

Teaching the Truth Means Embracing the Community

Bard High School Early College is a partnership between Bard College and Newark Public Schools that makes it possible for students to earn both a high school diploma and an Associate's Degree in 4 years for free. Bard Early College is not a charter school but a magnet public high school where students can earn up to 60 college credits from Bard College. 96% of our students identify as being of color. If we are going to teach the truth during contentious times, it's important that we remember and recognize whose truth we are talking about. Is it our own truth? Is it our students' truth?

In the case of my students, they expressed interest and yearned for a course on the history of the City of Newark. Many had been born and raised in the city, or had migrated recently to the city, but had very little prior knowledge of the greatness of this city. So, I took on the task of petitioning my school's administration, developing a course syllabus and curriculum to put forth to Newark's Board of Education (BOE). It was unanimously approved. Newark's BOE, at the time of course approval, had recently regained local control of its schools after the state of New Jersey took over the district in 1995, and kept it for 22 years. One of the objectives of the newly empowered Newark BOE was to ensure that the Amistad Law was being implemented in all of its schools, classrooms, and curriculum. Known colloquially in Newark as Amistad, this legislation passed in New Jersey in 2002, over 20 years ago, and requires all schools in the state to incorporate African-American history into their social studies curriculum. I am happy to report that the course I created, called Innovative Newark, received recognition from the Amistad Commission, New Jersey Department of Education, the New Jersey Historical Commission, and the NAACP for doing what to some may seem controversial, what is being seen and labeled as Critical Race Theory or divisive history, but what is actually necessary and relevant history – the history of the students who sit in front of us every day.

Innovative Newark is a history course that centers the rich and powerful Black and Brown history of the city of Newark – as a final project after learning about Newark's history, students come up with an original solution to an issue they are

passionate about and want to solve in Newark. Students are introduced to the importance and challenges of problem solving in local contexts and to their roles as Innovative Citizens in Newark. Innovative citizenship requires students to challenge the status-quo by identifying social problems, mobilizing resources, and building networks as they work towards the social good. This course is designed for students to integrate knowledge, techniques, and expertise from multiple fields to address the moral, social, and cultural questions, the scientific and economic challenges they want to solve, and their own truths.

One unit in the course is titled “Exploring Black Power in 19th Century Newark.” Students explored and analyzed primary sources from a multimedia virtual exhibit that highlights Newark’s and New Jersey’s courageous Black activists. The site includes performances by Newark artists, newspapers and photographs, and other Black history scholarship by Newark scholars.

The curator and main researcher for the project, Ms. Noelle Lorraine Williams, Director of the African American History Program at the New Jersey Historical Commission, came to speak to students about her experience working on this project but also spoke about her experience as a Black woman historian in a mostly white field. Students prepared questions in advance of her visit.

Students ultimately produced posters that were displayed in the school hallways on their analysis of the exhibit. On the poster, they had to include 5-7 facts they learned from the exhibit. At least half of them had to be uplifting or inspiring. This came from class discussions where students mentioned that often when learning about Black history, students were taught about oppression and loss and were not given the chance to celebrate and highlight the triumphs and wins in the Black community. Students also had to provide a reflection – what could other students and youth today take away from this exhibit?

That was just the work and rollout of one unit in the course. I also created a unit on the history of muralism in the city of Newark - students learned about the long history of using art as a way to express, fight back, and celebrate Black achievements in the city of Newark. This includes analysis of murals already in the city, asking students what murals they would like to see in their city and why, as well as having a local male artist of color come speak about the history of muralism in Newark. There was also a unit on the Newark Rebellion of 1967 and the triumphs and wins that came out of that moment and how it impacted Newark and it continues to impact the city.

The final projects consisted of the students researching and presenting either an original program or product that would change their local Newark community. I want to quickly highlight students’ work and share with you what matters to them, their truths and what they see as pressing issues in their communities:

- One solution was a student-led program called Newark Residents Support – The overall goal was to provide more housing support for Newark residents in

low-income neighborhoods, also catering to the needs of non-US citizens in the city.

- Another student-led program was called Defenders of the Mind – The overall goal was to provide better mental health treatment for the community, focusing on LGBTQIA residents in the city of Newark.
- A third student presentation was called The Backyard Evolution of Newark – They proposed a cleaning service in the South Ward. Students in this group remarked in their presentation: “Do more than just the bare minimum in your community, reach out to your Mayor, and have a plan in order to make a difference.”
- One student innovation was called the Kick Back – It focused on providing students with greater flexibility in their courses and in scheduling so that students actually want to come to school and in a way their innovation could be seen as a solution to fixing the attendance problem at some of the schools in the city.
- Lover Wheels was the winning student innovation. Their social business was to provide hygienic products to those in and around Penn Station. This group actually went out and interviewed those residents, asking them about what they would like to see and how the greater community could help them.

As an educator, I believe not only in centering Black and Brown history in the classroom but also creating outlets for students to do something with the knowledge they’ve acquired in the course and in the classroom. That creativity and power, as you can see, came out in students’ final presentations.

I started on this path of teaching and research to be the teacher I never had growing up, one that celebrates the complexities of the Afro-Latinx experience in the United States and highlights the contributions of Black and Brown Americans in the fight for liberation and equality all over the Americas. This is my history and the history of my students - it is worth celebrating and exploring in every course we provide. It is during contentious times that these truths need to be celebrated, need to be explored, our students are ready to ask the difficult questions. The real question is, are we?

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