Then They Came for the Books
All of the stories in this issue excite me, but the one that I couldn’t wait to dive into was the piece about current Ed.L.D. student and runner ALIA QATARNEH, ED.M.’22. With a son who became a runner a few years ago, I suddenly find myself immersed in the cross country and track and field world. I’ve learned what it means to PR and why every runner is on Strava. Even when my son isn’t around, I actually listen to the Coffee Club Podcast, hosted by pro runners with the On Athletics Club. So when I learned that one of our Ed.L.D. students, Alia, was getting ready to run the Boston Marathon for the first time as a “TrailBlazHer,” I knew I had to write about her. First off, what exactly is a TrailBlazHer? I learned that, at its core, it’s an all-female running group that supports and creates space for all women, but especially BIPOC women interested in running and moving and doing it in community. Part of their goal, in addition to creating a supportive sisterhood, is to redefine the typical image of what “a runner” looks like. As a story about the group in Runner’s World noted, “This women’s run crew is unapologetically staking their claim to the streets of Boston.”

Turns out Alia grew up in Boston and ran in high school, but like many runners, never quite felt like she fit in or could run a big race like the Boston Marathon—until she met the TrailBlazHers. Turns out, she’s pretty inspiring.

“What I conclude from this study is the Ivy League doesn’t have low-income students because it doesn’t want low-income students.”

PROFESSOR SUSAN DYNARSKI
“I stand here today because these women taught their only grandchild to work hard, dream big, and never take any of this for granted.”

TIM MCCARTHY (SEE P. 8)
As Luck Would Have It

TIM MCCARTHY on his humble roots, talking too much, and the many ways he hit the jackpot.
McCarthy’s story starts in 1971, the year he was dropped off as a newborn at a Catholic Charities location in upstate New York by his birth parents and taken in by Michelle and “Coach Mac,” a young couple looking to adopt. McCarthy calls them the “jackpot parents” — and the start of the good luck that he feels he’s carried throughout his life. “I’ve never been interested in that at all,” he says, plus there was never any official documentation when he was dropped off, making a search nearly impossible. “And I haven’t ever wanted to. I got super lucky. My parents are amazing.” Both passionate public school educators (for a combined 79 years), his parents turned 80 this year and are still surprised every day that he went to Harvard as an un

McCarthy lives with his husband, C.J. Crowder, Ed.M. ’02, and “Coach Mac,” a young couple looking to adopt. McCarthy’s story starts in 1971, the year he was dropped off as a newborn at a Catholic Charities location in upstate New York by his birth parents and taken in by Michelle and “Coach Mac,” a young couple looking to adopt. McCarthy calls them the “jackpot parents” — and the start of the good luck that he feels he’s carried throughout his life. “I’ve never been interested in that at all,” he says, plus there was never any official documentation when he was dropped off, making a search nearly impossible. “And I haven’t ever wanted to. I got super lucky. My parents are amazing.” Both passionate public school educators (for a combined 79 years), his parents turned 80 this year and are still surprised every day that he went to Harvard as an un

When I came down for breakfast, there were edits and Corrections. "Even before I went to school, I was asking questions. I was a huge troublemaker, huge troublemaker. I always had behavioral issues, all the way through high school," he says, laughing. "Probably also in college, graduate school. I’m still a troublemaker. My worst marks were handwriting and behavior. On my second-grade report card, which we still have, my teacher wrote in the comment section, ‘Timmy talks too much.’ My parents had to respond that they received the report card. My dad wrote, ‘You’re telling us!’
“So Timmy’s always talked too much,” McCarthy says. “My father used to joke that I got vaccinated with a phonograph needle.” Given who McCarthy was surrounded by growing up, it’s not a surprise that he learned it was okay to express himself.

“I was around adults all the time, as it happens when you’re an only child,” he says. “And I was around adults all the time who were curious about me and wanted to know what I had to say and gave me room and space to tell fanciful stories and to ask tough questions and to just chatter away and make sense of things in their presence.”

That included his other grandmother, Gram Bobrinitz on his mother’s side, who “was also hungry to learn,” he said during his convocation speech — and taught him other important lessons.

“Unlike Grandma McCarthy, who was a first-generation college student, Gram left high school when she was 16 to work in a garment factory in upstate New York,” he says. “Her family could only afford to send one of their four daughters to nursing school, so she became a cuffer, which meant putting cuffs on men’s dress shirts. And she cooked. As McCarthy told the Ed School students in May, when he wasn’t on the swing with Grandma McCarthy, he was in the kitchen with Gram Bobrinitz, "sundling the sauce, marveling at the meatballs, and hovering over the homemade pasta that seemed to stretch across every surface." By the time he reached middle school, Gram Bobrinitz was nearly 60 and decided it was time to finally get her high school diploma. “That meant that she had to clear some space to study in the midst of all that macaroni. Sometimes, we studied together — I helped her with spelling, she helped me with math — and she beat me to her high school diploma. "That meant that she had to clear some space to study in the midst of all that macaroni. Sometimes, we studied together — I helped her with spelling, she helped me with math — and she beat me to her high school diploma."

McCarthy says he doesn’t know what inspired her to go back to school but wishes he had asked. “I could have seen how she went back to high school to finish what she started,” McCarthy said at Convocation. “I stand here today because these women taught their only grandchild to work hard, dream big, and never take any of this for granted.”

At A Place Like This

And he did dream big. After graduating from Harvard College with a B.A. and getting two master’s and a Ph.D. from Columbia, McCarthy returned to Harvard, where he taught history and literature to undergraduates before joining the faculty at the Kennedy School, where he was the first openly gay faculty member and stayed for 16 years before coming to the Ed School. “My career has gone all over the place,” he says.

Initially he planned on staying in New York after his Ph.D, but was still connected to Malcolm, a young boy he mentored while volunteering at the Maynard Petcher School in Cambridge when he was a Harvard undergraduate. McCarthy later became Malcolm’s big brother through the Big Brother Big Sister program. I made a commitment that I was going to stay connected to him and stay in touch with his mother,” he says. Malcom even attended his father’s basketball camp in Alabama. When Malcolm was a teen, his mother called McCarthy and asked him if he’d help parent him.

And so I did. I came back from New York and put everything on hold," he says. That was in 1996. McCarthy started teaching at Harvard College and moved into Quincy House as a resident scholar. Malcolm lived with him during high school, becoming a track star at nearby Ridge and Larch. I met him when he was four and I was 19. He is 37 now. I’m 52,” McCarthy says.

And the connection has expanded. Now, Malcolm’s 14-year-old daughter Maka has become a big part of McCarthy’s life and visits the Harvard campus regularly. Through him, she’s met famous visitors, including Hillary Clinton and John Lewis. When Maka was nine, McCarthy wrote a piece to her that he posted online called “May Our Hope Persist: A Love Letter to My Niece.” He had started the letter in his mind when he was holding her for the first time in the hospital, the day she was born nine years earlier. “I’d never before met a human that saw the world,” he wrote. “You were very small, but you weighed everything. I can’t forget the look on the nurse’s face when she

“I come from blue collar, hardworking folk and teachers. When I say I come from humble roots, really do come from humble roots. We’re not fancy folks. My mother once said that we’re probably not fit for polite company. We’re a little bawdy, sometimes a little profane.”
came into that hospital room in Boston and saw you in my arms as you settled into your first night’s sleep. Not everyone can see what is so obvious to us: we are family.”

Not long ago, McCarthy joined a new family: at the Ed School. By the time Dean Bridget Terry Long called him in 2021 and asked if he was interested in joining the faculty full time (he was), McCarthy already had strong ties to the school, having taught a few modules and Project Zero classes. There was also the strongest connection: C.J. Crowder. Currently the director of talent acquisition at Ignite Reading, Crowder was an Ed School student when they met in 2001, McCarthy a professor in the yard.

“I used to work at Harvard Collections — it doesn’t exist anymore — and a few of us went to Whitney’s after work,” Crowder says of their first meeting. Crowder went to the jukebox to play a song and turned to the guy next to him to borrow a dollar. “I told him I would play a song for him. I played Captain Aka by Billy Joel, and we spent the rest of the night talking.” Their first official date was waffles and eggs in the dining hall at Quincy House, where McCarthy worked as an assistant resident dean. “When I entered the courtyard for the first date, I heard a little boy, a neighbor, call out, ‘Timothy Patrick McCarthy!!’ because he was so excited to see Tim and I think I fell in love with him at that moment.”

When Long reached out about the Ed School job, McCarthy was ready to move to Appian Way. “This is a special place. When I was there, there was a saying that it’s called trinct because it embraces you like a hug. It reaches out for special educators who understand the importance of sparking the imagination, passion, and excitement of educators and it makes them a vital part of the trinct community,” he says. “Tim was longing for that opportunity, and I think the leadership at trinct could sense that. Be the change…that’s Tim.”

It’s a vibe that his students have since picked up on, which doesn’t surprise Crowder: “He loves teaching — his parents and grandmother were teachers so it’s in his blood,” he says. “He loves connecting with his students and they bring him so much joy and light. He truly believes in the mutual benefit of teaching and knows as much as he teaches his students, they teach him so much more.”

During his Convocation speech in May, McCarthy talked to the soon-to-be graduates about how recent “world-historical disruptions” like the pandemic and political insurrections “have changed us for good. I say that because I have learned this from all of you.” Students, he explained, have shown him how to listen more deeply and speak more lovingly. They’ve challenged him to make classrooms more accessible and inclusive. And they have “checked” him when his walk and talk were misaligned.

“They have also appreciated his way of including storytelling — and one’s personal history — into learning.”

As BRIAN RADLEY, ED.M.’19, noted in an interview about faculty influences, McCarthy “affirmed for me the power of narrative as a way to connect with and inspire others. He also helped me reconnect with my own educational story in a truly empowering way.”

That through line of storytelling is why McCarthy joined the American Repertory Theater as a board advisor and host of their Resistance Mic! series, and recently hosted a series of author talks with Harvard Book Store. It’s also what keeps him talking about his own family and the influence they’ve had on who he is as an educator, and a person.

“I say to all my classes that stories are the connective tissue of our common and different human experiences. That’s just a core belief that I have,” he says. “Part of it is that I come from a storytelling family. One of the dimensions of that larger ecosystem of education and my family was that everyone was always sharing stories, telling stories about each other, and telling stories about where they’ve been and what they’ve done. Stories were just so important for us.”

Recently, his colleagues at the Codman Square Health Center in Dorchester, where he’s been teaching a year-long, college-level intro to the humanities class for adults since 2001, cheered when listening online to McCarthy’s Ed School Convocation speech. For years, they had been hearing those same stories.

“They were like, ‘I’m my God, I love that your grandmothers made it to Harvard, because in a way, my story of my grandmothers and their devotion to me and to education was one of the ways that I helped to explain why someone from Harvard was in Dorchester, why someone who teaches at Harvard was also teaching in the Clemente Course. I am an unlikely presence, both at Harvard and in Dorchester. Right?’

“There was nothing to predict,” he says, “that I would end up at a place like this.”

“I say to all my classes that stories are the connective tissue of our common and different human experiences. That’s just a core belief that I have.”

HARVARD ED.
She Sets the Pace

Alum works to dismantle what it means to be a runner and a scientist

Story by Lory Hough

Aila Qatarneh, Ed.M.’22, is many things. She’s first-generation, East Boston-raised, Arab-Italian-American. She’s an educator, rhyme-runner, learner, leader, and scientist.

She’s also a TrailBlazHer — part of an all-female running “crew” that launched in 2020 in Boston to respond to a need — the need for women in and around the city, and especially women of color, to have a safe space to truly see themselves as runners. Too often, the common narrative in society is that to be a “runner,” you must have a certain body shape or be able to hit specific PRs. But as Qatarneh once said in an interview about women interested in joining the TrailblazHer group, “if you run for the 39 bus, you are a runner.”

That’s why the TrailBlazHer’s mission isn’t about going faster or besting one another in races. It’s about being visible and dismantling mainstream messaging about women and their bodies. It’s about the mental, physical, and spiritual fitness of the women who show up each week. And, more than anything, says Qatarneh, a crew “LeadHer” who oversees weekly runs, it’s about community. “Trailblazers aren’t just a run crew,” she says. “We are a family, a sisterhood even.”

That sisterhood supported Qatarneh last April when she ran the Boston Marathon for the first time. She had been running for years before joining Trailblazers — first as a sprinter in high school at Boston Latin, then tackling longer distances, including seven half marathons. But running Boston — the biggest race in her hometown, and known worldwide — was never, ever on Qatarneh’s radar.

“It’s important to differentiate between knowing about the Boston Marathon and running to run the Boston Marathon,” she says. “As a Bostonian, I’ve known about this iconic race since I was in elementary school. Did I know it was iconic? Absolutely not. My father had taken my sister and I to the finish line a few times in the 90s, but I did not grasp the gravity of this one-day event. I did not know anyone who ran a marathon, let alone Boston. No family member or relative, no Eastie neighbor, no co-worker of my parents. Begs the question, why? Who is this race for? It surely wasn’t for me. But things changed in 2022.”

That was the year the Boston Running Collaborative, an extension of the Boston Athletic Association, opened nominations for their inaugural Boston Marathon Program. This goal was to actively engage local runners and make the iconic marathon more inclusive and representative of the city. TrailBlazHers nominated Qatarneh to receive a coveted bib. On the big day this past April, future Ed.L.D. classmates tracked her progress and one of her former professors, Monica Higgins, cheered her on in the rain at the 13.1-mile mark.

This summer, Qatarneh reached another milestone: In June, as she prepared to start the Ed.L.D. Program, she left the job she held for the past 11 years at Harvard working with middle and high school biology teachers to bring cutting edge lab techniques to the classroom as part of the science educat—
“I’m challenging the running sector by disrupting the narrative around what it means to be and look like a runner, and I’m disrupting within the Harvard community by challenging what it means to be a scientist.”

And why it’s an act of justice
Story by Lory Hough

Just after he joined the Ed School in July, after xxx years in the Afric novel activist biography department at San Francisco State University, Professor (future colleagues) spoke to Ed students about social justice educators and the importance of rest — including his own.

What got you thinking about the toll activism takes on educators, especially their ability to rest?

To keep it real, I didn’t always see the connection between social change and rest. Rest became important to me when I realized that something was really wrong in my own life. In 2001, I experienced a sort of mental breakdown. We had just given birth to our daughter Nyah. I was teaching at Santa Clara University. I was the executive director of a nonprofit in Oakland and constantly raising money, and I was leading a series of youth orga- nizing sessions with young people. One night, I woke up in a sweat and I couldn’t sleep. I was so straddled and worried about failing to raise money, not being good enough at teach- ing, and most importantly, not being there for my daughter. I walked into the living room and broke down crying. Well, really, I was sobbing. At first, I was surprised and didn’t know where all this emotion was com- ing from. But when I tried to calm it, bury it, and stuff it back down, it welled up even more.

What happened next?
I was five minutes into my snotty nose crying when the inner dialogue started in my head. One voice, the strong baritone Black man stood up and said, “Hey, you a grown ass man. Suck it up and keep going.” Another voice, one that I’d never heard before said, “It’s OK, man, you are so hard on yourself, just let go of all this shit you’ve been carrying.” More sobbing. Nedra, my spouse, heard me and came into the living room. She had never seen me in that state, so she knew I was really wrong. We sat and talked, and what became clear to me was that I needed to make a different choice about how I wanted to live. I remem- ber reading somewhere this quote, “I choose peace of mind. Instead of this” and that’s exactly how I felt. I also realized this wasn’t alone, and that a lot of teachers I was supporting were experiencing their own ver- sion of my meltdown.

Why do educators sacrifice rest in the name of justice?

The truth is, teachers aren’t really trained to understand themselves. They are trained to support and teach students without much con- sideration of how to cultivate the reservoir of presence that is required to teach and support in a transformative way. In most cases, teachers are expected to grind and burn their way through the challeng- es of teaching. This is particularly the case for social justice educators who assume that there is not much time for their own rest because there is so much suffering and in- justice in our schools. Rest is also an opportunity to reflect because it allows us to take stock of what’s going on inside and shatters the myth that real social justice work happens outside of us. Rest forces us to reconcile the close relation- ship between our inner journey and how we show up in the world.

You say “rest is an act of freedom.” What do you mean?

There are so many ways that we, as a society, view rest as a sign of weak- ness. The idea that rest is weak- ness has a long history in America and it is still deeply rooted in white supremacist capitalist culture that views work, labor, and productivity as the bedrock of a healthy econ- omy. People of color, in the minds of white America, have primarily been seen as labor to exploit. Rest and leisure are reserved for the white folk who supposedly earned the luxury to rest. Rest and race are in- tertwined and it is still deeply rooted in racist supremacist capitalist culture when we center rest in our personal and professional lives.

To read the full interview, go to gse.harvard.edu/ed

“The truth is, teachers aren’t really trained to understand themselves.”
She gave up a semester abroad in college to make hundreds of rubber warts before tackling vines and leaves. When a fuzzy, elephant-an-telope named Mr. Snuffleupagus needs your help, that’s just what you do.

For Liz Hara, a new student in the online master’s program, it’s also what she wanted to do. Starting in high school, Hara began building puppets for local theaters in Minneapolis. During her junior year of college at Vassar, she landed an internship with the Jim Hensen Company. This included helping Marty Robinson — aka, Mr. Snuffleupagus — with prop and design work (the warts and vines, among other things) for the Broadway production of Little Shop of Horrors that Robinson was involved with at the time. The internship also led to costume work for other Broadway productions, including The Lion King and Shrek.

Robinson eventually became her mentor and “puppet dad.” (Her “puppet mom” is Pam Arciero, who plays Oscar the Grouch’s girlfriend, Grundgetta.) A full-time job at Sesame Street followed, doing something few, if any, Ed School students can claim on their resumes: puppet wrangling.

“It’s basically an art department for the puppets,” Hara explained during a visit to Appian Way in July. “Puppet wranglers dress the puppets and do their hair and makeup.” They also handle rigging — she controls that bring the puppet to life. Hara says it’s a dream job and during the first few weeks as a wrangler, she fell asleep every night “giggling to myself.”

Even puppets need an entourage

“She’s the only puppet I have ever hugged when no one was watching.”

Asked about her favorite puppet, she jokes, “we never have favorite babies,” but admits a soft spot for Grover, even though, with his big hands, he’s hard to dress. “He’s the only puppet I have ever hugged when no one was watching.” In time, Hara also became interested in writing and joined the Sesame writing room. With the team, she won an Emmy in 2018 for outstanding writing (after winning her first in 2015 for costume design). She also started writing for other shows, including Shark Dog, Ninja, and Life in Pieces.

Nowadays, Hara is a full-time writer for Marvel’s Moon Girl and Devil Dinosaur, an animated series about a 13-year-old genius named Lunella who fights crime in New York City with a 10-ton T-Rex. And she’s become more interested in the learning side of kids’ shows, not just the crafting side. Curriculum, she says, is one of reasons she decided to come to the Ed School.

“The curriculum meetings have always been fascinating to me,” she says. “I would love to create my own curriculum-based show someday, where we take the curriculum into the premise and format instead of trying to marry them after the fact, which is how it’s often done.”

And when she has time, she’s still, happily, taking care of the puppets. As she recently told Maple Grove magazine, with puppets, “Things come to life and there is just a beautiful relationship between the audience and the puppet. That is still the most exciting thing about puppetry. Every performance is an invitation to the audience to come play.”
As Mitchell starts his second year in the Ed.L.D. Program, he’s continuing his internship with the Cambridge superintendent’s office and volunteering with the local branch of My Brother’s Keeper, as he keeps his eye on his own leadership goal: becoming superintendent of Cleveland public schools. “I become very ambitious and excited about the opportunities we have in education,” he says. “Everything for me is in K–12.”
"I think right now, many Americans rightly worry about the future of our democracy and our ability to work together as a nation to solve collective problems."

PROFESSOR MARTIN WEST (SEE P. 34)
As national history and civics scores drop, educators are finding new ways to make room in their classrooms for social studies.

Story by Andrew Bauld
Illustrations by Giulio Bonasera
Coupled with COVID-related learning loss, it’s no wonder that the latest report from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP) found a bleak assessment. American students are falling in social studies. NAEP, often referred to as the Nation’s Report Card, saw eighth-grade civic and history scores sink to new lows, with just 16% of students demonstrating proficiency in history, and 27% in civics.

“I think right now, many Americans rightly worry about the future of our democracy and our ability to work together as a nation to solve collective problems,” says Professor Martin West, who is also a member of the National Assessment Governing Board, which oversees the Nation’s Report Card. “Ensuring that students have a solid foundation in history and civics is not the only thing we need to address those concerns, but it strikes me as an essential prerequisite for strengthening American democracy.”

In an opinion piece for The Boston Globe, West wrote that the “ongoing erosion of student’s history and civics knowledge should sound alarm bells across the country.”

But at a time when civic engagement has become increasingly polarized and toxic, and many educators are faced with restrictions on what they can even teach, will schools be able to heed that warning?

Not Just COVID’s Fault
In 2022, the average NAEP eighth-grade U.S. history scores decreased by five points compared to 2018 and by nine points compared to 2004. Average scores also dropped across racial and ethnic groups, compared to four years before. And while scores dropped, the percentage of students who felt prepared for the NAEP’s “basic” achievement level increased, rising from 34% in 2018 to 40% in 2022.

Even in high performing districts, the gaps in student knowledge when it comes to history are shocking, educators say. Stephen Sommers, Ed.M. ’92, found that our fourth this past year, his first teaching eighth grade social studies in Brooklyn Public Schools, a high-achieving district less than four miles from Harvard.

During a discussion about the Thirteenth Amendment, Sommers asked his students to imagine what life was like at the time for Black Americans in the 19th century. He quickly realized that too was too advanced a question for many students, who he said, “had no idea what the Civil War was, or they conflated it with the American Revolution, or thought Martin Luther King Jr., was involved with it. I realized I couldn’t assume students had a historical basis for the things we were talking about.”

It’s not just scores and knowledge that have slipped. Compared to 2011, this year also marked a decline in the percentage of eighth-grade students who reported reading a class mainly focused on history and civics. This year also marked a decline in the percentage of eighth-grade students who reported taking a class mainly focused on U.S. history, while elementary teachers report they lack the support to teach social studies well.

To understand how we got to this point, it helps to know the history of social studies education in this country.

There’s no doubt that the pandemic had an adverse effect on student performance in history and civic scores in 2022, but, West says, “it would be a mistake to reduce the issue to the pandemic alone. “While civic scores fell for the first time since the NAEP test began in 1988, history scores have been falling for nearly a decade and fell by a similar amount between 2014 and 2018.

“Over a much longer period, we know that there have been pretty substantial declines in instructional time elementary school teachers reported devoting to history, social studies, and civic content, and that’s a consequence in part to an accountability system that focuses almost entirely on students’ math and reading achievement,” West says.

Researchers began to observe what they call the “social studies squeeze” in 2007, a result of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB), which required, by law, that states test students in reading and math, but not in other content areas. Without the pressure of high-stakes testing, schools slowly began reducing their emphasis on instructional time for other subjects, including social studies.

“We know when you don’t test, the time in- vestment shrinks,” says Professor Danielle Allen, director of the Democratic Knowledge Project (DKP), an initiative of Harvard’s Edmond & Lily Safra Center for Ethics. But, she adds, this declin e to an accountability system that focuses almost entirely on students’ math and reading achievement, it’s not just a mistake to reduce the issue to the pandemic alone.

“We have a 70-year story of disinvestment in civics and history,” she says, a trend that began during World War II with an increased investment in STEM research, and has continued to this day. Without the federal government spending a little more than $30 per student for STEM versus five cents for civics, according to research from the Campaign for the Civic Mission of Schools.

Those sidelining actions now echo across the latest NAEP scores, where students are unable to answer some of the most basic questions related to the foundations of the American political system. When asked to identify a stem or the historic events that have gotten us to here, they are where we are today. But, even if these low NAEP scores do serve as a wake-up call, that warning is coming at possibly the worst time.

“When we need more robust civic education with young people to help foster the democratic attitudes to safeguard democracy is at the very time when teachers feel under threat if they attempt to do so,” says Professor Meira Levinson, a founding member of the National Action Civics Collaborative at xxxx.

Since 2012, 18 states have imposed bans on certain classroom discussion topics, including race and gender. Some have even gone further. In 2021, Texas passed legislation to not only block teach ing lessons about racism or sexism, but also in- cluded a provision that outlawed assignments involving communication between students and federal, state, or local officials.

These limitations are restricting what teach ers can teach, especially when it comes to social studies. A recent report by the RAND Corpora tion, Walking on Eggshells, found that in four of five states, teachers changed their curriculum or instruction because of state and district restrictions. In July of this year, the Florida State Board of Educa tion approved new social studies standards that included language about how “slaves developed
skills which, in some instances, could be applied for their personal benefit. Not only are students receiving a censored version of history, but they are also losing out on the chance to discuss controversial topics, a critical component in the development of their civic skills. “Whatever we are doing in our schools, it is insufficient to meet the very real and high stakes demands of the current moment where we need more informed, more engaged, more skillful citizens with the right kinds of dispositions, not toward violence but toward using non-violent tools, to try and collectively identify real problems together,” Levinson says.

Experts have some solutions. End-of-year history and civics tests might improve results, as “research shows teachers spend more time on social studies in states that include the subject in their testing programs,” according to West. Infrastructure — meaning the policies that support teachers’ instructional practices and student learning — for social studies is also severely lacking in most states and at the district level, according to another RAND report. Creating more consistent frameworks and providing more support, including teacher evaluation and professional development, could go a long way in holding schools more accountable for student achievement in social studies.

But in addition to these more traditional interventions, educators and experts are also beginning to rethink what civics and history education can look like in 21st-century classrooms, and some promising changes are taking place right here in Massachusetts.

Leading the Change

It’s fitting that the birthplace of the American Revolution might serve as a model for turning the tide of failing social studies instruction. In 2018, the Massachusetts Board of Elementary and Secondary Education revised its history and social science standards, placing a greater emphasis on civics and introducing a new year-long eighth-grade civics course. The legislation also passed a law that requires all students in eighth grade and high school to lead a school-based civics project.

West believes the state can be an example for the rest of the country in how to prepare students to better understand history and become active civic participants. It’s a good start to reversing decades of neglect when it comes to teaching history and civics, but, unfortunately, it’s targeted primarily at improving grades. “There’s still a deep disillusionment amongst young people and how they feel about American democracy that extends beyond the classroom. According to the Democratic Knowledge Project, fewer than 30% of people under 40 believe it is essential to live in a democracy, while 1 in 4 young people believe choosing leaders through free elections is unimportant.

But Allen and the project’s staff are trying to change that attitude. One of the group’s many initiatives includes an eighth-grade civics curriculum called “Civic Engagement in Our Democracy.” (See sidebar.) Co-created by the DKP along with eighth-grade educators in Cambridge Public Schools in 2019, the curriculum has since been piloted by dozens of educators around Massachusetts. In 2021, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education recognized the curriculum as one of just four year-long civics curriculum that met state standards.

“To have that civic identity is to figure out what you value and connect that to the many roles in being part of a civic society, like voting, holding elected office, and working on local committees, and also with those outside civic institutions, like protests,” says Allen. “Our hope is to help young people reclaim one of those civic roles for themselves and reclaim an ownership stake in our democracy.”

Through project-based activities and projects, students learn about history while also developing their civic identity by reflecting on their own personal values to better understand the potential civic roles available to them. Audrey Koble teaches eighth-grade English and civics at Brooke Roslindale Charter School...
in Boston. She piloted the TKP curriculum last year and says the work around student identi-
	
ty was powerful. “It made it clear that you have to understand yourself to understand how a government can work for you,” Koble says.

That initial work laid the foundation for stu-
dents to create impactful civic projects at the end of the school year. Students attended local gov-

ernment board meetings and spoke with local political and business leaders including Boston Mayor Michelle Wu and New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft. And their projects reflected ideas for real problems facing students, like one in which students proposed a new MBTA subway route to address a lack of service between the Or-
ge Line and the Green Line.

Koble says thanks to the curriculum and their final projects, she feels confident her students are headed to high school with a stronger under-
standing of themselves and their place in their democracy. “They know some politicians are out there with their best interests in mind, and that they have the ability to reach out to them,” Koble says. “I didn’t understand that until well into my 40s, and for them to understand that at 13 and 14 years old is incredible.”

Spoke Sommers also piloted the TKP curricu-

lum at his school in Brookline, and despite need-
ing to fill in a few gaps for students, he found the curriculum very powerful, especially in the way that it “used the social studies to make the civi-
civics understandable and contextualized, while the social studies really came alive because you see how relevant it is today.”

One unit, in particular, highlighted that rela-
tionship, where students learned about Prince Hall, a Black abolitionist leader in Boston who was on what’s lost.

Even with supports built into the TKP curriculum, Sommers says students often felt overwhelmed with leading a project on their own, and as a result, he felt buried at times trying to keep track of more than 10 unique projects, the quality of which varied widely from student to student.

Civics Education That Works

Lecturer Eric Soto-Shed recognizes the chal-
diges of bringing impactful civic projects into classrooms. Although he’s encouraged by the work at both the state level and by organizations like the TKP, he’s working to help make it easier for teachers to assess civic skills and competen-
cies and make sure students across classrooms can have consistent, meaningful experiences.

Along with Jack Schneider, an education pro-
cessor at the University of Massachusetts-Am-
herst, Soto-Shed is working on a research project to identify what exactly it looks like to be an en-
gaged citizen and to codify those skills into re-
sources to support students and teachers.

If we want to put curriculum into the class-
room, we first need to identify the civic thinking actions we want students to do,” Soto-Shed says. “There’s a lot of good curriculum out there and research informed by philosophy and theory, but Jack and I were interested in the cognitive moves that engaged citizens do when they are partici-
pating in some kind of civic action.”

Soto-Shed says by identifying how people en-
gage in these tasks, he hopes it will be easier for schools to integrate civic learning. “What we’re hoping to do with our research is help schools and states and districts be intentional about the civic skills we really need to care about, what the tasks are for students to demonstrate those skills, and how can they be taught,” he says.

In identifying the gaps, he also thinks it will allow districts to build those civic competen-
cies into many different parts of the curriculum through interdisciplinary lessons and activities.

“Look at volunteering, or neighborliness, those are things that can cut across curriculum,” Soto-Shed says. “I think part of the challenge is that civics is broadly defined and can live in many different parts of the curriculum, so having a con-
crete tasks for where and how and when they are taught will help districts be more systemat-
ically about it.”

West also believes that getting creative about how to fit civics during the school day can be another solution to improving civic learning. “I think it’s a mistake to think about instruc-
tional time in schools as a zero-sum game where different parts of the curriculum are taught will help districts be more systemat-
ically about it.”

And by identifying the tasks, he also thinks it can help teachers see how civic skills we really need to care about, what the tasks are.

But teaching for student engagement doesn’t mean sacrificing learning the fundamentals of history or civics. Soto-Shed says even when teachers give students the freedom to choose any action project they want, they still need to hear the history lessons. “I think it’s very easy to feel like you can’t teach the content of civics and history, but learning about local government and the impact it has on their lives can feel much more rel-

levant to students. Plus, it’s a lot easier to get a local politician to speak with students than say the president of the United States. During the 2020 New York City Council elec-

tion, Park took advantage of online learning to virtually invite nearly a dozen candidates to speak with her class. In preparation, students cre-

ated rubrics about the qualities that would make the best council member and used them to inter-

view each candidate.

“We have to balance the fundamentals they need to know with giving them an access point to make them curious to access more information rather than just starting with Article I of the Con-

stitution,” says Park. “I think it’s important that civic curriculum starts with local government or local activism to give kids the motivations to get through the drier stuff.”

But teaching for student engagement doesn’t mean sacrificing learning the fundamentals of history or civics. Soto-Shed says even when teachers give students the freedom to choose any project they want, they can still learn about the history lessons. “I think it’s really important that we show them the connection of policies and systems of democracy by justifying their project choices.”

If a student wants to organize a protest, have them talk about why a referendum might not work, or if they want to do a social media campaign, who in the government do they think really needs to hear it,” Soto-Shed says. “Justify it in the context of a knowledge of the issue of the system. That can be a pow-

erful way to make sure students are learning the nuts and bolts while also being engaged in pas-

sionate work.”
The Bay Who Was Raised as a Dog: And Other Stories From a Child Psychologist’s Notebook by Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz. These stories show why schools have to be safe spaces and why educators must care to build rapport with students.

Favorite place to read:
I love to read in bed because it’s warm and cozy. It’s convenient in case I fall asleep.

What book is on deck once you’re ready to read something new?
I am always reading, so my book options are endless. I enjoy a mix of fiction and non-fiction, including memoirs and biographies.

What’s the most interesting or useful thing you read recently in a book?
I recently read a book on the history of the American Civil War, which provided a fascinating perspective on the events leading up to the conflict.

What’s your genre of choice?
I enjoy reading historical fiction, but I also appreciate books that explore social and political issues.

Are you a paper book or e-reader?

Looking for past On My Bookshelf Interviews? Go to go.harvard.edu/edbookshelf.
When Linda Anderson, Ed.M.'23, was offered a new principal job a few years ago, she was told she had a year to save the century-old Catholic school in Fitchburg, Massachusetts. Enrollment had plummeted from a high of 800 to less than 100.

And save it she did. But not by the hand of some higher being. It was through better marketing, updated business practices, and the fast feet of a surprising partner: the school’s football team.

“The football team is really such an amazing part of the story of saving St. Bernard’s, says Anderson. “The year that they won the Super Bowl, they were the smallest team in the state of Massachusetts. They had about 25 players, which is barely enough to even field a football team. Most of them were playing both offense and defense. They were resilient and humble and hardworking, and they just really embodied the spirit of the school and what we were all trying to do. ”

The players and coach knew that their wins were a rallying point for the struggling community. In that way, says Anderson, the team “was a microcosm of the school itself and this mission that we had to overcome tremendous odds. I think what they did more than anything was they helped to fill our tanks and inspire us to keep going because they kept going.”

They eventually raised $2 million and enrollment more than doubled since 2019. They also updated their mission and Anderson began consulting with other religious schools on strategies for staying open. And they got the “blessing” of the local archdiocese to operate as an independent Catholic school.

It was a comeback story that captured the attention of film producer Jeff Bowler, a former St. Bernard’s student. Bowler heard about the school’s plight and the football team’s success and reached out to talk about doing a documentary.

“I think their heartstrings were tugged by what our story was and how it all shook out,” Anderson says. “They felt like it was something that the world should hear, but also something other Catholic schools specifically should hear because they’re closing left and right.”

All In: Miracle at St. Bernard’s debuted at the end of 2022, about a year after Anderson started the master’s program part-time at the Ed School. Doing homework while running a school, she says, helped her reconnect again as an educator to what it means to be a student.

“We get lost a lot. We’re so busy doing our jobs that we forget that being a student is exciting and it’s a privilege, but it’s hard and it takes grit and discipline.”

How a high school football team and determined principal helped keep their tiny school from closing

Story by Lory Hough

“We get lost a lot. We’re so busy doing our jobs that we forget that being a student is exciting and it’s a privilege, but it’s hard and it takes grit and discipline.”

Saved by the Ball

A team win, a scene from All In: Miracle at St. Bernard’s.

COURTESY FOGLIGHT ENTERTAINMENT

“We get lost a lot. We’re so busy doing our jobs that we forget that being a student is exciting and it’s a privilege, but it’s hard and it takes grit and discipline.”

“Saved by the Ball”

How a high school football team and determined principal helped keep their tiny school from closing

Story by Lory Hough
Hooked on Books

Research shows even infrequent readers get absorbed in reading

Story by Lory Hough

YOU KNOW THAT FEELING: when you’re reading a good book and you get so lost in the story that you forget everything else going on around you?

It’s known in the academic world as “story world absorption,” and for years, researchers have studied why readers get hooked on certain narratives. Unfortunately, though, most of the research has focused primarily on adults, despite our knowing how important reading is for kids.

That changed this past summer when doctoral student MG PREZIOSO, Ed.M.’17, and Professor Paul Harris released results from their new study, published in the journal, Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts, that looks at what’s happening when children ages 9–11 become absorbed in what they are reading. They were motivated, in part, by something they noticed: kids with different levels of reading interest were completely immersed in and equally excited about a particular book series: Harry Potter.

Was it just this popular series, they wondered, or something else?

In an effort to find out, Prezioso and Harris asked children to fill out surveys about their reading habits and did follow-up interviews. They looked at reading frequency, favorite books, whether kids were more interested in fiction versus nonfiction, and the importance of character, plot, and descriptive language.

What they found was that for the youngest in their survey, the 9-year-olds, frequent readers reported greater overall absorption than 9-year-old occasional readers, but 10- and 11-year-old readers reported similar levels of absorption, regardless of how often they read.

“For that age range, it says that how often you read has no bearing on how you experience absorption,” Prezioso says. “Whether you’re an avid reader or you’re an infrequent reader, every kid has the potential to be absorbed and immersed in a story in a book.”

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“When kids are absorbed in a book, they’re not galvanized primarily by specific personality traits, they’re motivated by the desire to find out what happens in the text,” says Prezioso. “Every single kid that I interviewed mentioned fast-paced plots in fiction or nonfiction, text needs to be written in a narrative way. An informational story about a historical event, like the sinking of the Titanic, can be really engaging if it’s told as a story, with a mystery component to the plot.”

Prezioso says her interest in doing this research, and possibly expanding it to other age groups, is to better understand reading motivation in both school, which is often focused on skill building, and out of school, where you read “for fun.”

“I was interested in that disparity, in trying to gather data on how kids experience absorption, the kinds of books that are engaging, and how you could be absorbed and immersed in nonfiction, text needs to be written in a narrative way,” she says. “Ultimately, you want kids to be lifelong readers. You want kids to be acquainted with the joys that make reading, literature, poetry, and nonfiction worthwhile. It’s a lifelong relationship and absorption is a piece of that.”

“Whether you’re an avid reader or you’re an infrequent reader, every kid has the potential to be absorbed and immersed in a story in a book.”

Research shows even infrequent readers get absorbed in reading

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“Whether you’re an avid reader or you’re an infrequent reader, every kid has the potential to be absorbed and immersed in a story in a book.”

Professor SUSAN DYNARSKI, an economist, commenting in The New York Times (July 24, 2023) about a Harvard study that found that one in six students at the eight Ivy League universities, as well as Stanford, Duke, M.I.T., and the University of Chicago, has parents in the top 1 percent. As the Times wrote, the study (which Dynarski was not involved with) “quantifies for the first time the extent to which being very rich is its own qualification in selective college admissions.”
“Barbie isn’t perfect. She’s not for everyone, but maybe can she show us how to find some common ground. We can all use more of that.”

KIMBERLY WOLF, ED.M. ’09 (SEE P. 52)
Then They Came for the

Librarians and other educators are angry about recent book bans — and now they’re speaking out

Story by Elaine McArdle Illustrations by Mark Weaver

BOOKS
In her 25 years as a teacher and school librarian in Santa Clara public schools in California, MEGAN BIRDSONG, ED.M. ’94, never had a parent lodge a formal complaint about a book their child was reading. On the rare occasion a parent raised a concern, Birdsong met with them to talk about the merits of the title. “Those kinds of conversations can lead to some understanding,” says Birdsong.

How things have changed. Suddenly book bans and other forms of censorship in schools and libraries are ascendent across the country, led by organized groups and politicians. Last year saw a record-breaking 1,269 efforts to censor books and resources nationwide, nearly twice as many as in 2021, according to the American Library Association (ALA). The ALA used to receive 300 to 400 reports a year of efforts to ban books, says Deborah Caldwell-Stone, director of the ALA’s Office for Intellectual Freedom, “but in 2020 we suddenly began receiving a growing number of reports — from one to two a week, if any, to five or six in a single day.”

“It was not a typical occurrence until the last couple of years,” agrees Birdsong, who last year became the instructional librarian at a Catholic high school in California. From her colleagues in Florida, second only to Texas in book bans, “I have heard about schools where administrators or other leadership came into the library and removed books without any communication about process, just put them on the cart and they’re gone.”

Unlike the past, today’s challenges aren’t lodged by a parent about a particular book. Rather, these are efforts to remove entire swaths of titles championed by well-funded groups such as Moms for Liberty, a nonprofit founded in 2021 by conservative women who opposed face masks during the pandemic. Prior to 2021, the vast majority of book challenges involved one title a time. But in 2022, 90 percent were attempts to ban multiple titles at once, according to the ALA, and 40% involved challenges to 100 or more books. Most challenged titles contain subject matter related to LGBTQ topics or race. And it’s

Last year, the American Library Association documented 1,269 demands to censor library books and resources — the highest number since the organization began compiling data about censorship in libraries in the United States two decades ago.
not just school libraries under at-tack. 48% of challenges were direct-ed at public libraries.

“We are no longer seeing a par-tisan raising a concern about their student reading a book, but advo-cacy groups demanding broader censorship of topics they don’t be-lieve should be in schools or where they disagree with the viewpoints expressed in the book,” said Cald-well-Stone.

The groups leading the charge are highly coordinated and multi-faceted, working to get their preferred candidates elected to school boards and advocating for educational gag laws such as Flori-da’s “Don’t Say Gay” bill, which prohib-its public schools teaching about sexual orientation or gender iden-tity in a manner the state decides “is not age-appropriate.” In 2022, 36 states introduced educational gag bills to restrict teaching top-ics related to race, gender, Ameri-can history, and LGBTQ+ identities, according to PEN America, a free speech advocacy network.

In June, a fifth-grade teacher in Georgia was fired for reading a best-selling children’s book to her class, My Shadow is Purple, which the students chose; the Cobb County School District said she violated a trio of state censorship laws passed in 2022. And this year, Florida ob-jected to two AP courses because it says their content violates new state laws; one course is focused on Afri-can American studies, the other is a psychology course that addresses, among other topics, sexual orienta-tion and gender identity. “They are coming from every angle to push this,” Birdsong says.

“The educational gag orders and book banning are unreal to me,” says LIZ PHIPPS-SOEIRO, ED.M.’19, director of the Boston Public School Librar-ies, adding that even in liberal Mas-sachusetts, she’s heard of at least a dozen attempts at censorship. In many cases across the country, “a lot of these books are being banned by one complaint, and you don’t have to have read the books,” she notes. It took just a single complaint from an individual for Amanda Gorman’s book of her poem, The Hill We Climb, which she read at the 2021 inaugura-tion of President Joe Biden, to be-re-moved from elementary schools in Miami Lakes, Florida.

There are efforts to ban books in every state, and nearly half the chal-lenged books were written by or about LGBTQ+ people, while most of the others deal with racial issues. The most-challenged books in 2022 included Gender Queer: A Memoir by Maia Kobabe, The Bluest Eye by Toni Morrison, and The Absolutely True Diary of a Part-Time Indian by Sherman Alexie. Texas leads the na-tion with 23 attempted book bans in 2022 involving 2,349 titles, with The Bluest Eye top of the list. Flor-ida is next, and in 2022 Governor Ron DeSantis signed laws requir-ing schools to use certified media specialists to make sure books don’t include topics the state disallows.

While the a.t.a. “fully acknowl-edges that a parent has the right to guide their student’s reading and the right to have that conversation and perhaps ask that their student not be given that book,” says Cald-well-Stone, “now we’re seeing pol-icies and advocacy to stigmatize a whole range of materials under the rubric that they’re illegal or por-nographic — when they are none of those things.”

Moreover, “We’re seeing librari-ans and library workers coming under attack for providing for the information needs of their commu-nities in a way that serves the in-formation needs of marginalized communities, being attacked for having books on the shelves that reflect the lives and experiences of LGBTQ+ persons, people of color, Black Americans, Indigenous per-sons,” she notes. “We’ve even had a number of communities where or-ganizations have demanded that lib-rarians be charged with obscenity or other crimes for having books on the shelves on themes of sex edu-ca-tion or sexuality or that address LGBTQ+ themes.”

Many Boston public schools have been without libraries for many years, but as Phipps-Soeiro works to correct that, there are al-ready more than a dozen open lib-rarian positions. She believes that librarianship, like classroom teach-ing, is less attractive these days be-cause educators are under attack on so many fronts.
“These efforts with book bans are taking us backwards,” says MELT ROSENFELD, ED. M. ‘22, a former English teacher and current principal at the Ben Gamla Plantation School, a public charter in Plantation, Florida. Educators have worked hard to teach students see themselves in the stories in our libraries. By removing these titles, authors, and characters, we are marginalizing students who already suffer historically in that way.

At a time when educators face too many critical issues, including teacher shortages and the learning losses and behavioral regression of kids due to the pandemic lockdown, “it is really best use of our time,” Rosenberg asks, “to go through hundreds and hundreds of titles” to remove them because someone objects? It’s one thing to see themselves in the stories in in our libraries. By removing these titles, authors, and characters, we are marginalizing students who already suffer historically in that way.

“Many reasons. Reading is essential for an educated populace in a democracy, they say. Books help children understand the world around them in all its complexity, and they deserve to see themselves reflected in the books available to them. And parents should make decisions for their own children but not other people’s kids, they assert. The role of school libraries is to enrich the educational landscape, to create a foundation for the love of literacy,” says Phipps-Soeiro. “That can’t be done from a deficit lens. Our children come to us with their own knowledge, their own experiences, and libraries are a place to share, to collectively figure things out together, to hear about other experiences, and to give us a broader understanding of our own cultural landscape and that of others.”

The more access you have to books and to a variety of books, the better reader and critical thinker you become and the more interested in reading, says CYNTHIA HAGAN, ED. M. ‘22, who runs Book B. P., a literacy nonprofit in West Virginia, which provides books to students in the local schools, many of which are operating without an in-school library. “Not only that, you develop an identity as a reader. It changes the whole trajectory of someone’s life, how they see themselves.”

When kids can see themselves in books, they can begin to see themselves as anything,” says Alex Hodges, librarian and director of the Gutman Library at the Ed School, where he is on the faculty. “Whether they become doctors, educators, airline pilots, we want them to dream big.”

Indeed, says Caldwell-Stone, studies show that “students who can find books about their experiences or lives or that offer alternative perspectives, have far better educational outcomes than when censorship is used in school to indicate one viewpoint is not acceptable.”

As a librarian for five years in West Virginia, Hagan never encountered a single complaint about a book. The new national trend, she says, is “horribly horrifying and the most vulnerable of the students, because if you can’t afford books at home, you get them at a library. If that’s all being monitored and censored — you’re out of luck.” Educators also argue that it’s essential for students to have access to books presenting different view points and identities written by authors from different identities.

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CYNTHIA HAGAN, ED. M. ‘22

“Books are touchstones for children just as much for adults”

“A record 527 titles unique titles were targeted for censorship in 2021. In 2020, the number targeted was 235.”

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DEBORAH CALDWELL-STONE

“Fighting Back”

But opponents to book bans are fighting back, including in court.

“We believe that our Constitution, our First Amendment, and our Bill of Rights firmly support the idea that no government should be in the role of telling what people think or read,” says Caldwell-Stone. “Books are not neutrality or for trying to understand the world they see or hear about on TikTok,” he says. Moreover, “We need to teach kids how to make decisions for themselves about what they do or don’t want to read,” says Hodges. “Those are conversations parents and teachers and community members could have so that they are taking care of the whole child and enabling that child to feel valued.”

Hodges believes that many parents fear that if a child reads about a particular identity, they will adopt it. “That’s not necessarily the case,” she says, “and we need to be freer in our openness to understanding the world and people in it.” She has often heard students request books addressing LGBTQ+ topics. “Occasionally it may be students who may share that identity, but I’ve found it heartening that there are also students who read those books who don’t necessarily share that identity,” she says. “I’ve found it inspiring the way kids want to read books that are outside their experience.”

“The more access you have to books and to a variety of books, the better reader and critical thinker you become and the more interested in reading, says CYNTHIA HAGAN, ED. M. ‘22, who runs Book B. P., a literacy nonprofit in West Virginia, which provides books to students in the local schools, many of which are operating without an in-school library. “Not only that, you develop an identity as a reader. It changes the whole trajectory of someone’s life, how they see themselves.”

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messages or themes,” according to the complainant. They also argue the bans violate the Equal Protection Clause because the targeted books are disproportionately by non-white and LGBTQ+ authors, or address themes of race or LGBTQ+ identity.

In Arkansas, a coalition of librarians and bookellers filed a federal lawsuit in June claiming that a new state law criminalizing efforts to furnish “a harmful item to a minor” is unconstitutional because it targets books with LGBTQ+ themes.

In July, a federal judge issued an injunction to temporarily block the law, agreeing that it is likely unconstitutional.

And in Llano County, Texas, seven library patrons last year sued county officials and the library board for restricting books, which they say violates their First Amendment rights. In March, a federal judge granted a temporary injunction, ordering the county to return the books to the shelves. Among the titles removed were a book for teens that described the Ku Klux Klan as a terrorist organization, and Pico Iyer’s Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents, an analysis of racism in the United States.

While Board of Education v. Pico, a 1982 U.S. Supreme Court case, doesn’t offer specific protections against book bans in schools, overall, the law is murky because free speech proponents would hope, says Harvard Law School Professor Laura Weinrib. Since book challenges and removals are so pervasive and it’s been decades since the Supreme Court examined the issue, she predicts they may take it up again soon. However, she warns it’s unclear whether the current court would affirm the Board of Pico protections.

For that reason, she sees a promising “new frontier” as a civil rights approach now underway by the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) at the U.S. Department of Education. In Georgia, the OCR found the Forsyth County School District may have created a hostile environment for certain students because the targeted books are by LGBTQ+ or non-white authors. So if, as such, the bans may be discriminatory and in violation of Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 and Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which applies to institutions that receive federal funding.

“I think the OCR approach is so promising because it’s bringing in a new and potentially more powerful set of tools to combat discriminatory book bans,” Weinrib says. “This is something new and exciting that could be a good tool for libraries looking to push back.”

And while having strong policies is only the first step, Weinrib says, “It’s really amazing.”

“We really depend on the people who can be strong-willed and strong-voiced early,” says Hodgson. “I firmly believe that the more we talk about book challenges and book bans, the more people are joining our team, who are taking up the call for this, who are speaking out, which is a lot, even though they know what the consequences are right now,” she adds. “It’s really amazing.”
Radical Refuge for Women

Alum found a way to support communal wellness for Black and Latina early childhood educators

Story by Lory Hough

IT STARTED WITH two grants—one to host a convening about teach- ers working within public school systems, and the second to collect data at the convening to really see how teachers were experiencing self-care during COVID. It hit, and Venezia Rodriguez, Ed. M. ’13, Ed. D. ’16, had to put the work on hold.

And so she and her team at New York University’s Center for Early Childhood Health and Development, where she is an assistant professor, waited. And while they waited, Rodriguez started getting asked more and more to take part in virtual panels about how edu- cators, especially early childhood teachers, were coping. She had written a book called The Teaching Brain and spent more than a de- cade as a public school teacher be- fore moving into higher education.

But Rodriguez hesitated on the invites. She just couldn’t do self- care talks anymore.

“I’m losing my mind with them,” she remembers telling a friend. “Self-care is not going to solve exploitation. Men aren’t told to practice self-care when they’re experiencing professional stress. It’s sexist and I was tired of it.”

Rodriguez felt — and still feels — strongly that “we really need to stop telling women to practice self-care. When you tell a woman to practice self-care, especially women of color, they heal communally, not inde- pendently. To tell me as a brown skin Latina, go get a massage or fa- tigate awareness development, and empowerment. Mental health professionals and researchers were involved, and the facilitators were also Black and Latina. They offered food that was culturally representa- tive and met at a nonprofit in a re- habilitated abandoned public school.

Along with the in-person re- treat, Rodriguez also started host- ing virtual support groups. During the sessions, clinical social workers offered support and helped early childhood educators become bet- ter aware of their teaching.

“The support groups are for them to come and share and to feel like they have a place where they can be supported by mental health professionals,” says Rodriguez.

She calls the work her Radical Refuge Program—and it’s growing. From that first retreat and virtual session last fall in Harlem, Rodri- guez is now working with two more groups of early childhood educa- tors: One on Long Island, where she grew up, and one in Nebraska.

The Nebraska partnership came from Nebraska asked if she could do something similar for Black and Latina early childhood educators who were a minority in the state. “It will be interesting to see how this plays out with a different pop- ulation,” she says, noting that some elements of the retreat, which will take place next spring, will stay the same, some will be very localized.

But all of the work, no matter the location, will support diverse female prek educators.

“One of the reasons that we’re focusing on that population in par- ticular is because that’s the popula- tion that is leaving the profession the most quickly,” Rodriguez says, “and yet that the student pop- ulation that’s growing the most quickly. We need to support the mental health and wellbeing of these adults in the classroom be- cause the kids really need them. They need whole teachers.”

presented information about the original Harlem retreat during a think tank conference at Yale on workforce wellbeing. A woman from Nebraska asked if she could do something similar for Black and Latina early childhood educators who were a minority in the state.

“Self-care is not going to solve exploitation. Men aren’t told to practice self-care when they’re experiencing professional stressors. It’s sexist and I was tired of it.”

The larger political and social roles of teachers more broadly is something this archive helps us think broadly about. Black teachers have always been aware of that, and they organized themselves.

PROFESSOR JARVIS GIVENS, with Profes- sor Imani Perry, in the Askwith Forum this past October on the relaunch of the Black Teacher Archive. The archive is a free, dig- ital portal that Givens and Perry created that centralizes historical materials created by professional organizations of Black edu- cators during the Jim Crow era through the Civil Rights era

https://curiosity.lib.harvard.edu/ black-teacher-archive
California Teacher of the Year on his journey

Story by Lory Hough

Hollywood Never Stood a Chance

When Jason Torres-Rangel, Ed.M.’04, found out he was named the 2023 California Teacher of the Year, he was honored, and his parents, both former public school teachers, were “over the moon.” Torres-Rangel, an English teacher at Theodore Roosevelt High School in the Los Angeles Unified School District and an adjunct professor at Los Angeles Trade Technical College, talked to Ed about teaching and how his career almost took another path.

You initially wanted to work in film and interned for The West Wing, but changed your mind?

At the same time that I was interning in Hollywood, I was taking undergraduate classes in Chicano studies, Black studies, gender studies, and media studies. These classes and my own upbringing informed my burgeoning political consciousness. I realized that I didn’t want to be part of the Hollywood machine; I wanted to go into a service profession where I could really give back to my community, a place that had given so much to me. The only people who were surprised I switched career interests were the people I was interning for in Hollywood — they tried to persuade me to stay, but I knew a different path was in store for me.

It was actually 9/11 that made me realize that path might be education?

Despite being the son of two teachers, I hadn’t considered the teaching profession for myself — but sometimes there’s a mentor in your life who sees something in you that you don’t yet see in yourself who helps you discover your path. One of your undergraduate professors said you’d make a great teacher. Is that what finally led you to the classroom?

Despite being the son of two teachers, I hadn’t considered the teaching profession for myself — but sometimes there’s a mentor in your life who sees something in you that you don’t yet see in yourself who helps you discover your path. One of your undergraduate professors said you’d make a great teacher. Is that what finally led you to the classroom?

How would you describe yourself as a teacher?

I try to do what feels right in my heart. I think it’s important for teachers to be authentic to who they are; to lead with radical love; to lead with the transformative power of education, and while the lightbulb to become a teacher didn’t go off for me yet, I realized that I wanted to go into a profession that would directly impact my community back home.

One of your students and their mom nominated you for the teacher of the year award, correct?

The student who nominated me is a phenomenal social justice warrior for women’s rights and her community. She writes for our school newspaper, The Teddy Times, and has authored articles on combating toxic masculinity, reproductive rights, and more. In her letter nominating me, she talked about how she had moved around a lot and had been in several different schools, and how she didn’t feel at home until she got to our school, Roosevelt, and my class being a part of that “home away from home” feeling. As a teacher, you can’t get a higher honor than that.

Your teacher parents were “over the moon,” you said, when you told them you had been nominated. How did that feel?

It’s been an incredible journey being able to share this with them. I am who I am because of the two of them, and so I try to include them every chance I get. I recently got to take my mom to Washington D.C., where she got to meet Vice President Kamala Harris in person. That was incredible to see my mom tear up as she met her. That made my whole year.

“Sometimes there’s a mentor in your life who sees something in you that you don’t yet see in yourself who helps you discover your path.”

Family photo from 1986; a selfie moment with Vice President Kamala Harris at the White House event; standing in front of Roosevelt High
Barbie’s Teachable Moments

I know Barbie. I played with Barbie, mostly her home accessories and pool, when I was little. But, while I’ve long written about the intersection of “girl world” and mass media, I’ve never written about her. I’ve written about No Doubt’s “Just A Girl” and American Girl Dolls, Seventeen and Mean Girls. Barbie was too easy, too cliche of a topic to spend time on. Unattainable body concepts — nothing else to dive into.

When it comes to Barbie’s recent film-driven resurgence, I’d like to think that my work in media and background in gender studies would have given me some immunity to the hype. But the trailers, steady stream of pre-release articles, and Barbie products seeming steady across the board made it hard. It invites us to examine and pool, when I was little. But, when I see a kid that has the drive to say, “Look, my mom and dad, they stopped at high school. I’m going to college and do this, this, and this.” I’m going to move heaven and earth to make sure that kid has the opportunities.

When it comes to reaching adolescents, mass media is a powerful tool, a jumping off point to address sensitive and complex topics, without getting too personal. Barbie touches on critical themes including gender and power dynamics, body image, self-advocacy, violence against women, boundary-setting, diversity, and inclusion. We can talk about our opinions, values, and takeaways related to what we’ve seen. (Barbie specifically, has the added benefit of being intergenerationally relevant.) We can ask our kids and students about their impressions, gently encouraging them to think critically about messages they are being served. We can highlight some of the lessons we most hope they learn. We can also help them understand where we stand on different issues, providing insight into how we might respond if they were ever to come up with a related concern or challenge. An added bonus to this approach? You don’t even have to like Barbie to have impactful conversations about the film.

When so much public debate is plagued by rage, zero-sum thinking, and cancel culture, Barbie also provides us a roadmap for how to address controversial topics and navigate heated scenarios. Mattel drove production of the film. They knew they had some questions to answer about whether Barbie has been a net positive or negative for our communities or our country. Barbie shows us how something can be both celebrated and critiqued, how we can address many (not all) serious themes with humor, creativity, and kindness, even if we have different perspectives.

Barbie isn’t perfect. She’s not for everyone, but maybe can she show us how to find some common ground. We can all use more of that.

Barbie’s Teachable Moments

Can the doll and movie help young people find common ground? It’s complicated.

Story by Kimberly Wolf, Ed.M.’09

Kimberly Wolf, Ed.M.’09, is the author of Talk with Her: A Dad’s Essential Guide to Raising Healthy, Confident, and Capable Daughters. Learn more at kimbelywolf.com

MORE AT KIMBERLYWOLF.COM

TALK WITH HER: A Dad’s Essential Guide to Raising Healthy, Confident, and Capable Daughters

I’m going to teach any kid that comes to our school, but when I see a kid that has the drive to say, ‘Look, my mom and dad, they stopped at high school. I’m going to college and do this, this, and this.’ I’m going to move heaven and earth to make sure that kid has the opportunities.

CONNELIUS TROY, ED.M.’21, assistant principal, Cristo Rey Miami High School, during a video interview that ran on the HGSE Instagram page

RIG TALK

ON MY MIND

ON MY MIND
New Courses Being Offered this Year that Caught Our Eye

THE ABCS — OF COOL COURSES

ILLUSTRATION BY AYA KAKEDA

A. EDU H310M Establishing Loving Spaces for Learning: Preventing Bullying and Discrimination in U.S. Schools
Feeling safe and welcome at school has a direct effect on students’s academic achievement. This course, taught by Senior Lecturer GRETCHEN BRION-MEISELS, ED.M.’11, ED.D. ’13, explores the most effective ways for educators to create school climates that are nurturing, loving, and inclusive for students with diverse identities, learning styles, and challenges, and from diverse racial, cultural, socio-economic, and political backgrounds.

B. PROFESSIONAL ED How We Argue: Strategies for Disagreeing with Empathy and Evidence
As the syllabus for this fall professional education course points out, “the call to teach and model effective ways to disagree has never been louder and more relevant.” That’s why educators need the right tools and skills — including becoming better at listening — as they learn how to lead their students and colleagues through complex disagreements and acquire a simple vocabulary for working on arguments with empathy.

C. EDU H611 01 Becoming a Good Person and Leading a Good Life
This spring course asks a fundamental question: How do we raise children to become good people and lead good lives? Becoming a Good Person, taught by Senior Lecturer RICK WEISSBOURD, ED.D.’87, focuses on answering this question by examining school and home environments, major trends in society, and the added challenges that come during uncertain, anxious times, persistent racism, and threats to our democracy.

D. EDU T554 Artificial Intelligence in Education
Discussions and stories about artificial intelligence (AI) focus on the negative impact it may have on students and schools. But what exactly does that mean? This course, taught by Seiji Isotani, a visiting professor from the University of Sao Paulo, Brazil, is designed for students who are near or relatively new to the world of AI in education, and touches on the comparison between the evolution of human learning and AI technologies.

E. EDU A150 New Directions in Black Power Studies
Taught by Professor Jarvis Givens and Brandon Terry, an assistant professor of African and African American studies and of social, this course explores what might be at stake — philosophically, theoretically, culturally, and politically — in revisiting the Black Power Movement. The course “will provide an extended opportunity to reflect upon the political and intellectual legacy of Black Power,” and the hard questions the movement continues to raise.
Orientation this year moved off Appian Way and over to Sanders Theatre, where Dean Bridget Terry Long addressed the new class in historic fashion.
“I have heard about schools where administrators or other leadership came into the library and removed books without any communication about the process. Just put them on the cart and they’re gone.”

MEGAN BIRDSONG, ED.M ‘94, INSTRUCTIONAL LIBRARIAN, CALIFORNIA HIGH SCHOOL (SEE PAGE 40)