THE TENNESSEAN

EDUCATION

Tennesseans tackle tough subjects like slavery, segregation in the classroom using local context, living history



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Updated Dec. 3, 2020, 4:08 p.m. CT

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Darrell Cobbins wants learning history to hit home.

Doing so, Cobbins said, will help students better learn about tough topics, like Tennessee's role in the slave trade or the significant, sometimes violent clashes in Memphis during the civil rights movement.

"When it's closer to home it becomes more relevant, more contextual, like, 'This is where Tennessee was in 1855," said Cobbins, a Memphis business leader and member of the Tennessee State Board of Education. "'This is where Tennessee was in 1955. This is where Tennessee is in 2020.'"

When covering tough historical subjects like slavery or the American Civil War, sometimes it's easier to avoid how a local community played a role and instead to turn to already well-known moments in time or historical icons, educators say.

But that's just one part of truly learning and understanding history, said Cobbins, the only Black member of the state board.

For decades, students across the United States have been likely to see clips from Hollywood movies when learning about the Civil War in American history class or learn about the Little Rock Nine — the group of nine Black students who integrated Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 — when learning about desegregation.

But students integrated schools all across the South, and Tennessee played a pivotal role, witnessing key moments in the nation's history since it became a state in 1796.

A self-proclaimed history buff, Cobbins himself has read the newspaper since he was eight or nine years old and can recall all sorts of random facts about Memphis, the city he represents on the state board.

There should be a high bar with local context when teaching these subjects, Cobbins said.

"The standards that are in place right now ask for there to be some Tennessee historical context imparted to students," Cobbins said of the current social studies standards that determine what students learn in public schools.

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Daniel Kiel, a lawyer and professor at the University of Memphis School of Law, won't say for sure if learning local history, such as about the students who integrated his own Memphis City School would have changed his perspective as a boy, but he thinks it might have.

Kiel is also a film director. In 2011, he debuted a documentary film that followed the journey of Memphis' own group of Black students who integrated formerly all-white schools in 1961 — the Memphis 13.

He can recall first learning about segregation in the context of his hometown — it was life-changing for Kiel. Since the film debuted, he has shown it at more than a dozen schools, often with one of the Memphis 13 alongside him, and that's the hook that can get students interested in history, he said.

"When you unpack these topics (like segregated schools or housing) and recognize that it's not by accident, but that there is a reason that things are the way they are, then there's a need to question," Kiel said. "Even middle schoolers and high schoolers respond to things they can connect to. ...They'll start to ask, 'Why does my neighborhood look the way things are versus another neighborhood?'"

'A bad lesson plan'

But tough topics like slavery, race and the inequities that have faced different groups of people throughout the country's history can be fraught with controversy.

In recent years, several instances of usually well-meaning teachers sending home an assignment or leading an in-class activity that then goes very wrong has made the news.

In 2019, two Williamson County teachers resigned after assigning homework that asked students to imagine their family owned slaves. "Create a list of expectations for your family's slaves," the assignment for an eighth-grade social studies class at Sunset Middle School in Brentwood said.

After the assignment became public because of a social media post by the brother of a Sunset Middle student, then-Williamson Schools Director Mike Looney apologized as did teachers Susan Hooper and Kim Best, who acknowledged the homework was "inappropriate" and "insensitive," before resigning.

The same year, professional development training aimed at helping educators acknowledge and be comfortable talking about race and race-related concepts like "white privilege" in Chattanooga caused an uproar in conservative Southeast Tennessee. The district argued those who criticized the training misrepresented the presentation, which was never aimed at or made available to students.

Several Williamson County school board members criticized a similar series of teacher training videos that addressed race, bias and white privilege used by the district in 2019.

This year, a family filed a lawsuit against Metro Nashville Public Schools — Tennessee's second-largest school district serving nearly 70% Black and brown children — after a student-teacher taught her fourth-grade students a lesson on a speech about keeping Black slaves under control.

The lawsuit alleges the “wildly graphic and inappropriate” content contained in the speech caused physical and emotional harm to their child who has autism.

The Waverly Belmont Elementary School student-teacher, who was Black, was dismissed after community and city leaders called for stronger oversight and policies in the classroom and families protested during a Nashville school board meeting and the lawsuit is still pending.

The lesson focused on pre-Civil War United States history and focused on a supposed 1712 William Lynch speech about slavery tactics, including “how to make a slave” during that era. The material was deemed not age-appropriate or within the scope of a fourth-grade class, according to a district spokesman at the time. The family of the student has now sued the school district.

But some worry that teachers are often stuck between providing engaging, important content that meets state standards and not offending anyone.

"In this environment, no matter whatever a teacher (does), someone is going to get mad," said Bill Carey, executive director of Tennessee History for Kids. "Somebody

is going to get mad and the next thing you know, it's on Facebook."

Carey doesn't deny that sometimes teachers do purposefully misrepresent a topic, but it's rare. Often, these headline-worthy assignments are the result of a lesson plan gone wrong.

"This hasn't been an area of emphasis, especially teaching statewide history content," Carey said. "When you read these (stories) you kind of say, 'That wasn't very well thought out.' But that doesn't mean they should be fired. Nobody is firing a math teacher for a bad lesson plan."

Communities want to talk about it

Despite the controversy, most communities want to have these conversations, Kiel said.

And students not only crave them, but need them.

The reluctance that can come with talking about your own community history, can come from the baggage it carries, Kiel said.

"Sometimes there is a safety in discussing Apartheid in South Africa before you discuss segregation in the U.S., because you (can) distance yourself because there is that baggage. There is an advantage, sometimes, from stepping away from your community," Kiel said.

But whenever he has shown "The Memphis 13" to classrooms in Memphis, students immediately connect with it, he said. They are eager to see streets or school names they are familiar with and learn their histories.

And when his team shows the film outside of Memphis?

"Whenever we share the film out of town, all that people want to talk about is their own community's experience with desegregation," Kiel said. "There's clearly an interest in talking about their own community's story."

And these stories need to be taught, Tennessee educators often agree.

"Our history as a nation is complex. While it has its shining moments, there are also many ugly truths that must be confronted to build empathy and understanding among our students, who are the future of this nation," said Rachel Turner, who oversees social studies content at the middle and high school level for Hamilton County Schools in Chattanooga.

'NOT JUST ABOUT SYMBOLS': America's reckoning over Confederate monuments

In Chattanooga, social studies teachers use a variety of primary sources in curriculum guides and lessons, such as photos, political cartoons, newspaper clippings, guest speakers, speeches, political documents, Turner said in an email to The Tennessean.

The district bases all lessons around Tennessee's state standards.

For Turner, the ideal lesson would provide students with a variety of primary and secondary sources and allow them to investigate historical themes and make evidence-based claims, with teachers providing unbiased context.

How to teach tough subjects

Carey has made supporting teachers in this endeavor one of his callings. Since Tennessee History for Kids isn't a state-led education program, Carey can provide outside-the-box programming for teachers, such as a recent webinar on the "dos and don'ts" of teaching slavery and how educators could use historical archives from Tennessee newspapers to back up their lessons.

Some of the dos? Don't use fictional accounts or narratives that have been converted to film, such as the 1939 epic "Gone With the Wind," Carey cautions. Critics of the film, which is widely considered one of the greatest films in American cinematic history, have long criticized its romanticized depictions of slavery and the Civil War-era south.

Do use primary sources like advertisements calling for readers to be on the lookout for runaway slaves or announcing a slave auction in old newspapers. Find first-person accounts of Tennessee slaves and don't downplay the role slavery played in the state's history — a hallmark of Turner's strategy for Hamilton County Schools lessons.

Talking about tough issues, and how society has changed — or hasn't — today are important for students, many educators argue.

And as protest movements rise and surge across the nation this year, in the wake of George Floyd's killing earlier this year by police in Minneapolis, young people seem more willing to talk about many of these topics, Cobbins and Kiel said.

"The film has stayed the same pretty much since 2011, but obviously the world around it has changed significantly," Kiel said of his film.

Since the film debuted, several monuments of Confederate heroes have come down in Memphis and the Memphis 13 have been recognized and honored by the city. One school, Bruce Elementary School, even installed murals of the three members of the Memphis 13 that integrated the school decades ago.

"The way that students and people who watch it and respond to it have changed. Things I might not have been comfortable saying out loud or as forcibly in 2011, are things I might be willing to say now and I suspect that would be the case for teachers more broadly."

The current dialogue around race in the nation, raises the stakes of the conversation but also opens up topics that might have been harder to get into in the past, Kiel said.

It is imperative for students to learn about where they come from, so they can understand where the nation is trying to go, said Archie Moss, principal at Bruce Elementary.

"To learn history that tells them about how their parents were growing up, how their great-grandparents were growing up — it's imperative for them to know where they come from to help prepare them for where they're trying to go, for moving forward," Moss said.

In the five years since he's been at Bruce, Moss said he and his staff have ensured Bruce students learn the history of the school and of integration not just in history class. The history is embedded in the school's culture, in the values students and teachers share and can serve as an example to motivate students.

The three members of the Memphis 13 that integrated Bruce, didn't know they were creating history, Moss said. But now, students know "these three individuals paved the way for us."

"They didn't think they were creating history or doing anything special, they just wanted to go to school," Moss said. "So we are really able to make connections of who we are, where we came from and what is possible for our kids."

Allowing students to 'come to their own understanding'

Cobbins echoes Moss. He said part of learning history is putting it in the context of today and using it to inform today's society.

"I think, generally speaking, part of learning history is that you have to acknowledge that particular period of time and what is happening and what is going on, but you do it through the lens of today. If you juxtapose that respective period, whatever it is in history to today's time, and ask students to evaluate the values and norms of society and the values and norms of society of today you allow them to come to their own understanding and their own values of right and wrong," Cobbins told The Tennessean.

On a recent trip to Charleston, South Carolina with his 11-year-old son, Cobbins took a bus tour of historical sites. He was shocked, and somewhat appalled to see

the more than 100-foot-tall statue of slavery defender John Calhoun "lording" over the city from its pedestal in Marion Square.

"And when I think about that, I think you, know he has historical significance as a leader of his time, but based on what we know today, should he be lording over the entire city and population like that?

"We have to acknowledge that when you put up monuments, it sends a message, for some that message is positive and it's important and for others it harmful," he said. "With a new generation, it can send a different message."

That's why local context is needed when teaching history. That's why Tennessee's own social studies standards are reviewed by a new panel of teachers and community members every six years, Cobbins said.

"I'm paraphrasing Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., but he said the role of education is not meant to teach people how to count beans," Cobbins said. "But to teach them to be critical thinkers, concerned citizens and informed citizens. The subject matter changes over time, but the outcome you want in the end doesn't. Through the education process and being exposed to the standards and curricula, they can analyze society, their community, the nation."

Since his visit to Charleston, the statue of Calhoun, which towered over the square since 1898, was removed in June 2020.

Reporter Laura Testino in Memphis contributed to this report.

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