacher caucuses continue to have a “race” problem in the midst of proclaiming a social and racial justice lens. Much of this is attributed to the changing demographics of teachers. In Philadelphia there are approximately 25% black educators and in Chicago there are approximately 20%. This is why active partnerships with diverse parents and community organizers like Black Lives Matter Philly, TAG (Teacher Action Group), Urb Ed (advocates for a quality and efficient urban education), and PSU (Philadelphia Student Union) are imperative when the majority of the Caucus of Working

8 → Lois Weiner, “When ‘Teachers Want What Children Need’: Reconciling Tensions in Teachers’ Work and Teacher Unionism,” *The Monthly Review* 65, no. 2 (June 2013): 53, https://doi.org/10.14452/MR-065-02-2013-06_5.

Educators are white. We also have space for an elected supporting member, one who is not a member of PFT, to be on the steering committee.

Each of these struggles are met with strategies, but we must be vigilant in our practice by making sure that we are transparent and honest when one or all of us fall short of reaching an authentic anti-racist view. These struggles were a major factor in developing the training. It was imperative that our members were the first in line to participate.

WHY AND HOW DID THE ANTI-RACIST TRAINING COME TO FRUITION?

In 2018, the Racial Justice Organizing Committee of the Caucus of Working Educators decided to add a demand that was not a part of the national list, and that was anti-racist training for all educators and staff in all Philadelphia public schools. The actual wording of the demand was the following:

While the majority of Philadelphia's students are people of color, the majority of our teaching force is white. We demand ongoing anti-racism Professional Development for all District and Charter staff (including classroom teachers, classroom assistants, Principals and all climate staff, school police, recruiters, etc.) that encourages them to reflect on their own racial identities, recognize implicit bias, and challenge systemic inequality in order to better serve students in Philadelphia.

The committee also agreed that the training should be created internally and then shared with the district. So, during the first racial justice meeting in September of 2018 that is exactly what we set out to do. After several meetings, conference calls, and organizing sessions, we developed a 20-hour anti-racist training. It included several articles and *Stamped from the Beginning* by Ibram X. Kendi.⁹ The first complete training was given to the members of the caucus in June 2019 and it included the following:

⁹ → Ibram X. Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racism in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2016).

Day One - The Emergent Anti-Racist:

Agenda:

- Defining Racism
- Surveys: Bias/Privilege
- Race as a Social Construct
- History of Race
- White Fragility/White Saviorism
- Race and White Saviorism in Education

Day Two - The Fluent Anti-Racist:

Agenda:

- Identify Racial Bias and Privilege
- Check Racial Bias and Privilege
- White Supremacy as Root Cause
- Effects of Racial Bias and Privilege in Education

Day Three - The Intersectional Anti-Racist:

Agenda:

- Defining Intersectionality
- Intersectionality, Racism, and Anti-Racism
- History of Intersectionality
- Defining & Understanding Black Feminism
- Defining & Understanding Queer and Trans Affirming
- Defining & Understanding Colorism
- Defining and Understanding Islamophobia

Day Four - The Realized Antiracist: Less Talk, More Action:

Agenda:

- Review Discipline Data & How Racism Manifests in Schools (Administrators)
- White Supremacy in Organizations

- Best Practices & Development of Anti-Racist/Anti-Bias Strategies
- How to Advocate for Your Children (Parents)
- Lesson Planning Utilizing New Material (Teachers)

A modified Day 1 was presented during a district sponsored professional development titled “TuneUp Tuesday” on two separate days and received very positive feedback. Most in this stated, “that this kind of training was necessary.” This resulted in a part of the training being included for the New Hire Orientation for the School District of Philadelphia. The goal is for the **complete** training to be presented for all educators and staff.

DEVELOPMENT AND PURPOSE OF AFFINITY GROUPS LIKE BAR-WE AND MEC

The creation of Building Anti-Racist White Educators (BAR-WE) started with an iTAG, which is an inquiry group led by educators. This started with a series of inquiry conversations with the same title and soon became a committed affinity group that is open to educators of color, but they approach this work with an understanding that it is not the burden of educators of color to educate white educators on racism and white supremacy – white educators need to take that responsibility. Even so, this work must be accountable and responsive to educators of color. In September of 2018, they started a series of conversations around *How can your curriculum challenge dominant and oppressive ideologies*. Additionally, two of the main facilitators of this group, Charlie McGeehan and Rebecca Coven, were recognized by Teaching Tolerance through their Excellence in Teaching Award. This demonstrates scholarship and commitment to the work.

The creation of the Melanated Educators Collective (MEC), originally called Educators of Color, was also formed out of the racial justice work.¹⁰ The collective wants to unify and empower educators of color in the Philadelphia and Greater Philadelphia communities. As

¹⁰ → <https://www.melanatededucatorscollective.com/about-us>.

the groundwork was being developed and partnerships identified, a core group began to discuss ways to deepen this work while focusing on educators, parents, and students of color. These members recognized a need for support and professional development that centers around teachers and students of color. The School District of Philadelphia did not share the racial data of teachers. This made the problem more difficult to correct in a sustainable manner. Black teachers are leaving the education field in droves. This spells disaster for public school students who increasingly are children of color, and studies prove that when students have teachers who look like them, they are more successful. Because of pressure from MEC and the Racial Justice Organizing Committee, the district now shares this data.

Understanding this problem, these teachers and parents, all public school educators and/or parents of color began to meet and discuss how to move the needle forward in terms of demanding the recruitment and retention of Educators of Color, as well as creating conditions in schools that will facilitate learning for children of color and all children in the Philadelphia area and beyond. Several of the members of the MEC have conducted workshops or been featured in major publications about teaching and learning.

Affinity spaces are places of affirmation and empowerment that educators need to share experiences in a way that is productive, valuable, and meaningful. Both White and Black educators need spaces to preserve our dignity. Affinity spaces are places where people of the same identity can share the complexities of their shared racialized lives. Educators are constantly faced with institutional and systemic racism that informs the policies and curriculum. It also affects individual teachers and school staff mentally, physically, and spiritually so it is important that all educators regardless of ethnic identity have the opportunity to reflect on their personal biases, prejudice, and internalized oppression. Both groups also continue to work with the Racial Justice Organizing Committee.

REFLECTION ON HOW AND WHY THIS WORK CONTINUES TO BE TRANSFORMATIVE

The work continues to be necessary and not easy. There is always a constant need to check in, evaluate, re-strategize, move forward, recover, and start again. It will never stop as long we have a broken system that is positioned to keep its foot on the backs of those who are often rendered invisible. It is vital that we continue to transform words into powerful actions. In the words of James Baldwin, “Any real change implies the breakup of the world as one has always known it, the loss of all that gave one an identity, the end of safety.” It is only then that the system can be rebuilt and not simply reformed to repeat the same errors of the past and present.

In the words of Assata Shakur, “it is our duty to fight for our freedom, it is our duty to win. We must love and protect each other. We have nothing to lose but our chains.” This work must continue until humanity for Black, Brown, Queer, Women, Trans, and all marginalized human beings is achieved. Educators must dismantle the oppressive curriculum and the tools used to cage the minds of the youth. It is imperative that we affirm, value, empower, and inspire young people to break the vicious cycle of racism. ■