

BACKGROUND

AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY CURRICULUM OF THE SCHOOL DISTRICT OF PHILADELPHIA



NORTH AMERICAN VALUES INSTITUTE

Executive Summary

The School District of Philadelphia’s 10th-grade African American History curriculum replaces a comprehensive study of black history with an ideologically driven narrative centered on identity politics, grievance, and activism. Instead of providing students with a rigorous exploration of African American history, the course presents a narrow, divisive view that frames Black Americans as fundamentally separate from the United States. It relies on discredited resources like the 1619 Project, minimizes major historical figures and achievements, and normalizes violence as a tool for social change. In doing so, the curriculum denies students a full understanding of African American history and fails to equip them with the critical thinking skills necessary for academic, civic, and professional success.

Introduction

A serious study of African American history should equip students with a deep understanding of the struggles, achievements, and contributions of Black Americans throughout the nation’s history. Instead, the School District of Philadelphia’s 10th-grade African American History curriculum replaces this essential work with a politicized narrative that emphasizes identity, grievance, and activism over accuracy and complexity. This report shows how the curriculum distorts historical events, minimizes key figures and achievements, and encourages a divisive view of American society. The curriculum ultimately does a disservice to students by fostering resentment rather than true education at a time when academic outcomes in Philadelphia remain alarmingly low.

Divisive Framing

The course begins by suggesting that African Americans are physically in the United States, but not fully part of it. In the first unit, students are told to “explore how African American experiences today might challenge the values the United States purports to hold dear.”

By inviting students to question the legitimacy of American ideals and suggesting that those ideals are insincere, the curriculum sets up a divide between African Americans and the nation itself.



EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES IN PHILADELPHIA

- 35% of students scored Proficient or Advanced in English Language Arts.
- 20% of students scored Proficient or Advanced in math.
- 66% of students attended 90% or more of enrolled days.

– [The School District of Philadelphia, School Profiles 2023-2024](#)

This approach to the complex history of race in America encourages division rather than understanding.

The unit continues its divisive framing with its first assignment of the year: “After critically examining race and racism in the United States, students will find a song that they think should replace the national anthem and try to persuade others of their choice.” By encouraging students to replace the national anthem in response to racism, the curriculum teaches students to reject the ideals that unite us, which have guided the ongoing pursuit of justice and equality.

Selective Presentation of African History

In presenting the importance of African history, the course selectively highlights achievements while omitting critical facts necessary for a full and honest understanding of the past. The course asserts that studies of African American history have ignored African history because of racism: “Despite being regulated [sic] to the margins of mainstream American historical projections rooted in fairly recent conceptual frameworks derived from distortions informed by anti-Blackness and anti-Africanness, the study of ancient African prehistory and Africa during the classical period occupies a foundational cornerstone of the African American History course.”

This section claims that, “Too much information about Africa and its people has been distorted over the last 500 years to assist in the rationalization of racialized chattel enslavement in the Americas.” While the meaning is somewhat unclear, this statement seems to suggest that acknowledging [tribal leaders’ participation in the slave trade](#) is itself a distortion that is used to [justify slavery](#). However, an [honest examination of history](#) must acknowledge that African kingdoms were active participants in the slave trade, capturing and selling prisoners from rival tribes.



Rather than presenting this full historical context, the curriculum instead emphasizes that “African kingdoms and societies were highly organized and featured centers of learning that served as local and international beacons

of knowledge.” Presenting these achievements while omitting African complicity in the slave trade gives students an incomplete and misleading understanding of the past.

Similarly, the unit claims that “Africans utilize[d] every opportunity to disrupt and undermine the system of slavery,” which [oversimplifies](#) a complex reality. Students deserve the full truth – both the profound injustices committed against African Americans and the broader historical context – instead of a sanitized version that underestimates their ability to grapple with difficult historical facts.

The 1619 Project

The curriculum further abandons historical truth by repeatedly citing the 1619 Project, a work by Nikole Hannah-Jones that appeared in the [New York Times Magazine](#) in 2019. The Project contends that the arrival of enslaved Africans in Virginia in 1619 represents America’s “true founding,” and asserts that a primary motive for the American Revolution was the colonists’ desire to preserve slavery.

These claims have been widely contested. Historian Leslie M. Harris, who consulted as a fact-checker for the 1619 Project, [warned](#) the Project's writers that the assertion regarding the Revolution was inaccurate, but her concerns were disregarded. Furthermore, five prominent historians requested corrections from the New York Times, [stating](#), "These errors, which concern major events, cannot be described as interpretation or 'framing.' They are matters of verifiable fact, which are the foundation of both honest scholarship." Despite these controversies, the 1619 Project's disputed views on history have been integrated as fact into this curriculum.

The curriculum also misrepresents efforts to limit the teaching of critical race theory (CRT) in high school by falsely suggesting that such limits would forbid the teaching of America's history of slavery: "In this lesson, students will learn about the CRT bans that are being discussed across the country. Students will discuss the importance of slavery being included in curriculum, and revisit...lessons on the importance of African American History." This characterization confuses criticism of CRT's ideological biases with an unwillingness to teach slavery as historical fact. It further equates teaching CRT and the 1619 Project with teaching about race and slavery. Teachers are instructed to "[e]xplain to students that in many states the teaching of slavery, race, 1619, and CRT is discouraged or banned." Notably absent is any acknowledgement of the significant controversy around the 1619 Project.

Portrayals of Historical Figures

The legacy of Abraham Lincoln, like those of most historical figures, is complex. Although he did not believe in full racial equality, he issued the [Emancipation Proclamation](#), declaring that "that all persons held as slaves" in states that seceded "are, and henceforward shall be free." While it did not immediately end slavery throughout the country, this action was an important step towards abolition.

The curriculum dismisses Lincoln's contributions, asserting that, "The mythology that surrounds Abraham Lincoln is a false narrative. He was elected on the anti-expansion of slavery platform, not anti-slavery. He was a reluctant emancipator, whose goal was to save the union, not destroy the institution of slavery." While the popular image of Lincoln may be oversimplified, he played a critical role in ending slavery. The curriculum, however, goes further to discount and dismiss Lincoln's historic role and states that "when put into historical context and seen through his point of view, Lincoln can be a sympathetic figure. But the popular narrative that a single White politician ended an institution that formed the economic backbone of U.S. society is simply inaccurate, racist, and dangerous."

The curriculum also devotes significant attention to Malcolm X without acknowledging the complexities of his legacy. Malcolm X openly espoused anti-white and antisemitic views. He stated, "History proves that the white man is a devil," and accused Jews of exploiting Black communities:

"Many Jews have guilt feelings when people talk about 'exploitation.' This is because they know that they control 90 percent of the businesses in Black communities, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. And they benefit more from Black buying power than Blacks do from other parts of the White community. So they feel guilty about it."

Malcolm X also believed in violent action and [stated](#): "Stop sweet-talking [the White man]. Tell him how you feel.... [Let him know that] if he's not ready to clean his house up, he shouldn't have a house. It should catch on fire and burn down."

Malcolm X was a prominent leader of Nation of Islam, [designated as a hate group](#) by the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC). According to the SPLC, the Nation of Islam “often reframes the serious issues facing the Black community, such as economic inequality and police brutality, to fit within their antisemitic ideology, blaming Jews rather than the systemic racism infecting American institutions.” According to the [ADL](#), the Nation of Islam has “has maintained a consistent record of antisemitism and bigotry since its founding in the 1930s.” The curriculum omits these serious issues, resulting in a selective and misleading portrayal of Malcolm X.

Malcolm X was a proponent of [Black Nationalism](#), which promotes the idea that Blacks should have their own nation: “A revolutionary wants land so he can set up his own nation, an independent nation... If you’re afraid of Black nationalism, you’re afraid of revolution. And if you love revolution, you love Black nationalism.” The curriculum mentions the “[e]volution of Malcolm X,” but it does not explicitly address the fact that in his final years he left the Nation of Islam to pursue a less radical path for racial equality, a shift that ultimately contributed to his [murder](#) by Nation of Islam members.

The year-long curriculum contains only a few mentions of Martin Luther King. It contains nothing on James Baldwin, Rosa Parks, or President Barack Obama. In other words, the course fails to address significant examples of Black achievement in the United States, choosing instead to focus on resistance, victimhood, and oppression. While the Black experience in America has undeniably involved profound struggle, the decision to ignore positive, world-changing figures and events presents a distorted and incomplete history of African American History.

Normalizing Violence as a Strategy

The curriculum mentions the Black Panther movement repeatedly, but it fails to seriously address its violent history. It describes the Panthers as more “radical and militant” than the civil rights movement and concludes that “[b]oth movements were instrumental in advancing civil rights for African Americans, and contributed to significant legal and social changes.”

Nowhere does the curriculum acknowledge that the Black Panthers [openly](#) “advocated the use of violence and guerilla tactics to overthrow the U.S. government.” Instead, the curriculum focuses on the group’s artistic expression by asking students to consider: “How does Black Panther art communicate their vision for a just and liberated world for Black people?” It emphasizes that “Black Panther artwork portrays Black people in positions of power with guns, newspapers, scales of justice, shovels, or brooms as symbols of self-determination. The artwork challenges the white capitalist police state, represented as pigs, and conveys a vision of Black liberation where Black people take control of their own lives for food, jobs, housing, healthcare, safety, education, and justice.”

In its discussion of Black Lives Matter, the curriculum references the Black Panthers, omitting its [history of violence](#) and its current iteration, the New Black Panther



Emory Douglas. A page from *The Black Panther Newspaper*, vol. 4, no. 10 (Happy birthday Huey). 1970. Two-color ink on newsprint, 17 5/8 × 11 1/2" (44.8 × 29.2 cm). Publisher: Black Panther Party. The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Collection of Patrick and Nesta McQuaid and Akili Tommasino, gift of the Committee on Architecture and Design Funds. © 2021 Emory Douglas/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York

Party (NBPP), which the SPLC has [designated as a hate group](#). According to SPLC, in its “10 Point Platform” the NBPP “demands that Black people be given a country or state of their own within which they can make their own laws” and that “all Black prisoners in the United States be released to ‘the lawful authorities of the Black Nation.’” The group claims to be entitled to reparations for slavery from the United States, all European countries, and “the Jews.” Former NBPP leaders have made violent, antisemitic statements, including:

“You want freedom? You going to have to kill some crackers! You going to have to kill some of their babies!”— King Samir Shabazz, former head of the party’s Philadelphia chapter, in a National Geographic documentary, January 2009.

“Kill every goddamn Zionist in Israel! Goddamn little babies, goddamn old ladies! Blow up Zionist supermarkets!”— Malik Zulu Shabazz, the party’s former national chairman, protesting at B’nai B’rith International headquarters in Washington, D.C., April 20, 2002.

The curriculum adopts a neutral position toward violence, mentioning the option of non-violence, but de-centering non-violent leaders like Martin Luther King in favor of Malcolm X and the Black Panthers. It refers to violence as a legitimate option by stating, “The effectiveness of nonviolence as a tactic for achieving civil rights was questioned by some African American leaders who proposed alternative methods, including armed self-defense and Black nationalism. The diversity of perspectives within the African American community regarding the best strategies for achieving social change emphasizes the importance of considering multiple perspectives when examining historical movements and events.”

Rather than presenting nonviolence as the moral and strategic cornerstone of the civil rights movement, the curriculum normalizes the idea that violence is simply another valid approach to achieving social change.

The Future

The curriculum spends significant time discussing reparations as a way forward for the Black community. It states that “the unit will conclude with an examination of Reparations, including its historical context and contemporary relevance in the ongoing fight for racial justice.” The curriculum offers no critical engagement or diverse perspectives to help students understand why the issue is [controversial](#). Instead, it lists multiple resources supporting reparations, including an NPR article [claiming](#) America owes the Black community between 10 and 12 trillion dollars. No practical mechanism is presented for how such a transfer would occur beyond a vague reference to “some sort of big wealth redistribution.” Another [lesson](#) on reparations draws from the Zinn Education Project, based on the teachings of Howard Zinn, the radical left-wing ideologue known for his extremely biased book, *A People’s History of the United States*. The curriculum fails to address the practical and political complexity of reparations as an option.

The curriculum sets for a list for the future of Black America, called “Defining Black America and It’s [sic] Future.” This list, which includes reparations, paints a grievance-centered portrait rather than highlighting achievements and potential.

Defining Black America and It's Future Subtopics:

- Black Nationalism
- Black Feminism
- Intersectionality
- Black Power Social & Political Thought
- White Backlash
- War on Drugs/ Mass Incarceration
- Hip-Hop
- AfroFuturism
- AfroSurrealism
- Reparations

— From the SDP African American History Curriculum

The inclusion of Black Nationalism in the future sends a defeatist message to all students preparing to enter adulthood. Black nationalists advocates “for the creation and support of separate cultural, economic, political and social institutions for Black communities, focusing on autonomy and self-reliance as essential strategies for survival and empowerment.” This list informs high school students that Black Americans require their own institutions within the United States in order to succeed.

The list grows more ideologically loaded from there. The emphasis on “intersectionality” underscores the idea that the more “oppressed” identities people have, the worse off they are. “White

backlash,” without further explanation, reinforces the idea of a deeply fractured and hostile society. AfroFuturism, Hip-hop and Afrosurrealism, while valuable artistic and cultural movements, are elevated to defining features of Black America’s future. Meanwhile, the list omits any reference to political, economic, scientific, or educational advancement. It is unclear how anything on this list provides a genuine, hopeful path forward for Black Americans.



This list presents an ideologically-driven and divisive potential that does little to teach students about the full painful and tragic, varied and inspiring history of African Americans. Once again, under Ismael Jimenez’s leadership, radical ideology is prioritized over education.

Conclusion

The Philadelphia African American History curriculum fails to provide students with a full, honest, and empowering account of Black history. Rather than presenting a balanced view that acknowledges suffering while celebrating achievement and resilience, it advances a grievance-centered, divisive narrative rooted in radical ideology. By minimizing figures like Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King Jr., glorifying militant movements, and framing the future of Black America around separatism and victimhood, the curriculum abandons its educational mission. Students deserve a history education that both confronts injustice and highlights extraordinary triumphs in order to gain a deeper understanding of the American story and a sense of possibility for the future.