



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of March 19-23, 2012

Silence Is Not the Solution

by UCLA IDEA

Last month, 17-year-old Trayvon Martin was killed while walking in a Florida gated community. George Zimmerman, a neighborhood watch volunteer, fatally shot Trayvon, and called it self-defense. Trayvon was carrying a bag of Skittles and a can of iced tea. Twenty-six days later, Zimmerman has not been arrested.

Many people across the nation have taken to the streets to protest Trayvon's death—including a Sunday rally in Los Angeles. It has sparked a national debate on race and justice.

One place that has been particularly silent on these debates has been Trayvon's school M. Krop High School in Miami. The school officially acknowledged Trayvon's death with a moment of silence Wednesday, almost one month after his death. School officials said they were acting on behalf of Trayvon's family, who had requested privacy in the matter.

But, even now that they can open up about it, few teachers are taking time away from their test-focused curriculums to discuss the event, its implications, and the racial conditions in place that could have contributed to Trayvon's death. "I'm pretty sure the school just doesn't want that commotion inside the school because learning in that environment would be pretty hard," said Ashley Aristide, a classmate and friend of Trayvon. Later, she said his death is a teachable moment, one that the school is not embracing: "It's a history class so we're encouraged to watch the news, see what's going on, and it's all over the news so how can you avoid it?"

Schools are more than just places where students come to learn about reading, writing and mathematics, or prepare for tests, college and careers. Schools are among the diminishing number of sites in society where young people can talk face-to-face with peers and in the presence of knowledgeable adults. New York University professor Richard Sennett recently wrote in *Together: The Rituals, Pleasures and Politics of Cooperation*, that the goal of cooperation is not for everyone to agree, but to have a decent community that learns how to "manage the everyday experience of inequality." If we can't allow students to practice this "craft" of cooperation, young people are unlikely to learn it.

In that respect, teachers have a profound effect on facilitating discussions on all contentious matters that impact society—including, in Trayvon's case, racial consciousness, the law and inequality. Prejudice exists and it matters. A few of the most spectacular cases come to national attention, but these represent the tip of the iceberg. The New York Times reports that a disproportionate number of students of color, particularly boys, are disciplined more often and at harsher levels. Research by UCLA IDEA shows that California's young men of color, especially African-American boys, feel more insecure and unsafe in school than their peers. They are more likely to report being pushed, shoved, beaten up, threatened or harassed. In addition, California's young men of color are more likely than

-more-

For links to news articles, read our *Themes in the News* online.

www.ucla-idea.org



THEMES in the NEWS

IDEA's weekly commentary on education news

Week of March 19-23, 2012

Page 2

their peers to report that adults at their school neither care about them nor listen when they have something to say.

Certainly public schools need to be safe places for all students, but they can and should be more. Students need to be able to talk and work through difficult situations under the guidance of caring teachers. Barring that, too many young people will experience schools as irrelevant to their daily lives or, worse still, as alienating places. And others will become the next generation's neighborhood vigilantes—imbued with racial attitudes, and unable to tolerate or understand civil talk and the value of working and living together.

####