

# What should K-12 educators know about the Black Lives Matters movement?

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# About This Brief

Dear Readers:

The **Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement** is a social and political movement that advocates for the rights, safety, and dignity of Black people. It emerged in response to systemic racism, police brutality, and racial injustice in the United States and around the world. The movement gained widespread attention after the killing of 17-year-old **Trayvon Martin** in 2012 and the subsequent acquittal of **George Zimmerman**, his shooter.

BLM was founded in **2013** by three Black activists: **Alicia Garza** – A writer, activist, and organizer focused on racial and social justice, **Patrisse Cullors** – An artist and activist known for her work in criminal justice reform and abolitionist organizing, and **Opal Tometi** – A writer and human rights advocate with a focus on immigrant rights and racial justice.

These three women started the movement by using the hashtag **#BlackLivesMatter** in response to the verdict in Trayvon Martin's case, aiming to challenge anti-Black racism and mobilize grassroots activism. Since then, Black Lives Matter has evolved into a **global movement**, with chapters across the U.S. and other countries, advocating for policy changes, police accountability, and racial equity in various sectors.

K-12 educators can learn more about the BLM movement in this Practice Brief and incorporate this knowledge into their curriculum and instructional practices because it is essential to fostering **equity, critical thinking, and civic engagement** in students. Understanding BLM allows educators to teach accurate histories, address systemic injustices, and create inclusive learning environments where all students feel seen, heard, and valued.

By integrating discussions about racial justice, activism, and structural inequality across grades and subjects, teachers help students develop the analytical skills needed to understand and navigate complex social issues. Additionally, incorporating BLM-related content ensures that students, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds, see their experiences reflected in the curriculum. Teaching about BLM also empowers students to **engage thoughtfully with current events, recognize media bias, and participate in their communities**, ultimately preparing them to be informed and socially conscious citizens in a diverse and democratic society.

For K-12 educators seeking to integrate **racial justice education** in their classroom and increase their knowledge of the BLM movement, **self-education and reflection** are core competencies of their teacher practice. Before facilitating conversations with students, educators must deepen their understanding of racial history, systemic inequities, and the role of activism in maintaining a democratic society.

Reading foundational texts, engaging in professional development, and reflecting on one's personal biases and experiences with racial injustice are key actions in which educators can engage. This foundational knowledge is also important in helping educators be prepared

to **navigate resistance**, whether from parents, administrators, or the community, by understanding school policies, effectively communicating the educational value of their lessons, and building support networks among colleagues.

A **culturally responsive and inclusive classroom** is essential for successful racial justice education. Educators can develop and continuously use norms that foster **brave and safe spaces** for class discussions, create instructional tasks that encourage student-led inquiries, and incorporate various forms of engagement, such as music, art, storytelling, and community-based learning.

Teaching **critical media literacy** is also crucial, as it helps students analyze how racial justice movements are portrayed in the media, recognize bias, and differentiate between misinformation and credible sources. By conducting an **audit of their curriculum and teaching materials**, educators can ensure that diverse perspectives, particularly Black voices, are represented across subjects. Incorporating primary sources, accurate historical accounts, and data-driven discussions on racial disparities, educators can create an informed learning environment.

To sustain these efforts, educators should **engage with local communities and commit to ongoing professional growth**. Partnering with racial justice organizations, inviting guest speakers, and encouraging student-led activism can help bridge classroom discussions with real-world applications. Teachers can incorporate primary sources, accurate historical accounts, and data-driven discussions on racial disparities to create a better informed and culturally responsive learning environment.

Ultimately, integrating racial justice education is an evolving process that requires **intentionality, courage, and adaptability**, ensuring that students develop the knowledge and critical thinking skills to engage meaningfully with social justice issues. To support you in these efforts, we offer this practice brief and encourage you to consider the practical recommendations and essential questions with colleagues, students, and members of your school community.

Sincerely,



**John Pascarella, Ph.D.**  
Professor & Chief Academic Officer



**Akilah Lyons-Moore, Ed.D.**  
Associate Professor & Faculty Affiliate

# How to Read this Practice Brief

This practice brief for K-12 educators includes: an overview of the historical and social context of the Black Lives Matter movement, culturally responsive and inclusive teaching strategies for teaching the BLM movement, practical suggestions for increasing critical media literacy and navigating misinformation, useful tips for addressing challenges and resistance to racial justice education, ways to promote student engagement and civic participation, opportunities for professional learning and growth, policy and legal considerations for teaching BLM in schools, new opportunities for growing community partnerships and parental engagement, and convenient checklists for practical steps educators. Generative AI assisted the author's development and organization of this brief, which includes original expert analysis along with AI generated content that has been carefully reviewed for credibility, substance, accuracy, and clarity.

## Key Purposes

There are ten key purposes for readers to effectively use this practice brief to inform their work as K-12 educators:

### 1. Educating K-12 Educators on the Black Lives Matter Movement

- Provides historical context on the origins and evolution of BLM.
- Highlights key events, impact, and ongoing efforts related to racial justice.

### 2. Supporting Racial Justice Education in Schools

- Emphasizes the importance of teaching about racial injustice, activism, and systemic inequities.
- Encourages integration of discussions on BLM across subjects to promote equity, critical thinking, and civic engagement.

### **3. Guiding Educators on Curriculum Development and Instructional Strategies**

- Offers practical steps to audit curricula for diverse representation and accuracy.
  - Suggests ways to incorporate primary sources, critical media literacy, and historical accounts into lessons.
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### **4. Creating Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Classrooms**

- Provides strategies for fostering brave and safe spaces for discussions on racial justice.
  - Encourages student-led inquiries, storytelling, and community-based learning.
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### **5. Preparing Educators to Navigate Resistance and Challenges**

- Helps educators anticipate and respond to resistance from parents, administrators, or communities.
  - Recommends ways to communicate the educational value of racial justice topics.
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### **6. Engaging with Local Communities and Professional Development**

- Encourages partnerships with racial justice organizations and guest speakers.
  - Suggests professional learning opportunities to deepen educators' knowledge on racial justice and culturally responsive pedagogy.
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### **7. Promoting Student Civic Engagement and Activism**

- Highlights the role of activism in creating social change.
  - Encourages students to critically engage with current events and recognize media bias.
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### **8. Providing Essential Questions and Lesson Ideas for Different Grade Levels**

- Includes age-appropriate essential questions for Social Studies, English, Science, Math, Arts, and Civics.
- Suggests lesson plans and book recommendations for elementary, middle, and high school students.

## **9. Addressing Policy Considerations and Legal Frameworks**

- Provides educators with knowledge on policies affecting racial justice education.
  - Helps educators understand their rights and responsibilities in teaching about race and activism.
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## **10. Encouraging Long-Term Commitment to Racial Justice Education**

- Stresses the need for continuous learning, curriculum updates, and institutional support.
- Recommends self-reflection, professional growth, and collaboration with colleagues to sustain these efforts.

The information shared in this practice brief should be used for informational purposes by K-12 educators committed to advancing educational equity. The primary purpose of a practice brief for K-12 educators is to provide concise, research-informed, and actionable guidance on a topic, policy, practice, or issue affecting K-12 education. It serves as a practical resource to help educators understand, navigate, and respond to key developments in education policy, instructional strategies, and student support systems.



# **Key Events, Impact, Criticisms, and Ongoing Efforts**





The Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement has had a profound impact on social justice efforts, policy discussions, and public awareness of racial injustice, particularly in the U.S. but also globally. Here's an overview of its key events, impact, and ongoing efforts:

## Timeline of Key Events and Mobilization Efforts

2012-2013

### Trayvon Martin's Death (2012) & Founding of BLM (2013):

After George Zimmerman's acquittal in the killing of Trayvon Martin, Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi launched the hashtag #BlackLivesMatter, sparking an online and offline movement.

2014

### Ferguson Uprising:

The police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, led to weeks of protests, with BLM playing a major role in mobilizing demonstrations against police brutality.

2014

### Eric Garner & "I Can't Breathe":

Garner was killed in a police chokehold in New York, and his last words, "I can't breathe," became a rallying cry for the movement.

2015

**Charleston Church Shooting:** The racist mass shooting at Emanuel AME Church in South Carolina intensified national conversations about white supremacy and racial violence.

2016

**Colin Kaepernick's NFL Protest:** Inspired by BLM, Kaepernick kneeled during the national anthem to protest police brutality, igniting widespread debate on race, patriotism, and free speech.

2020

**George Floyd's Murder & Global Protests:** The killing of George Floyd by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis sparked some of the largest protests in U.S. history. Millions marched worldwide, calling for police accountability and systemic change.

2020

**Breonna Taylor & Calls for Justice:** Taylor, a Black woman, was shot and killed by police in her home in Louisville, Kentucky, fueling further protests and demands for police reform.

# Impact of BLM

1.

**Increased Awareness and Conversations on Racism:** BLM shifted public discourse on systemic racism, police violence, and racial injustice, leading to mainstream acknowledgment of these issues.



**Policy Changes and Police Reform:** Some cities reallocated police funding to community-based services, and calls for police accountability measures, such as banning chokeholds and requiring body cameras, gained traction.

2.



3.

**Corporate and Institutional Changes:** Companies and institutions pledged commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives. Statues and symbols linked to racism (such as Confederate monuments) were removed.

4.

**Electoral and Legislative Influence:** BLM influenced voting patterns, mobilizing Black voters and young activists in elections. Local and federal legislation, such as the George Floyd Justice in Policing Act, was introduced to address police misconduct.

## Criticism and Challenges

*While widely supported, BLM has also faced:*

- **Criticism from conservatives** who claim the movement is anti-police or divisive.
- **Debates over leadership and funding transparency** within the official BLM organization.
- **Pushback from law enforcement groups** and politicians who frame the movement as fostering anti-police sentiment.
- **Criticism from civil rights activists** who claim that BLM strategies are ineffective and focused too much on protests and disruption.
- **Claims of silencing speech and repressing academic freedom** as some academics have been hesitant to speak out against BLM resulting in self-censorship, reduced academic inquiry, and research bias.
- **Accusations of misogyny**, as seen through a lack of focus on missing and unsolved murders of Black women and girls.
- **Disconnection from working-class and global communities** who believe BLM does not adequately represent community members primary racial justice concerns

## Ongoing Efforts

*Despite facing criticism, BLM thrives through these ongoing efforts:*

- BLM continues to advocate for **criminal justice reform, reparations, economic justice, voting rights protections, and an end to systemic racism.**
- The movement has expanded beyond police violence to address **healthcare disparities, education inequities, and racial wealth gaps, LGBTQ activism, and access to healthy food and nutrition.**
- **Creation of the Black Lives Matter Foundation** – a central hub that provides funding, toolkits, and partnerships with organizations and individuals.
- Development of **core pillars** that provide a framework for the BLM Foundation and its affiliates: **Arts, Culture, Frontline Organizing, Healing Justice, Policy, Research and Education.**
- Created a **formal leadership infrastructure** through the BLM Foundation.
- Increased **transparency and accountability** through the BLM Transparency Center, publication of Impact Report, and public disclosure of the BLM financial information (IRS 990 Form).

# Essential Questions to Increase Students' Awareness of the Black Lives Matter Movement

When introducing discussions about the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, educators should frame them in age-appropriate and subject-matter relevant ways. Below are essential questions categorized by grade level and subject area.

## 1. General Essential Questions (All Subjects, Adaptable by Age)

- What does “Black Lives Matter” mean, and why was the movement created?
- How have people throughout history advocated for racial justice, and how does BLM connect to these efforts?
- What role do activism and protest play in creating social change?
- How does the media shape public understanding of movements like BLM?
- How can students use their voices to advocate for fairness, equality, and justice in their communities?

## 2. Social Studies / History

Elementary:

- What does fairness and equality mean?
- How have people worked together in history to make the world a better place?

Middle School:

- What historical events have led to movements for racial justice in the U.S.?
- How does the Black Lives Matter movement compare to the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s?

High School:

- How has systemic racism shaped policies and institutions in the U.S., and how does BLM address these issues?
- What are different perspectives on the Black Lives Matter movement, and how do historical and social contexts shape these views?
- How have local, state, and federal policies responded to the demands of the BLM movement?

## 3. English Language Arts (ELA)

Elementary:

- How do stories help us understand fairness and kindness?
- What lessons can we learn from books about standing up for others?



# Essential Questions to Increase Students' Awareness of the Black Lives Matter Movement

## Middle School:

- How do literature and storytelling help us understand different perspectives on race and justice?
- How can speeches, poetry, and personal narratives inspire change?

## High School:

- How do writers use rhetoric to advocate for justice in speeches, essays, and social media?
- How does literature reflect and challenge racial injustices in society?
- How can students critically analyze portrayals of race and activism in media and literature?

## 4. Science & Math

### Science:

- How do racial disparities in healthcare, environmental conditions, and access to STEM education connect to the goals of the BLM movement?
- What is environmental racism, and how does it impact Black communities?

### Math:

- How can data and statistics help us understand racial disparities in policing, income, healthcare, and education?
- How do graphs, maps, and numbers tell stories about racial inequality in different communities?

## 5. Arts & Music

### Visual Arts & Performing Arts:

- How has art been used as a tool for activism and social justice?
- What messages do murals, street art, and protest posters convey about BLM?

### Music:

- How have musicians and artists used their work to express themes of racial justice?
- How do different genres of music (hip-hop, jazz, gospel, etc.) reflect struggles and triumphs in Black history?

## 6. Civics & Government

### Middle & High School:

- What role does the First Amendment play in protests and movements like BLM?
- How do policies related to policing, voting rights, and racial equity affect Black communities?
- How can young people engage in civic action to support causes they care about?

A low-angle, upward-looking photograph of several modern skyscrapers with glass facades. The buildings are reflected in each other, creating a complex geometric pattern. The sky is visible in the background, showing some clouds. The overall tone is professional and corporate.

# **Policy Changes, Controversy, and Backlash to Corporate Responses**

## 1. Policy Changes Influenced by BLM

BLM has played a major role in pushing for reforms in policing and criminal justice at local, state, and federal levels. Some key developments include:

- George Floyd Justice in Policing Act (2021) – A bill introduced in Congress aiming to ban chokeholds, limit qualified immunity for police officers, and create national databases of police misconduct. However, it has not yet been passed into law.
  - State and Local Reforms – Cities like Minneapolis, Los Angeles, and New York redirected police funding toward mental health and community-based safety programs. Some police departments banned no-knock warrants (as in Breonna Taylor's case) and implemented stricter use-of-force policies.
  - Removal of Confederate Symbols – Many states and municipalities removed statues and symbols associated with white supremacy due to pressure from BLM and allied movements.
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## 2. Global Impact of BLM

BLM has inspired movements worldwide to address racial injustice and systemic oppression:

- United Kingdom – Activists protested police violence against Black Britons and highlighted racial disparities in housing, healthcare, and education.
  - France – Protests erupted against police brutality following the deaths of Adama Traoré and other Black citizens at the hands of law enforcement.
  - Brazil – Demonstrations linked BLM to the high number of police killings of Afro-Brazilian citizens, particularly in favelas.
  - Canada, Australia, and South Africa – Movements focusing on Indigenous rights, anti-Black racism, and historical injustices gained momentum, often citing BLM as a catalyst.
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## 3. Criticism and Controversy

Despite its impact, BLM has faced criticism from various groups:

- Law Enforcement & Conservative Figures – Critics claim the movement promotes anti-police rhetoric, with slogans like "Defund the Police" being misinterpreted as calls to abolish law enforcement rather than reform it.
- Internal Leadership & Funding Transparency – There have been concerns about financial management within the Black Lives Matter Global Network Foundation (BLMGNF), including allegations that leaders mishandled funds. Some local BLM chapters distanced themselves from the national organization due to lack of transparency.
- Polarization – While widely supported, the movement has also become a political flashpoint, with some conservatives branding it as divisive or radical.



#### **4. BLM's Role in Elections and Political Activism**

BLM has significantly influenced U.S. politics by mobilizing voters and advocating for policy changes:

- 2020 Presidential Election – The movement played a key role in increasing Black voter turnout, particularly in battleground states like Georgia, Michigan, and Pennsylvania.
  - Legislative Advocacy – BLM activists have pressured politicians to commit to racial justice policies, from police reform to economic equity initiatives.
  - Local Elections – The movement encouraged the election of progressive district attorneys and policymakers committed to criminal justice reform.
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#### **5. Economic and Corporate Responses**

BLM's advocacy led to increased corporate commitments to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI):

- Corporate Pledges – Major companies (Nike, Netflix, Apple, and others) committed billions to racial justice initiatives and Black-owned businesses.
- Workplace DEI Efforts – Many organizations implemented anti-racism training, revised hiring practices, and established DEI roles.
- Backlash Against DEI – In recent years, there has been pushback against corporate diversity efforts, particularly in conservative states and sectors, with some arguing that such programs constitute "reverse discrimination."

# **Teaching the Black Lives Matter Movement: What K-12 Educators Need**



# Teaching the Black Lives Matter Movement

Racial justice education and teaching about the Black Lives Matter movement creates opportunities for K-12 educators to continue to develop their teaching practice. The arc of continued professional development and learning allows K-12 educators to meet the needs of their students through relevance and inclusivity. To effectively teach about the Black Lives Matter movement and broader racial justice issues in **age-appropriate** and **subject-relevant** ways, K-12 educators must deepen their knowledge and skills in key areas which include: 1) Strengthen their historical knowledge on race, activism, and systemic inequality, 2) Adopt culturally responsive and anti-racist teaching practices, 3) Develop skills to facilitate difficult conversations in ways that support student growth, 4) Stay informed about policies and legal considerations affecting racial justice education, and 5) Engage with families and communities to create holistic learning environments. Below are essential learning areas that can **increase the success** of these practices.

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## 1. Understanding the Historical and Social Context of Racial Justice

Educators need a strong foundation in the history of racial injustice, civil rights movements, and systemic inequities to facilitate informed discussions.

### Key Learning Areas:

- The history of anti-Black racism in the U.S. (slavery, segregation, redlining, mass incarceration).
- The Civil Rights Movement and its connection to BLM.
- Racial disparities in education, policing, healthcare, and housing.
- How social movements (BLM, Chicano Movement, Women's Suffrage) influence policy and change.

### Professional Learning Resources:

- [Teaching for Black Lives](#) – Rethinking Schools
  - [Facing History & Ourselves](#) – Civil Rights and Social Justice Curriculum
  - [Zinn Education Project](#) – Teaching about Movements for Racial Justice
- 

## 2. Culturally Responsive Teaching & Anti-Racist Pedagogy

Teachers must create learning environments that affirm students' identities and center diverse perspectives.

# Teaching the Black Lives Matter Movement

## Key Professional Learning Areas:

- Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT) – Using students’ backgrounds and experiences to guide instruction.
- Anti-Racist Pedagogy – Identifying and addressing bias in curriculum, teaching materials, and classroom interactions.
- Recognizing and countering implicit bias in disciplinary practices and expectations.
- Strategies for facilitating difficult conversations about race and social justice.

## Professional Learning Resources:

- [Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain](#) – Zaretta Hammond
  - [How to Be an Anti-Racist](#) – Ibram X. Kendi (book & online courses)
  - [Learning for Justice \(formerly Teaching Tolerance\)](#) – Free professional learning modules
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## 3. Critical Media Literacy & Navigating Controversial Topics

Since BLM and racial justice issues are politicized in the media, educators must teach students to critically analyze information and recognize bias.

## Key Professional Learning Areas:

- Understanding media framing of social movements.
- Teaching students how to evaluate news sources, social media narratives, and misinformation.
- Strategies for handling pushback from parents or community members who view discussions of BLM as “political.”
- Developing a classroom policy for civil discourse when discussing race, activism, and equity.

## Professional Learning Resources:

- [Stanford History Education Group: Civic Online Reasoning](#) – Free curriculum on evaluating sources.
- [Facing History & Ourselves: Fostering Civil Discourse](#) – Training for difficult classroom discussions.
- [PBS NewsHour Classroom](#) – Media literacy resources tailored for K-12.

# Teaching the Black Lives Matter Movement

## 4. Trauma-Informed Teaching & Emotional Intelligence

Discussions about racial injustice can be emotionally challenging for students, particularly students of color who may have lived experiences with discrimination.

### Key Professional Learning Areas:

- Understanding racial trauma and its effects on students' learning and well-being.
- How to de-escalate emotionally charged conversations.
- Creating safe and brave spaces for discussions about race and identity.
- Supporting social-emotional learning (SEL) alongside lessons on activism and justice.

### Professional Learning Resources:

- [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network \(NCTSN\)](#) – Guides on trauma-informed teaching.
  - [CASEL \(Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning\)](#) – SEL integration strategies.
  - [We Do This 'Til We Free Us](#) – Mariame Kaba (on restorative justice and healing-centered education).
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## 5. Policy & Legal Considerations in Teaching About BLM

Given the increasing restrictions on teaching about race and social justice in some states, educators need to be informed about their rights and limitations.

### Key Professional Learning Areas:

- Local and state laws regarding curriculum content on race and activism.
- How to align lessons with academic standards while navigating restrictive policies.
- How to engage administrators and parents in discussions about curriculum choices.
- Defending educational integrity while avoiding professional risk.

### Professional Learning Resources:

- [The ACLU's Guide to Teachers' Rights](#) – Legal information for educators.
- [Education Law Center](#) – Understanding legal protections for teaching about race.
- [National Council for the Social Studies \(NCSS\)](#) – Policy guidance on teaching social movements.

# Teaching the Black Lives Matter Movement

## 6. Building Partnerships with Families and Communities

Parent and community engagement is critical for creating an inclusive learning environment that supports discussions on racial justice.


### Key Professional Learning Areas:

- How to effectively communicate with families about racial justice education.
- Partnering with local activists, community organizations, and guest speakers.
- Bridging generational gaps – Understanding different perspectives on BLM and racial equity.
- Facilitating service-learning projects that connect classroom discussions to community action.

### Professional Learning Resources:

- [Harvard Family Research Project](#) – Best practices for parent and community engagement.
- [Community Schools Playbook](#) – Strategies for integrating social justice education into school-community partnerships.
- [Teaching for Change](#) – Resources for engaging families in anti-racist education.



A photograph of a woman with glasses and brown hair, wearing a black long-sleeved shirt, raising her right hand holding a blue pen. She is looking towards the left. In the background, other people are visible, some with their hands raised, suggesting a classroom or meeting setting. The image is partially obscured by a yellow banner at the bottom.

# **Essential Questions for K-12 Educators Working Toward Racial Justice and BLM Education**



# Essential Questions to Consider

As educators strive to integrate the Black Lives Matter movement and racial justice education into their classrooms, they should reflect on key questions that guide their learning, teaching, and professional growth. Below are essential questions categorized by critical areas of focus. These essential questions are meant to guide reflection and action as educators work toward integrating racial justice education, BLM-related discussions, and culturally responsive teaching into their practice.

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## 1. Deepening Historical and Social Context Understanding

- How have historical movements for racial justice, including the Civil Rights Movement and BLM, shaped policies and attitudes today?
  - What systemic barriers have historically affected and continue to affect Black communities, and how do they manifest in education?
  - How can I ensure that my lessons accurately and critically represent the historical and contemporary struggles for racial justice?
  - What sources and perspectives should I incorporate to provide a balanced and fact-based understanding of BLM and racial equity?
- 

## 2. Culturally Responsive and Anti-Racist Teaching

- How do my own biases, privileges, and experiences shape the way I approach racial justice education?
  - How can I make my curriculum and classroom environment more inclusive and affirming for all students, especially students of color?
  - How do I ensure that BLM-related topics are not just discussed during Black History Month but are embedded into year-round learning?
  - How do I validate and center student voices, particularly those from historically marginalized backgrounds?
  - What strategies can I use to help students recognize and challenge racial bias in their own lives and communities?
- 

## 3. Critical Media Literacy and Navigating Controversial Topics

- How can I teach students to critically evaluate different media representations of BLM and racial justice movements?
- What frameworks can I use to help students differentiate between credible sources and misinformation related to social justice topics?
- How do I create a classroom environment where students feel safe discussing complex and sensitive topics about race?

# Essential Questions to Consider

- How do I navigate discussions where students or families have differing, and sometimes opposing, views on BLM and racial justice?
  - How do I engage in professional dialogue with colleagues about best practices for teaching racial justice in a politically polarized environment?
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## 4. Legal and Policy Considerations in Teaching About Race and BLM

- What are my district's policies regarding teaching about race, BLM, and social justice?
  - How do I balance my responsibility to teach historical truth and social justice while navigating potential legal or political constraints?
  - How do I communicate with administrators and families about the importance of teaching racial justice topics?
  - What rights do I have as an educator if I face resistance or backlash for teaching about BLM or systemic racism?
- 

## 5. Building Partnerships with Families and Communities

- How can I engage parents and caregivers in meaningful conversations about racial justice education?
  - What community organizations or local activists can I partner with to enhance my students' learning experiences on social justice issues?
  - How can I ensure that my approach to teaching about BLM is collaborative rather than performative?
  - How do I encourage students to connect classroom discussions on racial justice with actions in their own communities?
  - How do I create space for diverse perspectives while staying committed to social justice principles?
- 

## 6. Sustaining Commitment to Racial Justice Education

- How do I ensure that my engagement in racial justice education is ongoing and not just a response to current events?
- How do I measure the impact of my racial justice teaching on student learning and growth?
- How can I continue to grow professionally in my understanding of anti-racism and culturally responsive pedagogy?
- How can I support and collaborate with colleagues in making equity and racial justice an institutional priority?



# **First Steps for K-12 Educators to Achieve Racial Justice and Black Lives Matter Education Goals**

# First Steps for K-12 Educators

For educators committed to integrating racial justice and BLM-related discussions into their teaching, the process can feel overwhelming. However, taking intentional, structured first steps will help establish sustainable and meaningful changes. Below is a roadmap for getting started.

## Step 1: Commit to Personal Learning and Reflection

Before bringing these conversations into the classroom, educators should first deepen their own understanding of racial justice, systemic inequities, and the historical roots of activism.

### Actions to Take:

- Read key books on race, history, and education (*Culturally Responsive Teaching & the Brain* by Zaretta Hammond, *Stamped* by Ibram X. Kendi & Jason Reynolds, *How to Be an Antiracist* by Ibram X. Kendi).
- Engage in self-reflection:
  - What biases or blind spots do I have about race and social justice?
  - How does my own identity shape my perspective on these issues?
  - What fears or challenges do I anticipate in teaching this topic?
- Take online professional development courses on culturally responsive teaching, anti-racist education, and trauma-informed pedagogy.
- Follow BLM-affiliated educational organizations like Learning for Justice, Facing History & Ourselves, and the Zinn Education Project.

## Step 2: Review and Revise Classroom Curriculum

Once educators have a foundational understanding, they should evaluate their curriculum to ensure it represents diverse perspectives and aligns with social justice principles.

### Actions to Take:

- Audit textbooks and reading materials – Do they represent diverse voices, particularly Black authors? Are they missing key historical or contemporary perspectives?
- Include primary sources – Incorporate speeches, letters, and firsthand accounts from activists, scholars, and community members.
- Integrate discussions on race and justice into subjects like history, literature, science, and math (see lesson ideas above).
- Use data and statistics to illustrate disparities in housing, education, policing, and healthcare (great for math and social studies).

### Guiding Questions:

- Whose voices are missing from my curriculum?
- Am I presenting an accurate and balanced history of social justice movements?
- How can I integrate lessons on activism beyond Black History Month?

# First Steps for K-12 Educators

## Step 3: Build a Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Classroom

Creating a safe and brave learning environment is essential for discussing sensitive topics like racial justice and activism.

### Actions to Take:

- Establish classroom norms for respectful discussion:
  - Emphasize active listening and empathy.
  - Use “I” statements instead of generalizations.
  - Normalize discomfort as part of learning.
- Incorporate student voices:
  - Ask students how they experience fairness and justice in their own lives.
  - Provide opportunities for student-led projects on racial justice.
- Display inclusive classroom visuals:
  - Highlight diverse leaders in literature, history, STEM, and the arts.
  - Feature posters with affirming messages about equality, activism, and representation.
- Address racial trauma and emotional responses:
  - Acknowledge that students may have personal connections to these topics.
  - Provide space for reflection (journals, art, or small group discussions).

## Step 4: Teach Critical Media Literacy and Current Events Thoughtfully

Since BLM and racial justice issues are often misrepresented or politicized in the media, educators should help students analyze information critically.

### Actions to Take:

- ETeach students how to assess credibility in news coverage of protests, activism, and racial justice issues.
- ECompare different perspectives on the same event – How does language shape narratives?
- EDiscuss how social media has influenced activism (e.g., viral hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter).
- EEncourage students to research and form their own opinions using fact-based sources.

**Helpful Resource:** [Stanford History Education Group's Civic Online Reasoning](#) – Lessons on spotting misinformation and bias.

# First Steps for K-12 Educators

## Step 5: Prepare for Resistance and Have a Response Plan

Some educators may face pushback from parents, colleagues, or administrators when discussing BLM and racial justice. Having a prepared response strategy is crucial.

### Actions to Take:

- Be clear about the educational purpose: Emphasize that teaching about BLM is about civic engagement, history, and human rights, not politics.
- Know district policies on teaching about race and activism.
- Involve administrators early and seek their support when necessary.
- Be ready to engage families:
  - Communicate openly with parents about learning goals.
  - Share resources that clarify misconceptions about BLM and social justice education.
- Build a network of supportive colleagues to exchange ideas and strategies.

### Professional Organizations That Can Help:

- [National Council for the Social Studies \(NCSS\)](#) – Policy guidance on teaching social movements.
  - [Education Law Center](#) – Legal protections for teaching about race.
  - [Teaching for Change](#) – Resources for discussing race and equity in schools.
- 

## Step 6: Engage with the Local Community and Student-Led Initiatives

BLM is deeply connected to local activism and community organizing. Bringing real-world connections into the classroom helps students see the relevance of social justice work.

### Actions to Take:

- Invite guest speakers: Activists, historians, or community leaders can share their experiences and knowledge.
- Partner with local organizations focused on racial justice, youth advocacy, or restorative justice programs.
- Encourage student-led projects:
  - School-wide awareness campaigns.
  - Art or writing projects on activism and justice.
  - Service-learning initiatives that address equity in their own communities.

**Example:** Some schools have created student-led social justice clubs or hosted community forums on racial equity.



# First Steps for K-12 Educators

## Step 7: Commit to Continuous Professional Growth

Educators should view racial justice education as an ongoing practice rather than a one-time lesson or unit.

### Actions to Take:

- Attend equity-focused conferences and webinars (e.g., National Equity Project, Learning for Justice).
- Join educator networks focused on social justice.
- Regularly update curriculum materials to reflect new scholarship and perspectives.
- Reflect on personal progress:
  - What has worked well in my teaching?
  - What areas need improvement?
  - How have students responded to these discussions?

**Recommended Course:** “*Teaching Hard History*” by Teaching Tolerance – A structured program on integrating race and equity into curriculum.

## The Journey Starts with Small, Intentional Steps

**Step 1:** Start with self-education and personal reflection.

**Step 2:** Review curriculum and classroom materials for representation.

**Step 3:** Create a classroom culture that supports brave conversations.

**Step 4:** Teach critical media literacy to help students analyze racial justice issues.

**Step 5:** Prepare for pushback and develop a response plan.

**Step 6:** Engage with the local community and student-led efforts.

**Step 7:** Commit to lifelong learning and professional growth.

By taking small, intentional actions, educators can create learning environments that empower students to understand, critically engage with, and advocate for racial justice issues in ways that align with their age and subject area.



A close-up photograph of an open book with its pages fanned out, resting on a wooden surface. In the background, a blurred bookshelf filled with various books is visible. A bright yellow rectangular overlay is positioned on the left side of the book, containing the title text in a bold, black, sans-serif font.

# **Lesson Ideas and Recommended Books**

# Lesson Ideas and Book Recommendations to Support Discussions on the Black Lives Matter Movement

Below are age-appropriate lesson ideas and book recommendations categorized by grade level and subject area to help K-12 educators increase students' awareness of the Black Lives Matter movement in meaningful ways.

## Lesson Ideas by Grade Level and Subject Area

### Elementary School (Grades K-5)

#### Lesson 1: Understanding Fairness and Equality (Social Studies / ELA)

**Objective:** Help students understand the concepts of fairness and justice.

##### Learning Activity:

- Read a picture book (see recommendations below).
- Discuss: What does fairness mean? Have you ever seen someone treated unfairly?
- Create a class poster with ideas on how to make the classroom and school fairer for everyone.

#### Lesson 2: Art as Activism (Visual Arts)

**Objective:** Explore how art is used to express emotions and advocate for change.

##### Learning Activity:

- Show murals and protest posters from the Civil Rights Movement and BLM.
- Have students create their own posters about fairness, kindness, and justice using colors, symbols, and words.

#### Recommended Books (Elementary)

- *Let's Talk About Race* – Julius Lester
- *Something Happened in Our Town* – Marianne Celano, Marietta Collins, and Ann Hazzard
- *The Undefeated* – Kwame Alexander (poetry about Black resilience and history)
- *All Because You Matter* – Tami Charles
- *Change Sings* – Amanda Gorman

## Middle School (Grades 6-8)

### Lesson 3: The Power of Protest (Social Studies / Civics)

**Objective:** Learn about the history of protests and their impact.

#### Learning Activity:

- Compare BLM protests to historical movements (Civil Rights, Women's Suffrage, etc.).
- Assign small groups different movements and have them present how protests led to change.

### Lesson 4: Analyzing Media & News Representation (ELA / Media Literacy)

**Objective:** Teach students to critically evaluate how movements are portrayed in the media.

#### Learning Activity:

- Compare news headlines from different sources covering the same event.
- Discuss: How do language and images shape public perception?
- Have students write their own unbiased news report.

### Lesson 5: Math & Racial Justice – Understanding Data (Math)

**Objective:** Use real-world statistics to analyze racial disparities.

#### Learning Activity:

- Explore data on racial disparities in education, policing, or healthcare.
- Create graphs or charts to visualize the numbers.
- Discuss: How can data help us understand inequality?

#### Recommended Books (Middle School)

- *Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You* – Jason Reynolds & Ibram X. Kendi
- *This Book is Anti-Racist* – Tiffany Jewell
- *Ghost Boys* – Jewell Parker Rhodes (fictional story about police violence)
- *The Hate U Give (Young Reader's Edition)* – Angie Thomas
- *Born a Crime (Young Readers Edition)* – Trevor Noah

### Lesson 6: BLM and Policy Change (Government / Civics)

**Objective:** Examine how BLM has influenced legislation and social policy.

#### Learning Activity:

- Assign research on policies influenced by BLM (e.g., police reform, voting rights).
- Debate: Should laws be changed based on social movements?
- Write a policy proposal for a racial justice issue.

### Lesson 7: Literature and Social Justice (ELA)

**Objective:** Explore how literature reflects themes of racial justice and resistance.

#### Learning Activity:

- Read excerpts from books like *The Hate U Give* or *Between the World and Me*.
- Assign students to write a personal reflection or persuasive essay on an issue they care about.

### Lesson 8: Art, Music, and Protest (Music / Visual Arts)

**Objective:** Study how artists use music and visual storytelling to address social issues.

#### Learning Activity:

- Analyze protest songs (e.g., *Alright* by Kendrick Lamar, *Strange Fruit* by Billie Holiday).
- Have students write lyrics or create artwork expressing their thoughts on justice.

#### Recommended Books (Middle School)

- *The Hate U Give* – Angie Thomas
- *Between the World and Me* – Ta-Nehisi Coates
- *Just Mercy (YA Adaptation)* – Bryan Stevenson
- *Dear Martin* – Nic Stone
- *How It Went Down* – Kekla Magoon

## Additional Resources for Teachers

- [Teaching Tolerance \(Learning for Justice\)](#) – Provides lesson plans and resources on racial justice education.
- [PBS Learning Media](#) – Offers videos, articles, and discussion guides on race and activism.
- [Facing History & Ourselves](#) – Has curricula on historical and contemporary social justice movements.
- [Zinn Education Project](#) – Provides materials on teaching BLM and other racial justice movements.

# Checklist for Educators





Here's a structured implementation checklist to guide K-12 educators through the first steps of integrating Black Lives Matter (BLM) and racial justice education in an age-appropriate and subject-relevant way.

## **Step 1: Commit to Personal Learning and Reflection**

**Goal:** Strengthen your understanding of racial justice, BLM, and equity in education before bringing it to the classroom.

- ☐ Read foundational books on race, equity, and culturally responsive teaching.
  - Culturally Responsive Teaching & The Brain – Zaretta Hammond
  - Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You – Jason Reynolds & Ibram X. Kendi
  - How to Be an Antiracist – Ibram X. Kendi
- ☐ Take online professional development courses on anti-racist and equity-based education.
  - Learning for Justice educator training
  - Facing History & Ourselves social justice workshops
  - Racial Equity Leadership Academy workshops offered by USC Race and Equity Center
- ☐ Reflect on personal biases and teaching approach.
  - What assumptions do I hold about race and activism?
  - How does my identity shape my understanding of racial justice?
  - How do I handle difficult conversations about race in my classroom?
- ☐ Follow BLM-affiliated educational organizations for research and classroom strategies.
  - Learning for Justice
  - The Zinn Education Project
  - National Equity Project

## **Step 2: Review and Revise Classroom Curriculum**

**Goal:** Audit your teaching materials for diverse representation and accuracy in racial justice education.

- ☐ Evaluate textbooks, novels, and history materials for bias and omissions.
- ☐ Incorporate Black voices and perspectives across subject areas.
- ☐ Introduce primary sources (speeches, letters, activism documents).
- ☐ Use data and statistics to illustrate racial disparities in math and science.
- ☐ Develop cross-curricular lessons that integrate racial justice topics.

### **Guiding Questions:**

- ✓ Are diverse perspectives represented in my curriculum?
- ✓ How do I ensure my students get an accurate understanding of racial history and activism?
- ✓ How do I challenge dominant narratives in existing materials?



### **Step 3: Create a Culturally Responsive & Inclusive Classroom**

**Goal:** Foster a classroom environment where students feel safe to engage in conversations about race and justice.

- ☐ Establish clear discussion norms to guide difficult conversations.
- ☐ Create “brave spaces” that allow for open, respectful dialogue.
- ☐ Display affirming visuals (e.g., posters featuring Black activists, diverse literature, and representation in STEM fields).
- ☐ Incorporate student voices and experiences in discussions.
- ☐ Provide multiple forms of engagement (journaling, small groups, art-based responses).

**Guiding Questions:**

- ✓How can I create a space where students feel safe discussing race?
- ✓How can I validate the lived experiences of students of color?
- ✓How do I engage students who may have different levels of awareness about racial justice?

### **Step 4: Teach Critical Media Literacy & Current Events**

**Goal:** Help students analyze how race and activism are portrayed in the media.

- ☐ Teach how to evaluate news sources for bias and credibility.
- ☐ Compare headlines from different sources covering the same racial justice event.
- ☐ Discuss the role of social media activism (e.g., #BlackLivesMatter).
- ☐ Assign a media analysis project in which students critique representation.

**Guiding Questions:**

- ✓How does media shape public perception of activism?
- ✓What is the role of social media in modern protest movements?
- ✓How can we identify misinformation about racial justice topics?

### **Step 5: Prepare for Resistance & Have a Response Plan**

**Goal:** Anticipate potential pushback from parents, colleagues, or administrators and have a plan in place.

- ☐ Know your district’s policies on discussing race, activism, and current events.
- ☐ Develop a communication plan for families, explaining the educational goals.
- ☐ Collaborate with administrators to ensure institutional support.
- ☐ Connect with colleagues and professional networks for shared strategies.

**Guiding Questions:**

- ✓How do I frame these lessons in a way that aligns with academic standards?
- ✓How do I respond to concerns that BLM is “too political” for the classroom?
- ✓What rights do I have as an educator when discussing racial justice?

## **Step 6: Engage the Local Community & Encourage Student Action**

**Goal:** Connect students with real-world applications of racial justice work.

- ☐ Invite guest speakers from racial justice organizations.
- ☐ Organize service-learning projects related to racial equity.
- ☐ Encourage students to explore activism in their communities.
- ☐ Foster student-led projects such as a school-wide social justice campaign.

### **Guiding Questions:**

- ✓ How can I connect students to racial justice efforts beyond the classroom?
- ✓ What local organizations can support student learning on these topics?
- ✓ How can students apply what they learn to real-world issues?

## **Step 7: Commit to Continuous Professional Growth**

**Goal:** View racial justice education as a lifelong learning process.

- ☐ Attend equity-focused conferences and workshops.
- ☐ Update teaching materials regularly to reflect new perspectives and research.
- ☐ Join educator networks focused on racial justice and culturally responsive teaching.
- ☐ Reflect on student engagement and adapt teaching strategies accordingly.

### **Guiding Questions:**

- ✓ What is my ongoing commitment to racial justice education?
- ✓ How do I continue improving my approach to teaching these topics?
- ✓ How do I collaborate with others to sustain these efforts in my school?

## **Final Thoughts: Take the First Step Today**

This work does not happen overnight, and every small action matters. Educators should approach teaching about the Black Lives Matter movement as a journey, not a checklist to complete in one year. The most important first step is to begin somewhere—whether it's reading a book, revising a lesson, or learning more about community organizations that are currently engaged in this work. Continue to embrace the mistakes, joy, and power of learning as you work with your students.

# About the Authors



[John Pascarella](#) is Chief Academic Officer of USC Race and Equity Center and Professor of Clinical Education in the USC Rossier School of Education. As an expert in racial equity and teacher education, he has published more than two dozen publications including peer-reviewed articles in *Cultural Studies* ⇔ *Critical Methodologies*, *Educational Studies*, *Taboo: The Journal of Culture and Education*, and *New Jersey English Journal*. Dr. Pascarella has appeared as a featured expert on *The Dr. Phil Show* and *Ethical Schools* podcast, has published Op-Eds in *Education Week*, *The Hechinger Report*, and *LA School Report*, and

has given over 100 invited talks and conference presentations dedicated to advancing equity-driven K-12 schools, colleges, and universities. Before joining the Center, Dr. Pascarella served as Chair of the Master of Arts in Teaching programs, Director of Clinical Experiences, and USC Faculty Fellow in Residence. Prior to his appointments at USC, he taught English Language Arts and Literature in urban New Jersey high schools and served as an Adjunct Professor at Montclair State University, a Course Lecturer at McGill University, and a Visiting Researcher at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.



[Akilah Lyons-Moore](#) is an Associate Professor of Clinical Education at the USC Rossier School of Education with over 17 years of experience in public education as a former charter high school administrator and history-social science teacher. Her work centers on how theories of learning, cultural and racial knowledge, and critical pedagogies prepare teachers to serve historically underserved students and students of color. She is particularly interested in Black teacher experiences and the retention of teachers of color. At Rossier,

Dr. Lyons-Moore teaches in the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program, leading courses on educational equity and history-social science pedagogy, and supports doctoral students in the Ed.D. program in Leading Instructional Change. As a faculty affiliate of the USC Race and Equity Center, she collaborates on projects with school leaders, teachers, and students advancing racial equity in their school communities. Raised in Pacoima, CA, Dr. Lyons-Moore draws on the collective histories and shared knowledge of her family and community. Before entering education, she worked in the nonprofit sector as a youth organizer and community director. She earned her Ed.D. and MAT from USC Rossier and her B.A. in Public Policy from Occidental College as a James Irvine Scholar.

## About the USC Race and Equity Center

Founded by Professor [Shaun R. Harper](#), and directed by Professor [Jessica T. DeCuir-Gunby](#), the [USC Race and Equity Center](#) is home to a dynamic research and organizational improvement center that helps professionals in educational institutions, corporations, and other contexts strategically develop and achieve equity goals, better understand and correct climate problems, avoid and recover from racial crises, and engineer sustainable cultures of inclusion and respect. Evidence, as well as scalable and adaptable models of success, inform our rigorous approach. Grants from the Ford, Lumina, Bill and Melinda Gates, W.K. Kellogg, Kresge, and Open Society Foundations have funded the Center's research and partnerships. The center to the USC Equity Leadership Academies (a professional learning and organizational change series for K-12 schools and districts), USC Equity Institutes (a professional learning and organizational change series for higher education institutions), the National Assessment of Collegiate Campus Climates (a quantitative survey), PRISM (a racial equity employee recruitment tech tool for higher education), and DEI Business Solutions for businesses and agencies.

### For More Information and Resources

Visit <http://race.usc.edu/k-12/>

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