

Teacher Activism in the Age of Trump: A Year in a Suburban High School

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Abstract

What follows is the story of a year working for social justice in a suburban high school, the year Trump was elected. It was a tumultuous year, but the challenges of teacher activism in any given year are similar. This piece reflects on the different demands and manifestations of teacher activism and explores the nature of what it means to daily identify as a teacher-activist. Names have been changed, including that of the author. The school depicted is in an upper-class, predominantly White community in New England. A small minority of students of Color attend, mostly through School Choice programs. At the time of this writing, there were no teachers of Color. This piece is part of a larger work in progress, *Teaching to Kill a Mockingbird: A Social Justice Lens for the 21st Century*.

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The author is using a pseudonym because she fears repercussions from the school district for writing publicly about social justice.

When Obama was elected, Donald, one of our students of Color, came into school the following morning, skipping through the hallways, shouting, “Obama won! He won!” Our first Black president’s face smiled out from his T-shirt. Instantly, his joy was countered by racism. “That’s because he cheated,” another student said. “He should go back to Africa where he belongs.” Donald shouted back in response; there was some shoving, a scuffle before the two were separated. I remember the desperate look on his face when he later told me what happened, the two of us alone in my classroom.

“What would Obama have done in that situation?” I asked, unsure of what to say to help Donald manage his feelings, but knowing we now had the ultimate role model to look up to. An administrator was waiting outside my door, ready to take Donald down to the office for a consequence after we finished talking. Racism clearly still loomed in our building, but it felt like things were finally going to change.

This year, when Trump won, I felt like crying. We had an assembly for Veteran’s Day just after the election, and I had to leave the auditorium when students started chanting “Trump, Trump,” as though at a baseball game. The speaker on stage, in military uniform, had been chastising people who took a knee during the national anthem to protest racial violence. Overnight, the political landscape had changed, and so had our school. On the eve of Obama’s election, several White men in town set a Black church on fire just down the street. Barely anyone talked about it, only the Black kids. Others said, “Is that really what happened? I’m not so sure.” But months later there it was, in the back pages of the local newspaper: “FBI confirms church burning was an act of racism.” Only the Black kids

knew what was happening; no one else wanted to admit it. The specter of racism that had been swept under the rug so many years ago seemed now to have emerged full force.

Write-ups for derogatory language surged after the Trump election. So much so that administrators called a meeting with students from the Gay-Straight Alliance and the students of Color club. “We wanted to check-in,” they said, “and let you know we won’t tolerate this behavior.” But the rest of the school—the perpetrators—didn’t get the same message or any message. It got so bad that our principal asked for a committee to step up and plan a schoolwide advisory lesson on empathy, to address the “uptick” in discriminatory behavior. That was how the year started—on the bittersweet note that, although people were getting more blatant with their biases, at least we would finally address what had been happening all along. I thought it was my big chance to step up and help out. It was, and I did, but it backfired. The adults in the community just weren’t ready. Thankfully, some of the students were.

Since I started teaching the required text, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, to my freshmen 15 years ago, Harper Lee’s call to action was something I took seriously. After I was called a “nigger-lover” in January of my first year (presumably because I have a biracial daughter), I formed a club for students of Color, and that was where I delved into issues of race. I supported the students that joined, helped foster a community among them, and found outlets for their voices to be heard. We wrote editorials to the school paper, celebrated Black History Month by highlighting the accomplishments of African Americans, took field trips to museums and performances that featured Black artists, and

once hosted a hip-hop night with local talent—that was the best. But after running the Black Culture Club for 12 years, I was ready to make a larger impact on my school community.

I knew what some of the problems were (implicit bias, microaggressions, lack of diversity among staff, and school policies and practices that discriminated against and marginalized students of Color) and wanted to address them with colleagues. I'd been very involved in my daughter's school community at home and saw how activism worked to change school culture. In the college town where we live, numerous groups keep watch on the district's record in terms of diversity—from the hiring and retention of teachers of Color to unequal rates of discipline, to whether the curriculum is inclusive, social justice-oriented, and multicultural. I'd joined a group called the Equity Task Force and helped start a Restorative Justice program at the high school. I was an activist now at home, so how could I stand by while my school repeated cycles of exclusion and abuse towards students of Color?

The kids in the Black Culture Club shared numerous stories with me over the years. For instance, a hall monitor followed them around while White kids passed by unnoticed. One time, teachers harassed them outside the gym after school, told them to disperse while ignoring the mob of White athletes in team uniforms, making just as much noise. A racist bus driver disparaged them each morning and one of the adults told them they were “ridiculous” when they suggested the Black church was burned down on election night because of racism. They shared the microaggressions they encountered each day: “Sorry I bumped into you—are you going to beat me up now?” “Can you fill out this map of Africa for

me?” “Why are all Black people good at basketball?”

During one lesson in class, while discussing stereotypes in the context of *To Kill a Mockingbird*, a White boy asked, “If they [Black people] are so concerned with stereotypes, why do they always act like one?” The one Black girl in class, who'd barely spoken all semester, gasped and shook her head. I knew I had to address his comment but wasn't sure where to begin. Fumbling through a series of questions designed to help him see his blind spot, I think we got somewhere—I'm never sure. But my own emotion acted as an obstacle; my stomach tightened every time a comment like that was made, and I knew I needed to get a handle on my reactions if I was going to be effective at educating my students.

But the problem was bigger than I. We needed help as a school. If this kind of tension existed in my room, it likely existed everywhere. And if I, the one person I knew who was actively engaged in antiracism, was having such a hard time with it, what on earth was happening in other classes? As in most schools, students of Color were under-represented in our advanced classes and over-represented in our discipline system. Just around the time, I was hoping to spread my wings and try to implement some action that would help address our school climate, and then Trump was elected. This was both good and bad. Good because my administrators were forced to take measures to counter emboldened students who now freely expressed intolerance. Bad because some community members began scrutinizing the school for its “liberal” stance and pushed back hard when we took steps to address our problems.

The first step my principal, Sean, took was to hire an outside trainer to address

implicit bias. I met with him on several occasions to point out problems. Once to share an essay by a student of Color about the negative assumptions his teachers and peers made about him, and another time with a low-income student who was disturbed by disparaging comments and teacher attitudes towards working-class kids. In some incidents, we reviewed policies that I felt targeted low-income students and students of Color, such as the tardy policy that hit School Choice kids the hardest and the lunch policy that denied food to kids whose parents couldn't pay. (Coming from less privileged districts, Choice kids often have more structural barriers to getting to school on time: They are not provided a bus; their parents often work multiple jobs, sometimes at night; and many have to look after siblings.) These discussions never went well. Sean usually dismissed or argued against most of my points, citing a "lack of data," and seeming offended that I would suggest our "perfect" school had problems. But of all the things I said, he latched onto one phrase, "implicit bias." He'd likely heard it before, in a workshop or article—which goes to show that repetition matters. He said he'd be willing to do some professional development for staff on implicit bias. I suggested a trainer I knew, and he contacted her.

Several months later, I sat amidst our faculty in the auditorium for the training. One moment stands out: I am physically unable to sit still. My heart is pounding, and I'm taking deep breaths to calm myself, constantly shifting in my seat. I get up and go to the back of the auditorium, where I stand and spread my arms across the railing behind me. It feels good to stand. I catch my breath and the eye of the presenter, Saffire, an ally from a group we both belonged to several years ago, The Alliance of White Anti-racists. Saffire has her doctorate in

social justice education now and is used to giving presentations like this one, but maybe not to the severity of the pushback she's getting. I know she understands my pain and frustration with what my colleagues are saying.

Since the start of her workshop, several people have criticized her presentation, questioning the bias in the advertisements she's put up on slides; one person even called her analysis "ridiculous." Then a few male teachers began laughing at Saffire's co-presenter, a young, gender non-conforming Latinx. If this is how our adults act, I thought, is there any hope for our students? Before my real discomfort set in, Saffire showed a study by Harvard that tracked the eye movement of elementary school teachers and found that they anticipated more behavior problems from students of Color. People scoffed at this and began trying to disprove the data.

But the comment that finally propelled me out of my seat was made by a special educator and football coach, a large, lumbering man with salt-and-pepper hair, usually kind. He said,

My son is Black. My wife and I adopted him. If he were here, he would say this is ridiculous. He would say this is the type of stuff that drives us farther apart, causes more problems than fixes them.

Now, standing at the back of the room, I've caught my breath and had a chance to think about what he said. Perhaps he does not know the damage a comment like that can cause. Perhaps he believes that ignoring the subject, denying implicit bias, is the best way to preserve our community and help us all get along. Saffire said that bias is often subconscious, so maybe he just doesn't know that, even when we adopt Black

children, we've all been brought up with assumptions about race. It is these assumptions that result in different expectations and outcomes for students. I need to help him understand this, or at least push back against his effort to silence the conversation before he succeeds.

I'm ready to speak. Saffire sees and calls on me when I raise my hand. As I make my way back to my chair where I remain standing, I address my colleagues saying,

I have a Black child, too, and it makes me more aware of my racism. I can relate to the Harvard study. When I first began teaching, I was intimidated by students of Color. I had to work on my own bias. Instead of criticizing what the presenters are saying, can we at least consider the possibility that what they're saying is true? What if there is implicit bias in these images? What if there is implicit bias in our school? What if we have implicit bias, and it impacts our relationships with students? If that's true, then what does that mean? What do we have to do about it?

I sit down, and Saffire proceeds. Minutes later, I'm still shaking, and it takes several deep breaths before I can calm down. Sometimes, this is what teacher activism feels like.

Part of my little speech was inspired by *The Color of Fear*, a film used for teaching about racism in which a group of men has a conversation about race. Throughout the discussion, a couple of Black men keep trying to explain to a White man how they experience racism on a day-to-day basis, and he keeps on doubting the reality of their experience. Finally, one of the Black men gets so frustrated he nearly jumps out of his chair, and the facilitator asks the White man,

“What if what they are saying is true? What would that mean?” and he finally breaks down, accepts the possibility of their truth, and can have some conversation without spending his energy trying to disprove what they're saying. I hadn't planned to use words from that movie; they just came out—which shows that the more you read and absorb discussions around this work, the more tools you have to come to your aid when you need them.

Part two of the implicit bias workshop, a few weeks later, was more toned down. Instead of targeting race, the presenters began with gender. They showed a slide of two different bathroom signs found in the same school. One said, “Men's Faculty Restroom,” and the other said, “Women's Teacher Bathroom.” There was not so much pushback this time. They reviewed implicit bias, then broke us into three groups, each with a different trainer. In separate rooms, we read a series of one-page articles about how to create a positive, culturally responsive classroom. We traveled from table to table in small groups to read and discuss the different articles, considering how to apply the strategies offered to our classes.

I ended up in a group with another English teacher, a school psychologist, a science teacher, and a gym teacher. I recognized the gym teacher as someone who'd given the presenters a hard time in the last training, shaking his head and texting and making comments under his breath. We barely met eyes, but I tried to see this as an opportunity to understand his viewpoint, and for him to hear mine. As we discussed the readings, he and the science teacher kept attempting to discard the questions we were asked, rush through the readings, and talk about unrelated topics. But the psychologist, the other English

teacher, and I took our time reading and talking seriously about the practices described. The others eventually just stayed silent. Sometimes teacher activism is simply engaging when there is pressure to disengage.

When we got to the last table, the superintendent was sitting there—a small, cheerful man in a bowtie. He'd planted himself at that table, discussing with the teachers who rotated there and listening in on their conversations. New to the district, he was from a blue-collar city an hour away, a more diverse but also potentially more conservative community. I wondered what he thought of the training if he was behind it or not.

The moment from the training that stands out best is this next one: After the last reading, which is about transgender students, the gym teacher, Karl, presents a question to the superintendent. "Why do some kids have to be uncomfortable, and others don't?"

Karl is standing, having refused to sit for the last three rotations, and looks agitated. As he speaks, his face reddens, and he crosses his arms tightly, as if holding something in. He relates a scenario that happened recently, where a transgender male student wanted to change in the locker room of his preferred gender, and a cisgender student complained that it made him uncomfortable. The school supported the transgender student (Go Sean!), and Karl seems very upset by this.

I nod my head as I listen, not to validate his point, but to understand his feelings. I can see that he's angry, even sense that he's hurt somewhere as if this situation has opened an old wound. I've learned that it's important to acknowledge people's feelings,

even when you disagree with them. In a way, I'm glad Karl's getting a chance to have a voice. He's been mostly quiet for the last hour or so. But it's equally important then to share my thoughts and feelings on the issue, challenge him to see outside himself, which I'm calculating how to do when the superintendent jumps in: "Let me ask you guys a question. Parents keep calling, I've gotten about a dozen phone calls this year, saying that our schools only serve the White athletes. Is that true?"

Simultaneously, Karl answers "no," and I answer "yes."

The statement is extreme, but I'm thrilled to be asked the question and have a chance to discuss race and privilege, especially with the superintendent. But the science teacher, a young woman, who is now scowling, speaks up, "That's just the outside perception."

"But these are parents," I say, "with kids *inside* the school."

Just then, the presenter calls for the room's attention and announces that our time is up. The superintendent leaves, the conversation ends, and our training is over.

Sean did take another step to address school climate by following through on his call for a schoolwide advisory lesson on empathy. He'd made this announcement early in the year, right after part two of the implicit bias training. It was the same professional development day; actually, our group that had formed in the fall was ready to present our lesson to the faculty—probably not the best timing.

At our first meeting, the advisor to the Gay-Straight Alliance club, also a guidance counselor, had shown up, along with a

different school psychologist, a new assistant principal from the Bronx, and one student, a White girl on the student council. No other teachers came, and no people of Color. We shared ideas and decided to use the Anti-Defamation League website to search for lessons on empathy, as well as gather materials from other resources to address microaggressions and derogatory language. We also talked about doing a privilege walk, made popular on YouTube. I decided to search for more diversity and more students. I knew we had to be intentional if we wanted real representation.

Before the next meeting, I invited Yvonne, a new Spanish teacher who was Latina, and two Black kids I'd had in class, both of whom had been vocal about issues of equity and social justice. I found an ADL lesson on discriminatory language, contacted my daughter's school and borrowed their advisory lesson on microaggressions, and got a copy of the prompts read during a privilege walk. With input from all three students, we were able to narrow down the advisory lesson to just the privilege walk and activity on microaggressions. We went through the list of microaggressions offered for discussion, and the students added more relevant examples: "You talk like a White girl" "You don't look like you're actually a boy" (to a transgender girl). Yvonne was also able to add some about being Latina: "Do you eat tacos for dinner?"

The lesson asked kids to take some of these comments and consider the intent behind them, which was often good, the possible negative way they could be interpreted, and then think of another way to say what the person meant without being hurtful. It also went over the cumulative psychological effects of microaggressions, which are daunting.

We decided to test out the lesson on my Creative Writing class, a heterogeneous mix of grades and levels. The kids were great, even though they snickered a little at some of the microaggressions, and one student, a White boy, commented that "people were being too sensitive." I'd anticipated this and replied, "Not if you hear these things multiple times a day." I referred to the list of psychological effects, which included depression and even suicide. The message seemed to take hold when a senior boy of Color shared that a store clerk once asked him if he were sure he could afford all the groceries he'd brought to check out. I'd experienced something similar shopping with my daughter, when a store clerk looked at her, then asked if I was paying with food stamps. I shared this, and we discussed the assumptions behind these remarks, how they may not have been intended to do harm but still did. There's really no way to argue with stories and people's honest feelings about them, so creating space for that type of sharing to happen is a good goal.

When we lined up to do the privilege walk, the room became silent. I read the prompts ("If you live in a household with two parents, take a step forward." "If your ancestors were brought here by force, take a step back.") and as they separated, students looked around to see where they were in relation to others. In the end, I made sure to read the statement Yvonne had prepared:

If you are near the front, you don't need to feel guilty about it but realize that you have a responsibility to use your privilege to help others. If you are near the back, know that you may have more obstacles to overcome, but it will build your resiliency and strength.

Students said the activity fostered empathy and made them realize the

situations other people were in, as well as where they had privileges. “It was uncomfortable being at the back,” said a female African American student, “but it was a valuable exercise.” The lesson felt like a success—so when we did it with the whole school, what went wrong?

At the faculty meeting just after the second implicit bias training, our committee stood in front of the auditorium and shared our steps for teaching the advisory. (Sean was conspicuously absent, as he had been during the implicit bias training—administrators send clear messages by their very presence or absence.) We warned teachers of potential potholes—like the comment, “Everyone’s being too sensitive”—and gave them choices for how to modify the lesson if it wasn’t working. We’d decided to break the lesson in two because we’d run out of time in the trial run. Finally, we did a privilege walk with the whole faculty in the gym. But somehow, the lesson, once executed, caused a maelstrom in the community.

The day after we did the first advisory, the privilege walk, as a school, Sean, the superintendent, and even the guidance counselors started receiving phone calls. Parents were furious. “They were upset that their kids were singled out at the back of the line, at the front of the line being told they had privilege, and everything in between,” Sean told me later. Some were upset because their teachers had *not* done the activity, and some because they had done it poorly, and not taken it seriously, but most simply objected to its content. The second part of the advisory, the lesson on microaggressions, was canceled. Instead, one of our assistant principals wrote up a lesson on the power of words, and students contributed to a schoolwide word wall of kind things to say. This skimmed the surface

and did not delve into the discriminatory nature of the comments that students were using towards each other, the ones that Sean had wanted to address. It sidestepped the real issues, which was disappointing and even dangerous, as it taught kids to do the same.

The school committee got involved, publicly denouncing the lesson, and community members attacked the Anti-Defamation League, which Sean had cited when asked where the lesson had come from (even though we hadn’t used ADL resources). I sent him a quick email to ask which parents were upset, “those whose kids were in the back, or those in front who had to confront their privilege?” After answering, he snapped, “If forcing kids to confront their privilege was the point of the lesson, it should never have been done.”

I did not respond to Sean’s email, as I understood he was under fire from several directions, but I realized something from our exchange. If I was going to impact school climate, I was going to have to bump up against Sean and push his comfort zone. My success hinged, in part, on my ability to engage him. This role was outside my comfort zone; I generally avoid authority and do my own thing. Now I knew I was going to have to get used to interpersonal conflict. To leverage my privilege, I have to use my position to serve as a voice for marginalized students, who don’t have access to Sean’s ear like I do. I have to get uncomfortable for their sake.

Meanwhile, other things were happening in the building that provided opportunities to effect change. For one thing, the superintendent announced that he was considering cutting School Choice, the program that brought most of the diversity to our district, to accommodate a merger

with the middle school. With so many kids, the building would be at capacity, and we needed to reduce the numbers. Everything was just conjecture, he said, but I've learned over the years that "possibilities" are usually realities, announced as "possibilities" to soften the blow. I knew we had to do something. I approached colleagues whom I knew would be concerned and decided to write a letter. I penned it, and a few others made adjustments before we showed it to Sean (who signed it) and sent it to the superintendent. We argued for the inclusion of multiple perspectives in our classes, the need for diversity in our school, and the great loss it would be to let go of the Choice program.

This action felt good; my colleagues and I had taken a stand. Many of the teachers in the building signed the letter, which felt like a win. However, the football coach with the adopted son, with whom I'd experienced tension all year, sent a response to two of the male colleagues I'd worked with, saying, "Good job, guys!"

They fired back: "Although Aaron can sometimes be a boy's name, we're pretty sure Aaron Byrum identifies as female." I was glad they stuck up for me, but it burned that the coach had tried to discredit me. I'd written most of the letter, come up with the idea, and he'd intentionally left me out of the congratulations. Was it an attempt to cut me down to size? Backlash for taking a stand against racism is real. I've had to live with not being liked or considered "one of the gang." I avoided the coach and continued to reach out to colleagues I trusted.

Finding allies is essential if you are going to be in this work for the long term. Yvonne turned into a friend, one I could go to when I was upset. We commiserated

when our second advisory lesson was cut and many times after that, helping each other keep resolve. The assistant principal from the Bronx, Reggie, also turned out to be an important ally. Although he left at the end of that year (he was "not a good fit"), we got to know each other well. He gave me insight into how the school operated on an administrative level, confirming what I already knew: "Keeping order is the top priority, not trying new things."

Reggie left, and so did Yvonne, who got bumped by another teacher. I was sad but determined to keep moving and make new allies. One way I did that was by attending social justice events outside of my school. It helps to have a community of like-minded people to support you, remind you of your goals, and reinforce your commitment. One such person was Safire, who'd done our implicit bias training. She organized a local conference called Transforming Education for Social Justice and reached out to me to lead an affinity group for "White Folks for Racial Justice." Before we broke into groups, the keynote speaker, Jamila Lyiscott, blew me away. A professor at Columbia who specializes in racial justice and hip-hop, she performed a spoken word piece about speaking three different dialects of English, and her process of finding validation for all of them. Then she spoke about social justice education and asked us to visualize a positive outcome for the work we were doing. "Don't focus on injustice only," she said. "Imagine what a just world looks like." She asked us to write down our vision. Here's what I wrote that day:

*People of Color in my school,
parents, and kids, band together
and have a voice. Teachers know
how to support SOC in class, are
educated and doing their own
personal work to address implicit*

bias. Students are used to multiple perspectives in the classroom, have regular conversations about diversity, the history of supremacy, and social justice. Examples of activism are given, and students engage in service projects. Sean commits to educating the larger population about bias, microaggressions, and diversity. We hire more staff of Color, address the roots of derogatory language, and have more faculty training, which he attends and enforces. We hire more consultants, have more advisories, and our school begins to change its culture. The culture becomes one where all voices matter, all students feel welcome, and everyone is committed to equity and feels confident to address difficult issues when they come up.

This is a dream I won't give up on.

The school year ended as it had started, with small victories amid catastrophe. We had a guest speaker in the English department, from an organization I'd suggested the year before. I've learned that every little conversation counts when it comes to working for social justice. Asked to think up guest artists at an English department meeting one day, I'd intentionally suggested an organization with a diverse staff and multicultural focus. In a school with almost no racial or ethnic diversity among its teachers, we have to be creative in finding ways to reach all students. The company I'd suggested sent us Gary, a gay, African American actor from Baltimore. No one could have been more different from our students culturally, or

more a breath of fresh air. Gary bellowed during class, cracking jokes and laughing out loud at them, and danced around the room, getting kids out of their seats and their comfort zones. He made them laugh, connected with them and helped them connect with each other.

Gary's role was to facilitate a final project for our American literature classes, a creative version of their "American story," told in podcasts, performance, or some other artistic medium. He worked with three English teachers, including me, and visited classes for several weeks. The kids were warming up to him when disaster struck, again in the form of community blowback. He showed Childish Gambino's video *This Is America*, to offer another version of an "American story." Before showing it, he said,

I am a Black man. My story is going to sound different from yours, but that's ok. All stories are important and valid. This particular story is the one I can relate to, but that doesn't mean you have to.

The video features a Black man (Donald Glover) dancing and singing while violent and distracting things are going on around him. Rife with commentary on the state of America, the video hones in on gun violence against Black people in particular, and twice Glover shoots people—once a fellow musician, and once a church choir in the middle of a song (some say this is a reference to the church massacre by Dylann Roof). Other images include cops on horses chasing down Black people and cars burning as if referring to mass protests against police brutality. Tame compared to what kids see every day on television and social media, the violence in the video was cited as the reason for the outrage that followed. But my colleagues and I sensed something else at

play.

Here was a Black man, the only Black man in our school, in the classroom, teaching content created by another Black man, which offered a critical lens on the system of white supremacy. My colleagues and I show a lot of violent videos, such as modern versions of Shakespeare, Holocaust films, not to mention videos about slavery. None are met with the kind of pushback that Gary and his video received. Parents called the superintendent, the principal, the school board, even the theater company to complain. We were forced to issue an apology letter, and each of us had to attend a meeting with Sean. “Certainly a different resource could have been used to make the same point,” he said.

I noticed a change in Gary after that. He was disheartened, engaged less, and was more reserved in class. “I had a version of my own American story I was going to show,” he told me. “But not anymore. I don’t feel safe here.” He sent an email to all of us involved in the project: “I feel I’ve had to swallow my voice to make others more comfortable.”

“If that’s how a grown Black man feels here,” I said to my colleagues, “imagine how it feels for a student.”

This kind of climate, these kinds of battles, reflect what is going on in the country as a whole. There’s an attempt to curtail movements towards social justice, to silence marginalized voices, particularly when they encroach on the sovereignty of white supremacy. This climate is playing out in the White House, in racially motivated mass shootings, in courts of law, on our streets, and in our schools. It’s no wonder that curriculum that challenges the status quo, especially in predominantly White

communities, is under fire. We are in a period of regression, where forward momentum and change are meeting roadblocks that weren’t there before.

The good news is that an increasingly oppressive climate brings people forward to take a stand who may not have otherwise, and produces an equal amount of resolve on the part of those it attempts to oppress. For every attack that tries to squelch a voice for progress, that voice gets stronger. I want to finish with a few examples of students who stood up in the face of a hostile climate this year and inspired me to do the same.

The first is Isaiah, a School Choice student. Isaiah was repeating junior-level English. He’d been struggling academically and socially since coming to our school; he was even expelled sophomore year. By the time he got to me, he was becoming vocal about the discrimination he’d faced over the past few years and wrote several pieces about it. One time he told me that as a student of Color from a low-income community, he felt like a “burden” on our school. Soft-spoken and sweet, I found it hard to believe the stories other teachers told about him, how he’d “told them off” and stormed out of class. Since I never saw this side of him, I can only imagine that his teachers must have done something to really upset him. Sometimes, repeatedly failing a student who wants to do well is all it takes.

The first thing Isaiah did to fight back against the negative perception others had of him was to write an open letter. I’d assigned a personal essay on identity, and he used the opportunity to confront the issues he’d been faced with while at our school. He candidly addressed the community and certain individuals about how he’d been treated with discrimination. Unfortunately, before he even finished drafting it, one of his other

teachers found a copy and shared it with some of the people he'd addressed. They were angry, and they took the letter to Sean, who asked Isaiah to sit down for a meeting. He declined. His graduation was a few weeks away, and he didn't want to try to "work it out" anymore, he said. But his message got across. The teachers' defensive response, unfortunately, made him give up on working on the essay.

For his final American story, Isaiah created a project to share in front of his peers about being "Blackorican." He wrote an essay explaining what this term meant to him and described the pride he felt in his heritage but also the discrimination he'd faced because of it. For the visual portion, he put together a slideshow of family photos, showing him as an infant up until high school, with traditional Puerto Rican music playing in the background. "I want kids to see I was just a baby," he said, "just a kid, like them, and how can you be racist to a baby, someone who comes from the same place as you?"

Isaiah's will to educate people in the face of discrimination shows his courage and his generosity. Through his letter and his project, he gave us the gift of holding up a mirror. Because of Isaiah, I was able to reflect on my involvement in school disciplinary issues. As teachers, we are often given the message to mind our own business when it comes to disciplinary action taken by others, especially administrators. But when we sense there may be an injustice happening, teachers need to break that code. One day I saw Isaiah in the hallway, looking upset. He was heading, he said, to meet the assistant principal.

"What happened?" I asked.

"They're accusing me of putting pot in

my brownies." He explained that he'd brought brownies in for the class, and another student had joked that Isaiah put marijuana in them. Isaiah just laughed, but the teacher took this to mean it was true, so she called the principal.

Knowing Isaiah's history with the school, how he'd been suspended, I didn't want to leave him on his own. I could tell he needed an ally, someone who believed him. So I stood in the hallway when the assistant principal came to meet him. The two of them stepped inside an empty classroom to talk, and I waited outside the door. I felt pressure to walk away, leave the situation to the administrator, but I also felt a responsibility to make sure Isaiah was ok. I stayed, and when the two of them came out, I checked in with him, "Is everything ok?"

The administrator gave me a skeptical look, but I finished my conversation with Isaiah before moving on. That time, Isaiah was believed, and the incident blew over, but I'd made up my mind not to give in to the pressure to turn a blind eye. If I felt a student wasn't being treated fairly by a colleague, no matter who it was, I was going to see it through. It can be a tricky line to walk, but if you have the students' best interest in mind, you're only doing your job.

The identity essay assignment that Isaiah used to tell his story turned out to be a catalyst for reflection for some White students as well. Two White girls chose to write about their race—something White students are not often asked to do. We read Zora Neale Hurston's *How It Feels to Be Colored Me*, and I shared a piece of my own about discovering the meaning of my whiteness. For some students, this opened their minds to an exploration of their own White identity and privilege.

One girl was Nicki, a popular athlete whose family lived in town and owned property in the city next door, a more diverse and less privileged community. In her essay, she examined incidents in which she'd felt aware of her whiteness, such as one time when she went with her father to collect rent and played outside with some Black girls. A black girl made the comment, "Do you go to Starbucks every day?" This revealed her assumption about White people, and she considered the causes of these assumptions. As I had with Isaiah, I acted as coach and cheerleader, applauding her for taking on the subject, and challenging her to go deeper: How do their assumptions about you compare to your assumptions about them?

One of my favorite moments from that class was when Nicki and Isaiah sat at a table together and had a long conversation about each other's essays, both listening intently to the other.

Another student who stepped up this year was Bella, a biracial junior in the School Choice program. She'd been vocal all semester about issues of race, identity, and diversity, especially in our school. For her argument essay, she chose to write a letter to our superintendent, asking him to keep the School Choice program. She researched the positive impact a diverse student body has on *all* students, and shared anecdotes about being treated with fear and suspicion by her peers, and held to lower academic standards by her teachers, because of her skin color. With more, not less, diversity, she argued, people can understand and appreciate differences, unlearn stereotypes, and adjust to an increasingly multicultural society.

Bella helped me realize that kids want to and can fight their own battles. If we can

give them the tools, such as a relevant writing assignment, a strong foundation in skills, and a chance to reach an authentic audience, they will make change happen. I don't know the impact of Bella's letter, and still don't know if we are keeping School Choice or not, but her devotion to the assignment showed me that teacher activism also means empowering students to take matters into their own hands. Any time our curriculum gives students tools to advocate for themselves, we are promoting equity.

Finally, one student gave me hope for the future by deciding to do an independent study with me next year. Karla and I had lots of conversations in class about the issues troubling our school; she was one of the girls who had worked on the advisory lesson with us and saw it all blow up. Typically, shy, Karla had taken to staying after class or coming in early to talk with me about all that was going on. Instead of internalizing negative images about herself as she had in the past, she said, she was finally accepting herself for who she was, and was ready to tackle racism (and other *-isms*) head-on. For her final American story, she made a digital magazine with articles and ads countering negative stereotypes of Black women, telling the truth about Black hair, and sharing her story of learning to love herself. I think we were both sad about the prospect of not being together for her senior year.

One day, after getting excited about all the books I wanted her to read over the summer, I said, "You know, you should do an independent study. Then we can keep talking about this stuff!" She completed the paperwork, and next year she will research microaggressions, how they affect marginalized kids, and what schools are doing to address them and improve school climate. Her final product will be a presentation to the faculty.

I can already imagine that day, Karla standing and talking in front of an auditorium of teachers, me sitting somewhere nearby, filled with joy, pride, and the peace that comes with moving towards justice. Sometimes, this is what teacher activism feels like.