

BASD to review African American history in the curriculum

[The Bethlehem Gadfly](#) [Education](#), [George Floyd killing](#), [Uncategorized](#) July 12, 2020

 *Latest in a series of posts responding to the George Floyd killing* 

from Jacqueline Palochko, “Black Lives Matter movement prods Bethlehem and other districts to review how history is taught.” Morning Call, July 12, 2020.

Jared Dowling was surfing the internet three years ago in June when he noticed a Google Doodle paying tribute to Juneteenth. Having no idea what the event was, Dowling, a 2020 Freedom High School graduate heading to Syracuse University, spent all day reading about how it originated in Texas on June 19, 1865, when slaves learned of their freedom — two years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed.

In four years of high school, Dowling, who is Black, [never learned about Juneteenth](#) in classes. But that didn’t surprise him. “There was never going to be a heavy focus on things of that nature in history class,” Dowling said.

Schools do not honestly and accurately teach the struggles and history of African Americans, Bethlehem Area School District Superintendent Joseph Roy acknowledged. That’s why he is proposing that the district spend the next year reforming middle and high school history courses.

“Going way back, American history was to teach how great the country is,” Roy said. “And we are a great country, and I think we’re great enough that we can look at our failures and the progress we’ve made.”

By state law, Pennsylvania public schools must teach [ethnic and racial relations](#), which could include segregation and racial profiling. By third grade, students are taught about the “treatment of minority groups in

history.” But the state doesn’t mandate specific courses. Districts build their own curriculum, with approval from school boards.

Roy would like Bethlehem’s history classes to go into more moments that deeply affected African American communities. While the civil rights movement is taught, for example, it’s often quickly done at the end of the school year and not given enough time. Roy would also like classes to delve into historical policies that heavily contributed to income disparities facing African Americans today.

About 11% of Bethlehem’s 13,600 students are Black.

“We know about slavery and we know it’s bad, but then we jump through Reconstruction, Jim Crow, civil rights,” Roy said. “We don’t do enough to understand the long-term structural impacts.”

The lack of teaching of African American history is not a knock on teachers, Roy said. As a former social studies teacher, he only recently learned about Juneteenth himself and knows other events were left out of his lessons. It also goes back to what teachers were taught when it comes to race relations. That’s why he wants to make sure the district finds the right resources and offers the necessary instruction to teachers before reforming history courses.

“We have to have teachers learn more and be given the materials,” Roy said.

School board President Michael Faccinnetto expects the board to support a review of the history curriculum.

“I think it’s important to teach an honest account of history, not a comfortable one,” Faccinnetto said, adding that history classes should teach more about the struggles of African Americans between the Civil War and the civil rights movement.

A review of the history curriculum is a step in the right direction, Dowling, the soon-to-be Syracuse student, said. But the disparities in white and Black communities shouldn't just come up in history classes, he said.

During his four years at Freedom, Dowling observed that he was the only Black student in his high school honors classes, the only Black student who ran for student council and the only one on the debate team.

There have been times in class, such as when slavery comes up, when Dowling has felt his white classmates' eyes drift toward him in an uncomfortable way. But there isn't anything wrong in feeling uncomfortable, Dowling said.

"We need to have those uncomfortable conversations so people know this is not OK," he said. "Even if the class is overwhelmingly white, people should be educated on the plights the Black community has faced."

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