

# Education Week

SOCIAL STUDIES OPINION

## When History Class Feels Like Propaganda: A Student's Perspective

Black history is too often cordoned off from American history in schools

By Lauryn Donovan — January 29, 2021 3 min read

Lauryn Donovan is a senior at Ladue High School in St. Louis. She has been organizing various movements and speaking out about social justice since she was 13 years old.

If there is anything that I've learned during my time as a student, it's that diverse representation within the student body, teaching staff, and curriculum is very important. Since elementary school, I've never really seen myself represented in the curriculum unless my ancestors were represented as the helpless and oppressed.

From a young age, I realized that Black history was treated as though it were a completely separate concept from American and world history. In my high school, there is a Black studies course because of the lack of emphasis on Black history in mandatory history classes.

I've noticed that even if we do learn about Black history, it's told from a white perspective, setting the scene for the whitewashing of history. This includes downplaying the severity of traumatic events that happened in communities of color, leaving out other cultures from the curriculum, and ignoring how historical events continue to influence systems of oppression today.

When we are taught the whitewashed version of American history from a young age, we learn to minimize the modern-day effects of legislation, events, and oppression for nonwhite groups. My history lessons have often focused on white abolitionist activists and politicians while ignoring how members of the Black community pushed for ending slavery as well. This removes the burden of guilt from the white community when they only see all the white people who contributed to the abolition of slavery.

For example, we've been taught to praise Abraham Lincoln as "the Great Emancipator" for his supposed belief in equality, but he didn't believe that Black people were equal to whites; he just thought that slavery was wrong and went against his Christian morals.

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When we learned about Reconstruction, my freshman U.S. history class only briefly touched on the lives of Black people during the era. The curriculum omitted important facts, including the severity of Black codes, the expansion of the mass incarceration system, the loophole in the 13th Amendment that permits forced labor as a criminal punishment, and restrictions on the accumulation of Black wealth. I only came to understand the importance of this time period through independent research.

Now, as a senior, I have had to educate the rest of my class on Black history that our curriculum glossed over. This year in my Advanced Placement American history class, we've finally started to touch on Black history. As one of the only Black students in my classes, I usually find myself giving the

Black perspective or having to advocate for people of color. Sometimes it's uncomfortable to explain my personal experience or call out flaws in our history curriculum when I'm faced with someone who's playing the devil's advocate.

I have also noticed that the American educational system is feeding us pro-American propaganda. When we are only taught about the positive aspects of our country instead of balancing the good and the bad, it becomes taboo to criticize our nation. That sort of nationalism is dangerous. Instead of being taught that it is an act of patriotism to ask questions, expose the ugly truth, and practice dissent no matter what, being critical is seen as "anti-American."

This is especially true of criticisms that oppose traditional American values, such as refusing to stand for the Pledge of Allegiance, calling out systemic issues, or speaking up against our nation's leaders. After taking AP classes, talking to teachers and professors, and doing my own independent research, I've noticed how our history curriculum always seems to depict the United States as the great savior of the world and hide our faults as a nation.

When we send young U.S. soldiers abroad, how many of them know why they're fighting beyond a nebulous threat of terrorism? But we should be asking ourselves why the United States is concerned with occupying those foreign countries. Though these are complex subjects, they can be taught in depth through social studies courses so we can independently formulate our own opinions and see all sides.

I have consistently called for a more comprehensive history curriculum at my school but have seen little change. In my sophomore world-studies class, we were taught that we learn history to prevent the past from repeating itself and to appreciate those who came before us. My fight has convinced me that the history curriculum is not going to do either of those things. Until the curriculum changes to truthfully educate students, I don't have much faith in the rest of the education system, either.