

# The TRANSFORMATION of a SCHOOL LIBRARY



## Christopher A. Stewart

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It was March 10, 2020, at 10:36 a.m. when I sent the following e-mail to my colleagues:

Good Morning! Be comforted in knowing that we are in this health scare together. Please look at the Coronavirus (COVID-19) tab on the Bell High School Library website. Please share with students, parents, and family members. Staying informed and health conscious is key. Also check out the interactive web-based dashboard to track COVID-19 in real time, created by Dong and Gardner of Johns Hopkins Whiting School of Engineering...

As the school librarian at Bell High School in Washington, DC, I serve some of the most amazing students, parents, educators, and community members in the world. As our school shutdown began, my desire was to make sure that my school community had the tools needed to feel comforted with a reformed educational roadmap as we shifted to a virtual format. I was grateful that two years prior, I created a high school library website that had resources for students, parents, and educators. As our school shut down, I enhanced the library website with additional tabs, including virtual learning tools, exceptional student

(special education) resources, and a parent tab. I also included a rather unique and varied list of webinars to ensure that all stakeholders received robust services, even if they weren't in-person.

As we explore this new educational terrain, during this hybrid learning environment, I have opted to continue providing outdoor learning and classroom opportunities through an outdoor classroom/library one day a week, as opposed to once a month pre-COVID. I don't believe it's wise, at this juncture, to open school buildings. I also believe that we are the school, each custodian, administrative assistant, teacher, librarian, parent, and student. Exploring outdoor education is key to providing safe and equitable educational opportunities. Post-COVID, the Bell Library would enjoy 50+ students for lunch. Popcorn, films, with discussions and deep-diving conversations in the Peace & Love Room, a dedicated room in the library created to give students, parents, and educators a space to have respite, where they could read, meditate, cry, laugh, and practice restorative justice, when the heart is bruised. This space also has a clothing closet.

Though our physical book collections aren't being touched during

the pandemic, we are offering new e-book and audiobook collections and virtual author talks. My school provided hot spots, laptops, and tablets to students. Comcast also offered my school district a reduced rate for its high-speed internet, and virtual tutorials and guidance were available for students and parents who had difficulty logging on or working out any glitches.

Classroom virtual pop-ins and mailing books and snacks are just a few of the activities that I have begun during hybrid learning. Ingenuity has been my best friend. Creating an essay contest, giving gift cards, and providing Uber Eats deliveries are just a few ideas that have helped encourage students to explore something new, whether it be virtually or safely in their communities.

### Supporting Student BLM Protests

It wasn't just coronavirus that impacted the lives of my school community; another virus also impacted my students: racism. A war cry was heard throughout the world when George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and too many others were killed at the hands of law enforcement in 2020. Typically, students would rush into the school library

before the first morning bell rang to talk about current events including music, politics, and entertainment. However, those rich conversations weren't as lively online, so I began to meet up with students at protests with water, snacks, books, and milk, in case we were teargassed.

I needed them to understand that their lives not only mattered but that they are the hope for a more just, compassionate, and loving world. Through them, bigoted systems will change and hearts will be transformed. I needed them to understand that distance and the four walls of a school building do not change my zeal to serve and love them.

### Student Ambassador Program

A transformative and non-complacent school library breaks down barriers by building relationships and creating robust collections that speak directly to students' hearts, minds, and souls. I have found joy in enhancing my library collection with author talks, field trips, and library lectures and by creating the Bell Library Brand Ambassadors. Preparing the next generation of amazing library scientists includes starting early.

The Bell Library Brand Ambassador program was birthed in February 2020 as an opportunity to encourage students to learn more about the field of librarianship and become familiar with library collections. The program's goal is to prepare students for post-high school studies and offer an employment opportunity that teaches them financial literacy and the importance of saving. Students shelve books, print event flyers, attend library programs such as author talks, and help arrange library field trips. After our school closed in March 2020, students continued to encourage their classmates to read and give me book suggestions to order for the library.

Each student receives \$20 an hour; 25 percent goes toward college and/or trade school, 25 percent goes toward a down payment for their first home, and 50 percent goes directly to them to use as they please. I picked up a second job to cover the stipends that the students receive. I operate out of a truth and trust policy, so once students have graduated from high school, they will receive two separate checks, one for college and one for a

down payment toward the purchase of their first home. If students need to reallocate those funds based on life events, that is more than okay. The goal is really for them to get in the habit of saving and working toward a goal.

### Seeing Potential in All Students

As school librarians, we see potential where others may not. Pre-COVID, I provided SAT prep to students for eight weeks after school. As a result of this program, students' scores went up an average of 150+ points over the average student's SAT score. As a requirement for the program, students had to check out three books every two weeks. We would discuss the books, even if the students didn't finish them. Genres ranged from mathematics to biographies to classics. Understanding the story and knowledge of others means that students can become better problem solvers while seeking to understand the narrative of all characters. During hybrid learning, I added an SAT prep tab to the library website, which had several tools and resources for students and parents.



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Outreach has been an important aspect of my school library. I continued the Brunch & Book Discussions throughout Washington, DC. The brunch is held in front of public libraries and in front of my school. Providing outdoor educational options has been a great way for students to safely social distance and receive new books, food, masks, and socialization. Consistent book distributions and access to online books and resources are essential to ending *book apartheid*. Book apartheid is a systemic racial and prejudicial human-created system that starves communities of literary resources, including but not limited to book stores, public and academic libraries, and school librarians. Book apartheid is intentionally and methodically designed to educationally blind impoverished communities, which are all too often black and brown. As Ida B. Wells-Barnett noted, "The way to right wrongs is to turn the light of truth upon them."

## Teaching Untold Stories

As school librarians, we are creatives; we have the capacity to develop when there is a void. I had the immense pleasure of developing and teaching the course "A Conversation: Critical Approaches to Race, Ethnicity, and Representation" (available at <https://raceandethnicity.wixsite.com/chec>). In this course, we discuss topics that range from ending homelessness and poverty to the birth-to-prison pipeline. Learning about all people's history and narratives from a plethora of continents and regions is what ensures our students see the world through an empathetic lens. As a community advocate, ensuring everyone has access to information and knowledge means exposing myths and biases and revealing

truths. As I currently teach this elective course at my school, students are discovering historical anecdotes that will forever shape their personal and educational existence.

As we step into a new phase of librarianship, I believe it requires an imagination that exceeds our wildest dreams. I am dreaming of library institutions within institutions that are incubators for creativity, boldness, and truth-telling narratives. Close your eyes: can you imagine a school district where each student is offered the opportunity to engage in meaningful dialogue coupled with historical anecdotes and lessons pertaining to race, racism, and representation? Particularly a history that is often not shared, in this case, black history, and no, not just in February.

These historical truths that would be taught would place meaningful value

on untold names and events, such as François Toussaint Louverture, a former enslaved Haitian who led the only successful enslaved human revolt in modern history. He not only fought to gain Haiti's independence from France and Spain, but he was also the catalyst for additional revolts throughout the world.

Students would learn about Bayard Rustin, an openly gay civil rights activist, chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, and adviser to Martin Luther King Jr., who was active in organizing marches in the 1940s and 50s. In 1941 Rustin joined the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR) and co-founded the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Rustin served as field secretary and organizer of workshops on nonviolence direct action for FOR, and eventually became the race relations director (Stanford, Martin Luther



King Jr. Research and Education Institute n.d.).

He not only spoke about combatting injustices, he embodied it by taking a stand. CORE organized an inter-racial bus trip across state lines. This act of bravery would inspire the Freedom Riders in 1961, but it would also cause Rustin to spend 22 days on a North Carolina chain gang. Rustin published a report detailing the horrific practice of chain gangs; this report would lead to sweeping changes (Stanford, Martin Luther King Jr. Research and Education Institute n.d.).

Activist and political, civil, and voting rights leader Fannie Lou Townsend Hamer passionately sounded the alarm against injustice. In 1961 Hamer received a hysterectomy by a white doctor without her consent; she was supposed to have surgery to remove a uterine tumor. It was commonly referred to as a “Mississippi appendectomy,” and it was a common practice performed on black women. In June 1963, Hamer registered to vote along with several other black women and was arrested for sitting in a whites-only bus station restaurant in Charleston, South Carolina. Hamer and many of the women were brutally beaten, leaving Hamer with a blood clot in

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her eye and kidney damage (Howard University n.d.).

In 1964, a seat opened up in the Mississippi House of Representatives, but Hamer was barred from the ballot. In 1968, she began a pig bank to provide free pigs for black farmers. A year later she founded the Freedom Farm Cooperative, buying up land that blacks could own and

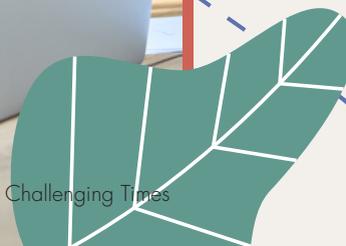
farm communally. Hamer purchased 640 acres and launched a co-op store, boutique, and sewing enterprise. She also provided 200 units of low-income housing (Howard University n.d.).

As we approach the 100th anniversary of the Tulsa Race Massacre (not Tulsa Race Riot), where more than 300 blacks were murdered, teaching such a history would shine a familiar light on our current state. In a course like this, students would learn that the massacre occurred over an 18-hour period, between May 31–June 1, 1921, when a white mob attacked residents, homes, and businesses in the predominantly black neighborhood of Greenwood, founded by O.W. Gurley (Johnson n.d.).

Some students might be surprised to know that Greenwood was commonly referred to as *Black Wall Street* because of its thriving black-owned businesses. Black Wall Street, particularly Greenwood Avenue, had schools, “hotels, cafés, newspapers, clothiers, movie theaters, doctors’ and lawyers’ offices, grocery stores, beauty salons, shoeshine shops, and more” (Johnson n.d.).

Providing historical relevance to a course and encouraging and empowering students to simply believe are essential to preparing future-ready world leaders for what can be daunting tasks that lie ahead: combating hatred, never ceasing to ensure justice, and being slow to anger and quick to listen.

I encourage other schools and school districts to teach these and other untold stories. Having open conversations that are justice and solidarity themed with our students ensures



their knowledge and appreciation of the human experience. This rich history that resides in the very DNA of the United States of America and the world deserves new observers and researchers. We do our future a disservice when we don't reveal the truth-telling narratives of all pre- and post-founding mothers, fathers, and contributors.

## Conclusion

As we find ourselves pivoting to new types of learning, I believe we must keep our finger on the pulse of the world around us and create centers of study within our educational institutions and separately. These institutions would provide literary training for educators, community members, and parents, with an intentionality placed on differing groups' learning needs. The library institutions would publish texts for

students, universities, and training manuals for educators. In addition, educators could receive anti-racist, collection development, library branding, web development, and additional training modules.

I do believe the school librarian's voice has become one to listen to during this past year. Our technological astuteness, coupled with the varied hats we wear, may have shocked the educational world, but they haven't seen anything yet. We will continue to provide creative educational alternatives.

As we prepare for the future, we must see ourselves in each part of the world. Developing an international school librarian consortium where students and educators would have access to neighboring countries' and nation-states' collections would provide our future world leaders

with an insight and intelligence that would be paired with empathetic responses.

I am so full of hope as I think about my students and how the field of library science will serve them and our educators. As we navigate new territory, please be encouraged in knowing that your voice, your story, your knowledge, and your love are all that your school community needs. Practice self-care and change the world.



## Book List:

- *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* by Ibram Kendi and Jason Reynolds
- *White Fragility* by Robin DiAngelo and Michael Eric Dyson
- *How the United States Racializes Latinos: White Hegemony and Its Consequences* by José A. Cobas, Jorge Duany, Joe R. Feagin
- *The Hate U Give* by Angie Thomas
- *Between the World and Me* by Ta-Nehisi Coates
- *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* by Michelle Alexander
- *The Fire Next Time* by James Baldwin
- *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Malcolm X
- *Black Skin, White Masks* by Frantz Fanon
- *Latino Spin: Public Image and the Whitewashing of Race* by Arlene Dávila
- *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* by Jack D. Forbes
- *The Making of Asian America: A History* by Erika Le
- *E. J. Josey: Transformational Leader of the Modern Library Profession* by Renate Chancellor



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is a high school librarian in the District of Columbia Public School (DCPS) System in Washington,

DC. He received the 2019–2020 DCPS Highly Effective Award. He authored the winter 2020 article “Black and Brown Narratives: School Libraries Creating Truth-Telling Collections” in *The CRAB*, the digital magazine of the Maryland Library Association. He is the treasurer of the Washington Teachers Union’s Executive Board and is the chair of the Washington Teachers Union’s Equity Collaborative Steering Committee. He’s also a member of the board of directors for An Open Book Foundation. He is an AASL member and is serving on the ABC-CLIO Leadership Grant Committee. His Twitter handle is @christopherpaix, and his blog is available at <<https://bellhighlibrary.wixsite.com/chec>>.

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