

State efforts continue to teach Black history

Pressure is on to end 'woke indoctrination'



FILE/STAFF Christopher Barr, a park ranger with the National Park Service, shows the Robert Smalls house in Beaufort in 2021.



FILE/STAFF Former Charleston Mayor Joe Riley (center), Citadel history students and others in 2019 toured the site of the Progressive Club, a historical community center on Johns Island founded by Esau Jenkins to assist African Americans. The club has been in disrepair since Hurricane Hugo in 1989.



FILE/HENRY TAYLOR/STAFF Churchgoers emerge through the front doors of Emanuel AME Church in Charleston after the Bible study of Mark 4:1-20 on June 17, the anniversary of a mass shooting that left nine dead.

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STATE

This summer, a group of 25 high school freshmen will visit important historic sites and institutions, such as the International African American Museum, Emanuel AME Church, the Penn Center and S.C. State University, where they will learn about the Black experience.

The program, offered by Charleston Civil Rights and Civics in partnership with Kids on Point, is meant to foster both historical understanding and social interaction among a diverse group of students.

When people with different backgrounds and experiences come together and get to know one another, their biases and prejudices tend to fall away, organizer Leslie Skardon said.

“If we can build connections early, hopefully we can reduce partisanship,” she said.

Slavery, segregation, discrimination and racism are part of the history of the United States, but teaching those topics today can be challenging and challenged.

Lawmakers in South Carolina and other states are limiting the ways teachers can address racial issues and accusing some who try of “woke indoctrination.”

As these political battles are waged over public education, some organizations are forging ahead with programs meant to shed

light on Black oppression, resistance and achievement. They advance an agenda of diversity and inclusion, and they seek to amplify voices that for more than four centuries were marginalized, ignored or silenced.

Charleston Civil Rights and Civics is the latest to launch a program of learning about civil rights and racial history, one geared toward high school students; others have been at it a while, and some programs are in development now.

- The YWCA Greater Charleston, in partnership with the Racial Equity Institute, has for several years offered racial equity and inclusion training for adults, with a focus on institutional and structural forms of racism.
- Furman University's Riley Institute has offered the Diversity Leaders Initiative, which gathers community and business leaders who learn about implicit bias, broad definitions of diversity, and ways to break old patterns in favor of productive solutions that can improve South Carolina as a whole.
- McLeod Plantation, part of the Charleston County Parks & Recreation Commission, interprets the history of slavery in ways that don't avoid descriptions of the brutality and harsh oppression enslaved people endured.
- The Avery Research Center at the College of Charleston runs a Race and Social Justice Initiative, funded by Google, which includes "public events, exhibitions, and various projects that promote awareness of the history and ongoing struggles of racial injustice in Charleston, South Carolina, and throughout the United States."
- The International African American Museum soon will welcome student groups, organize tours of the galleries and work collaboratively with educators to promote understanding of the Black experience.

Even government entities are getting in on the act. The S.C.

Department of Parks, Recreation and Tourism promotes Black History Month programming and presents online information about the civil rights movement. The city of Charleston maintains a “Charleston Racial Equity Timeline ” storymap online, which presents “an interactive history of race and race inequities in Charleston.”

Many more such programs are offered throughout South Carolina.

In Columbia, the Modjeska Simkins School of Human Rights offers classes to people of all ages who are interested in learning about Black and indigenous history, colonialism, labor movements, the civil rights movement and more.

The school is operated by the S.C. Progressive Network, and part of its purpose is to educate and motivate wouldbe activists, but its larger goal is to raise awareness of social and racial injustice and inequity, and to help create engaged and informed citizens, lead instructor Robert Greene II said.

The school got its start in 2015. Greene, a history professor at Claflin University, joined the effort in 2019 and has noticed a steady increase in demand, he said.

“What we find is that, because of all the recent pushback on things like critical race theory and teaching Black history, there seems to be a greater hunger to find out what those things actually are,” Greene said.

Students, who are mostly adults, tell him they never learned about Robert Smalls or Modjeska Monteith Simkins in secondary school.

They never learned much about the Stono Rebellion or Reconstruction .

It’s often political controversy that drives enrollment, Greene said. Police violence, the debate about Confederate memorials and the controversy over critical race theory have driven some to sign up, he said.

In class, he often hears students say, “I didn’t know that” or “Why was I never taught this?” So he discusses not only the history, but how the history is taught — and that can lead to interesting conversations about pedagogy, textbooks and public education, he said.

The new course begins March 6, in person and online, and continues each Monday evening through June. A few breakout sessions will be scheduled on Sundays, and guest speakers will make appearances in the classroom.

In Charleston, Skardon is planning a full week for the high school students who participate in the inaugural class, starting July 31. (Registration is underway.) The teens will be out and about nearly the whole time.

“I don’t think students want to sit in a classroom ... talking about civics,” Skardon said. “But the goal of civics is to get people to participate in democracy, to vote. How do you convince them? The need for active citizenship can be appreciated by studying history, and by understanding the scars, the impacts.”

Meanwhile, an effort by the Freedom Caucus — an ultra-conservative group of lawmakers that formed in South Carolina in the spring of 2022 — to fight what it calls political indoctrination in the classroom has led to lawsuits against two school districts, Charleston and Lexington 1, and opposition to a new K-8 literacy curriculum developed by the New York nonprofit EL Education that so far has proved very popular among teachers and students.

The Freedom Caucus has argued that the program violates state law forbidding the use of public money on so-called partisan curriculum.

On Feb. 13, about 60 teachers and students testified before the Charleston County School Board in favor of the curriculum, explaining that its emphasis on diversity and inclusion helped students connect with the lessons and improved learning

outcomes.

In a 6-3 vote, board members failed to pass a motion on Feb. 21 that would have required the district to replace the EL Education curriculum.

Late last year, the Berkeley County School Board banned the teaching of critical race theory, even though it's not part of the public school curriculum.

Conservative lawmakers also have been trying to ban critical race theory statewide.

Public school history curriculum covers so much material that the amount of time teachers spend on the African American experience is limited.

School officials encourage students to seize extracurricular opportunities to enhance their understanding of American history, spokesman Andrew Pruitt said.

“Learning doesn’t just happen in the 180 days that children are in the classroom,” he said. “Any community partner that’s providing access to any opportunity to expand their minds, expand their horizons, we would encourage them to do that.”

All of this motivates Skardon, she said.

Her first group of rising high school sophomores will spend their first day in Charleston visiting the International African American Museum, Emanuel AME Church, the Denmark Vesey statue in Hampton Park and the Grimke sisters house.

The next day they will travel to Beaufort and St. Helena Island to learn about the Penn Center, Robert Smalls and more.

On the third day they will go to Orangeburg, visit the Cecil Williams South Carolina Civil Rights Museum, the two historically Black universities (S.C. State and Claflin) and possibly the bowling

alley that was the site of student protests in February 1968.

The fourth day will be spent in Charleston learning about the 1969 Hospital Strike, the Progressive Club, Esau Jenkins and Septima Clark, and the Orangeburg Massacre.

On the fifth and final day, students will visit the Board of Elections, participate in a mock election, learn about the history of suffrage, meet lawmakers and reflect on all they learned through poetry.

Skardon said it's important to make connections between the past and present so students understand the efforts and sacrifices (and, in some cases, resistance) of their ancestors and how some battles still are being waged now.

“The goal is to create lifelong active citizens who can understand our past so they can understand today and make it better in the future,” she said.

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