

## **A Guide for Discussing Ferguson with Your Students**

### **INTRODUCTION:**

The death of Michael Brown, an 18-year-old African American student by Darren Wilson, a White police officer, along with the protests and police reactions has prompted a broad range of emotions and opinions across the United States. As some are reminded of the shootings of Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis, others harken back to the tragic death of Emmett Till in 1955. Still others believe this event has nothing to do with race and think it is strictly about law enforcement.

The Grand Jury decision is expected early this week which may bring more national attention and emotion. This document provides support to teachers and administrators in Montgomery County Public Schools who wish to integrate this teachable moment into their classrooms.

We have heard from some administrators, teachers, and parents who are worried about having students talk about this issue. Some believe that they don't have a good enough understanding of the facts. Others are nervous about managing the emotions that may come along with this conversation.

The document is designed with these concerns in mind. It provides background knowledge, a protocol for having the conversation, and links to many additional resources. This resource has been adapted from District of Columbia Public Schools and [TeachableMoment.org](http://TeachableMoment.org), a project of Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility.

Don't avoid the conversation. It is an important way to engage students in our core value of equity. Staff in the [MCPS Equity Initiatives Unit](#) and [The MCPS Study Circles Program](#) are available to support you.

### **1. CREATE A SAFE, RESPECTFUL, AND SUPPORTIVE TONE IN YOUR CLASSROOM.**

Sometimes students don't participate in discussions about sensitive issues because they worry that they will be teased, their opinions will be ridiculed, or strong feelings will arise because the topic hits close to home.

To create a safe and supportive environment, make group agreements at the beginning of the year. These might include guidelines like "no name-calling," "no interrupting," "listen without judgment," "share to your level of comfort," "you have the right to pass," and the like. Remind students that when they talk about groups of people, they should be careful to use the word "some," not "all." Do community-building activities to create a positive and respectful classroom environment, and resolve conflicts proactively. Most importantly, model how to talk about sensitive and controversial topics by being honest and open yourself, respecting different points of view and accepting of students' feelings.

### **2. PREPARE YOURSELF.**

Before you delve into a difficult topic with your students, educate yourself with background knowledge. Explore a range of viewpoints on the issue.

Next, articulate your own point of view on the topic for yourself so that when students ask for your opinion-and they will-you'll be prepared. Though many teachers keep their own points of view out of the classroom entirely, if it is appropriate to share yours, wait until the end of the discussion.

Also consider in advance the possible "triggers" for your students. For example, if you are discussing police brutality and the Michael Brown incident, remember that you will almost certainly have students who have been victims of racial profiling in your classroom. Some of these students may feel relieved to discuss a topic so relevant to their lives, while others may feel embarrassed. This doesn't mean you shouldn't discuss the topic, but you also should never highlight those students' situations. Be aware that strong feelings could arise and plan in advance for how to handle them. Remind your students about the ground rules and explain that this issue may affect some students very personally. Depending on the topic, you may even want to tell those students, or their parents, who have a very personal connection to it in advance. In order to talk about Ferguson it is important that you have an understanding of the events. Below are some resources that will help your understanding of the events that have taken place in Ferguson, Missouri since the shooting of Michael Brown on August 9, 2014.

- <http://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-nation/wp/2014/08/16/the-timeline-of-events-and-scenes-in-ferguson-mo-since-the-shooting-of-michael-brown/>
- <http://www.nbcnews.com/storyline/michael-brown-shooting>
- <http://www.cnn.com/2014/08/14/us/ferguson-michael-brown-shooting-5-things/>
- <http://www.foxnews.com/us/2014/11/22/ferguson-grand-jury-decision-unlikely-this-weekend-sources-say/>

### **3. FIND OUT WHAT STUDENTS ALREADY KNOW OR HAVE EXPERIENCED ABOUT THE TOPIC.**

Start with what the students already know. You can assess their prior knowledge in a variety of ways: create a semantic web as a whole class and brainstorm associations with the topic; have them talk with a partner; or have them write in response to a prompt. (If the topic is very delicate, you might ask them to write anonymously first, then use that writing to decide how to proceed in a later class.) Make a list of all the questions they have, either publicly or for your own planning. These questions are an additional window into what students already know, or think they know, and what they don't. Be sure to ask them to articulate where they got their information and opinions, and invite them to talk about how they know their sources are reliable. Remind them that, when learning about or discussing sensitive information, they should always ask, "What do I know and how do I know it (Encourage students to share their experiences with or witnessing of racial profiling. Also consider there may be students who have parents in law enforcement)?" An example of a KWL can be found at <http://www.eduplace.com/graphicorganizer/pdf/kwl.pdf>.

### **4. COMPILE THE STUDENTS' QUESTIONS AND EXAMINE THEM TOGETHER.**

After giving students basic information about your topic, elicit questions they still have. If they are focusing on content questions (who, what, where, why, when), expand their inquiry so they think beyond the basic facts and dig into deeper or "essential" questions. Help students to go deeper, make connections beyond one news story and lead to a more complex understanding of the situation. For example, content questions may include: "What is a Grand Jury and how does it work?" "What are the facts of the case?" "Who was Michael Brown? and Who is Darren Wilson?" These questions are important, but questions such as "Why do you believe the police shot him?" and "How should communities react to this tragedy?" "How does this situation make you feel?" push students to make

connections beyond one news story and lead to a more complex understanding of the situation. Another fruitful line of questioning might be asking how the issue affects their lives in Montgomery county and how it affects society at large.

#### **5. MAKE CONNECTIONS.**

Help students make connections between the topic at hand and their own lives. Students should be encouraged to speak their truth. How does the issue affect them or their family, friends or community? Why should they care? If there is no obvious connection, help them find one. For example, you might ask students if anyone has been a victim of racial profiling or have seen it happen to a friend. Often, starting with multimedia, whether photos, video or infographics, can hook students. You might also help them make connections by thinking about what else they know about, in current news or in history, that shares some of the same details.

Teaching Tolerance provides a lesson plan on teaching social justice through the use of photographs. [http://www.tolerance.org/search/apachesolr\\_search/using%20photographs%20to%20teach%20social%20justice](http://www.tolerance.org/search/apachesolr_search/using%20photographs%20to%20teach%20social%20justice)

#### **6. HAVE STUDENTS INVESTIGATE AND LEARN MORE.**

It is critical that students have a chance to find answers to their questions, conduct research, talk to people, and learn more in a way that makes the topic meaningful for them. (First, however, make sure your students understand how to tell the difference between opinions and facts. You might make a T-chart and use examples from a news article on a topic you're studying to demonstrate, then invite students to find and share their own examples from additional articles.)

Remember to point students to sources with contrasting political slants as well. For example, they might contrast reporting on the same topic in [The Progressive\(link is external\)](#) versus [The Weekly Standard\(link is external\)](#), or the [Center for American Progress\(link is external\)](#) versus the [Heritage Foundation\(link is external\)](#). Encourage students to seek out a range of people to learn more, including people who have strong opinions or special expertise on the topic. While students are gathering this information, emphasize that even "factual" information has a point of view. While they are researching, they should ask themselves: What is the point of view of this source? How reliable is it, and why?

#### **7. EXPLORE STUDENTS' OPINIONS AND PROMOTE DIALOGUE.**

After they have researched a topic thoroughly, students are ready to form and express their own points of view. It is important to encourage them to be open to different points of view. You might do an "opinion continuum" exercise where they show whether they "agree," "strongly agree," "disagree," "strongly disagree" or be "somewhere in between" or "not sure" on a variety of topics. Help promote dialogue, as opposed to debate. Dialogue aims for understanding, an enlargement of view, complicating one's thinking and an openness to change. Provide opportunities for various kinds of [group discussion](#) where different perspectives get aired. This can include paired shares, conversation circles, group go-rounds, panels, micro-labs, and fishbowls. (These are included in lessons available on [TeachableMoment.org.](#))

#### **8. BE RESPONSIVE TO FEELINGS AND VALUES.**

Even though you've set up ground rules at the outset and developed a respectful classroom environment, once a hot topic emerges you need to continue to watch for classroom tone. Remind students about the ground rules, especially if they are violated. Take the emotional "temperature" of

the classroom periodically to find out how students are feeling, and encourage the discussion of feelings throughout. Build in different ways for students to participate, but also to opt out if a discussion is emotionally difficult. Give opportunities for students to write their thoughts, perhaps anonymously, instead of sharing verbally. Remind students that while you want them to participate, they always have the right to "pass" if they feel uncomfortable. Again, if you anticipate that a certain topic may elicit too many strong feelings for a particular student, talk with them in advance.

#### **9. MAKE HOME CONNECTIONS.**

Use parents and other family members as primary sources by having students interview them as part of their research. Communicate with parents about your approach to discussing controversial issues. You can do this by sending a letter home in the beginning of the year or by discussing the issue on curriculum night. Invite parents to let you know if there are any sensitive issues for their family so you will be prepared.

#### **10. DO SOMETHING.**

If students have gotten engaged in an issue you've discussed and feel strongly about it, they may want to do something about it. Your study should include an action component. This could involve learning more and doing more focused research. It could also involve helping students carry out a social action or community service project related to the issue. Students can learn more about how other young people did projects around recent issues in the news. If the issue is a political one, they can engage in writing letters, speaking at public hearings, raising money, participating in demonstrations or writing articles for a school or local newspaper.

*These guidelines are adapted from a piece by Jinnie Spiegler that originally appeared on the [New York Times Learning Network](#)([link is external](#)), a helpful resource on teaching and learning.*

#### **References:**

- Do's and Don'ts for Teaching About Ferguson . (n.d.). Retrieved November 23, 2014, from [http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2014/09/teaching\\_about\\_ferguson\\_do\\_s\\_and\\_don\\_t\\_s.html](http://www.theroot.com/articles/culture/2014/09/teaching_about_ferguson_do_s_and_don_t_s.html)
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- (n.d.). Retrieved November 23, 2014, from [http://dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/Files/downloads/ABOUT\\_DCPS/Press/Brown\\_Discussion\\_Teachers\\_Guide.pdf](http://dcps.dc.gov/DCPS/Files/downloads/ABOUT_DCPS/Press/Brown_Discussion_Teachers_Guide.pdf)
- Classroom Resources. (n.d.). Retrieved November 23, 2014, from <http://www.tolerance.org/classroom-resources>