



Let the Children March

Lessons in Leading with Love and Purpose

BY FELECIA EVANS

The month of February is always a busy one in schools, whether we are gearing up for state testing or starting to prepare already for next school year, it is important to intentionally incorporate Black History Month celebrations at a school and classroom level. Since 1976, every American President has designated the Month of February as Black History Month. The celebration of Black History Month and the role that African Americans have played in our Nation's history, is important to help strengthen and supplement the teaching of the complex and sometimes incomplete history of the American story.

Literature, as a vehicle for teaching African American history, can strengthen the complex analysis and critical thinking skills that are foundational to our students' success in the future. Our students have access to unlimited amounts of information via the Internet and it is important that we teach them to be critical consumers and knowledgeable about the history of our great nation as it provides the context for our current struggles. According to the 2018-2019 Ohio Report Card, only 39.3% of African American students are proficient in Language Arts and only 32.5% of African American students are proficient in Mathematics. These staggeringly low numbers are a symptom of the historic oppression of African Americans in this country. Without understanding this history, one may falsely lay blame to a different cause.

Every year at Lander Elementary School, since taking the lead as Principal six years ago, I select a school book which teaches some aspect of African American history. I purchase a copy of the book for each classroom and then we design activities to go alongside the teaching of this book. This year, I selected a Coretta Scott King Award winning book titled, *Let the Children March*, by Monica Clark-Robinson. This book highlights the Birmingham Children's Crusade, which occurred in 1963, as several thousand children took to the streets of Birmingham, Alabama to protest for civil rights. There is

a memorial in Birmingham, near the 16th Street Baptist Church to teach about this historic day in our nation's history. The Children's Crusade is seen as a pivotal event in the civil rights movement and shows the power and importance of children's voices.

The activities that we planned for this February included a door decorating contest in which teachers and students decorated their classroom doors to communicate and celebrate the theme of the book. Each Friday, our entire school community wore different colors to signify different important aspects of the civil rights movement. The first Friday, we all wore green (our school district colors are green and white) to signify the importance of unity and bringing people together. The second Friday, we all wore the color red as a way to signify the need to end racism. On the third Friday, we all wore blue to learn about the history and importance of voting rights in America. On the last Friday of the month, we all wore gold and learned about the importance of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and how he was supportive of the Children's Crusade.

World Read Aloud Day occurred on February 5, and we used this as an opportunity to invite many local community members in to read books about kindness and books from African

American authors. This was a great opportunity to share the importance of literacy and reading with our school community. We had our superintendent, local politicians, our safety forces, and even our high school football team reading books aloud to our students.

Lastly, our Instructional Leadership Team, led by kindergarten teacher Mrs. Russo, organized a Lander Children's March February 21. In the days leading up to our school march, the older grade levels partnered up with the younger grade levels and did various activities together.

Unfortunately, the possibility of holding this event was threatened early on in the month. There were false rumors created and circulated

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on social media that our event was a Black Lives Matter march. This was false, but created a situation which could be unsafe for our children and school community. I ended up issuing a statement to my entire school community, clarifying these rumors and sharing that the purpose of our march was to show the sense of unity, kindness and acceptance that exists at our school.

By sharing this message, the outpouring of positive support from our parents, school board, superintendent, and community was overwhelming, and we knew that it was important to let our children march.

On a cold but sunny Friday in February, our entire school, walked out of the building and walked around the block, with our little ones holding the hands of our older students. We showed our community how much kindness, love, and unity exists in our school, and that our students, though their voices may be little, play an important role in making our society a better place.

This past school year, my district, the Mayfield City School District has undergone an initiative towards personalized learning called “All-Access.” Our vision is to create classrooms that provide students with equitable access to high quality learning opportunities, that are engaging and provide them with agency. We are designing learning activities that provide students with voice and choice in their learning and we are monitoring outcomes to ensure that all students are growing. We are creating professional learning communities where teachers are empowered to develop relationships with students and co-create learning experiences that help them fully develop their potential. The study of African American history is an opportunity to truly create All-Access learning experiences. Through the activities this past February, I saw students engaged and critically thinking, I witnessed them thinking about their own experiences and developing an understanding that they have a voice in this world.

While I consider myself the primary instructional leader at Lander Elementary School, it is also important for people to see your love, passion, and purpose as a leader. As the first African American principal in the history of my school district, I also see my role as Black History in the making and it is important that we acknowledge and celebrate the diversity of our students, staff and families. It is through the intersections of All-Access learning, instructional leadership, love, and passion, that I find my purpose, or perhaps, it is through purpose that I find my passion. While African Americans and other marginalized groups continue to struggle across this nation, it is through the teaching of history that we can understand our current reality and find hope for a better future for our youngest citizens.

About the Author:

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