BLACK VOICES

Tearing Down The Structures – And The Systems – That Keep Racism Alive

New Orleans may tear down its Confederate monuments, but its oppressive institutions remain.

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May 16, 2017, 05:15 PM EDT | Updated May 16, 2017

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Last week, the culturally rich, beautifully eccentric — but deeply Southern — city of New Orleans began taking down monuments of the Confederacy. Angry protestors swarmed the sites of the takedowns. Workers hired to do the deed were forced to wear flak jackets and identity-concealing scarves for their own protection. Every crane company in the region with equipment big enough to remove heavy monuments is said to have received threats.

Barricades, police guards, epithets. Confederate flags menacingly blowing in the humidity — this has been the scene in everyone's favorite jazz-and-beignets town as a courageous few try to right the wrongs of our country's ugly history.

It's a wonder anyone ever attempts to go against the rough grain of prejudice and white supremacy. And yet, all around this country, people are doing it.

Since last year's divisive election campaign, we've all witnessed a rise in racism, antisemitism, and "other" sorts. Many reports and news articles have chronicled the growing cultural anxiety among many Whites, who mistakenly feel that equality for all means oppression and erasure for them.

But those of us in the education field know that the opposite is true — that embracing, nurturing and even celebrating diversity makes all involved better. This is a fact proven by research, time and time again. We know, for example that students in integrated schools have higher average test scores, are less likely to drop out and more likely to enroll in college. And schools that insist on diverse student bodies have more success narrowing the academic achievement gap.

The Diverse Charter Schools Coalition is one group that understands that truth and is aggressively working to integrate the schools in its membership. Founded in 2014, the coalition now has grown from 14 charter schools and networks to include more than 100 member schools in more than a dozen states and in D.C.

One of the Coalition's founding beliefs: Charter schools can and should contribute to solving the historic challenge of integrating our public school system.

I applaud them for using the word "historic" there. Because the racism that exists in our nation — and particularly in our schools — as a microcosm of our nation is not incidental. It is very much historic. It's rooted in America's "original sin" — the enslitation of Native Americans — and has grown stronger through centuries of slavery, Jim Crow, redlining, the war on drugs, and mass incarceration. It blooms even now in the sad re-segregation of our public school systems, making it harder and harder for us as Americans to even reach the promise this country holds.

What can we do about it? Dismantling monuments to hatred is a fine place to start, but more must be done. It does little good to have public sites free of the faces of such bigots as Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee, and yet have segregated schools and students disillusioned and disengaged in the pursuit of "The American Dream."

At the National Urban Alliance for Effective Education (NUAE), we work primarily with teachers and school leaders to change beliefs about students' academic potential, from the earliest years all the way through college. We believe that when educators see students' backgrounds and cultures as strengths, academic performance improves. We believe that when educators believe students are able to prosper, they are more as successful. And when children believe they can learn at the highest levels, they do.

This is one reason why we partnered this winter with Cannisius College in Buffalo to create a Center for Urban Education, committed to inspiring Black, Brown and low-income students to reach the highest levels of academic performance. We're focused on the social justice aspect of teaching and learning, exposing new and seasoned teachers (many of whom happen to be white) to methodologies and pedagogies that enable them to deliver on the promise of education for all students — not just the students who look like them. We also have a mission to train and push out more teachers of color.

A recent report by a Johns Hopkins University economist underscored that which we already know: that "race matters" in schools. Low-income Black students who attend more one Black-majority elementary schools are far less likely to be significantly more likely to graduate high school and consider attending college. "One Black teacher can change a student's entire future outlook," one of the report's co-authors said.

Buffalo is a perfect place to launch such an ambitious venture. Last fall, the city embarked upon a racial reconciliation and equity project. ("Six Racial Equity Dividend: Buffalo's Great Opportunity." A report outlining the goals of the project unpacks "how the influence of institutions, places and people have worked together to create differential outcomes across indicators of education & job readiness, income & wealth, quality of life & neighborhoods, and criminal justice & safety." And advocates working with city leaders on the effort said:

> *Ultimately, achieving our potential as a region requires us to unpack with a critical eye our assumptions about the ways our city has been built and structured — factors that create the divisions and disparities we face today. The real story of race in Buffalo (and indeed in America) is one of the continued and intentional disadvantaging of people of color.*

That's about as bold as it comes when we talk about cities dismantling racism.

When we embrace diversity, when we have high expectations for all learners, when we respect cultures and support teachers, when we challenge our assumptions, and stride unflinchingly toward equity – that is how we keep our communities – our democracy – strong.

Though I'm just as glad as many of the rest of us to tell Jefferson Davis farewell, I know that we improve not just by taking down the monuments that remind us of racism, but by tackling the systems that continue to support it.

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