



— EDUCATION —

## Teaching Race

*Boston Public Schools equity warrior Colin Rose has a plan to close the district's opportunity gap—if only teachers and administrators could see what the problem is in the first place.* **By Linda K. Wertheimer**

**T**HE WAY THE PRINCIPAL AT DORCHESTER'S DEVER Elementary School created order out of classroom chaos may have made perfect sense to some: students walking down the hall, single-file, in one direction on a yellow line and the other way on a blue one. But Colin Rose, an assistant superintendent in charge of reducing racial inequities in Boston Public Schools, cringed as he watched the children during a 2017 visit. He flashed back to his first job out of college, teaching literacy skills to inmates in Boston's Suffolk County House of Correction at South Bay. When the prisoners left class and returned to their cells, they were forced to walk on lines painted on the floor while corrections officers watched. Like

the inmates, the students at the Dever were mostly black and Latino.

Rose immediately approached the principal, Todd Fishburn, and advised him to remove the lines, created with industrial tape in the school's colors. To Rose, who is African American and the father of two daughters under six, the problem was obvious: The lines were a symbol of control with troubling racial undertones. But Fishburn, who is white, didn't see anything wrong with the lines; rather, he viewed them as a practical solution to a big problem. Before he and

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a colleague put down the lines at the Dever, which the state had taken over in 2014 due to low test scores and other problems, students were ripping papers off bulletin boards, running in the halls, and making teaching nearly impossible.

Standing next to Fishburn, Rui Gomes, a Dever assistant principal, silently cheered Rose's admonition about the lines, a point of view he had felt unable to express to his white supervisor. *It's about effing time someone could come here and say these things*, Gomes thought to himself, worried that Fishburn would view him as a black militant if he began pointing out practices he thought were racially and culturally inappropriate. But Rose, a 6-foot-tall former Boston University sprinter with a beard and studs in his ears who had an air of confidence and charisma to spare, had the power that Gomes did not.

Rose returned to the Dever again a week later. The lines were still there. He mentioned his concerns. Again, nothing happened. When he returned for a third visit, this time with members of his team, Rose didn't mince words, delivering a no-holds-barred message to the principal and his leadership team: The lines displayed a plantation mentality—and had to go. "We're drawing lines on the floor, and kids have to stand on them, like they're in prison... and then they get a [reward] if they do that,"

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Rose, who oversees BPS's Office of Opportunity Gaps, told me in his sparsely decorated office. "It's the idea that students of color need to be civilized. It is the [incessant] nature of racism. It's still there, and we're trying to tackle it."

Rose landed his job in 2015 after former BPS superintendent Carol Johnson commissioned a report exploring causes of a persistent achievement gap between white boys and black and Latino boys in Boston Public Schools. The results were shocking, in that they pointed the finger at the educators themselves: Some BPS teachers (the majority of whom are white) proudly professed colorblindness to researchers, telling them they believed a student's race should play no role in what and how they taught—when, in fact, the latest thinking in education circles is that it should. How could teachers possibly improve the chances of success for black and Latino kids, who make up more than three-quarters of Boston Public Schools' 54,300 students, the study asked, if they didn't recognize or understand the diversity in their own classrooms?

Not long after the report came out, Rose, a former BPS middle school teacher, said so long to teaching kids in favor of leading a districtwide mind-shift on race—and training a fully "woke" cadre of educators and administrators in the process. If all goes according to plan, Rose hopes to eliminate inequities in performance, in discipline meted out, and in access to exam schools and advanced programs. He has already begun training staff at every level, including the highest-ranking central office administrators, to confront their own unconscious biases on race and ethnicity.

It's a hefty mandate for a 37-year-old with little administrative experience, especially when you consider that Rose is battling not one but two kinds of skeptics: educators and community leaders who believe it's impossible to reverse racist practices and inequities in a school system as large and complicated as Boston's (see: the busing crisis of the 1970s), and others who reject the idea that they need cultural-sensitivity training at all. "There's been a way that we just shut down conversations about race in Boston instead of [saying], 'Let's figure it out,'" says Susan Naimark, a former Boston School Committee member and author of the book *The Education of a*

*White Parent*, about her own racial awakening. "There's the good guys and the bad guys. And because we're a liberal city, there's a fear among white teachers that they're being seen as racist." As it turns out, getting educators to face those fears may be Rose's biggest challenge.

ROSE'S TRANSFORMATION INTO EQUITY warrior didn't happen overnight. He grew up in Rockville, Connecticut, a working-class village of just 7,500 outside of Hartford where 76 percent of the population is white. Early on, Rose, like many black students, was made aware that he was somehow different because of the color of his skin. When he was around 10, Rose was playing a game with a tennis ball near the local high school. A police officer walked over to Rose, his brother, and a friend, all black, and lined them up. Rose started to itch his stomach and saw the police officer reach for her gun. "I pulled up my shirt and said, real quick, 'There's nothing,'" he recalls. He was terrified.

Still, Rose says, attending Boston University on a partial track scholarship was his biggest racial awakening. He was there from 1999 to 2004, earning a bachelor's degree in public relations and then a master's in education. At BU, he was friends primarily with a group of young black men, and he can remember several nights when they could not hail a cab. One snowy evening, after watching multiple drivers turn off the light signaling they could take customers, they asked a white woman if she would give it a try. *Success*. But as soon as Rose and his friends started walking toward the car, the driver stepped on the gas and took off.

The memory still stings more than a decade later. "I just remember the image of my friend running after the cab," he says. Still, those years at BU were also full of happy moments: It was there he met his future wife, Pamela Pierre, now a Boston Public Schools teacher. She was an education major, which Rose says helped inspire his decision to become a teacher and later get a doctorate in education at UMass Boston rather than pursue public relations. The teaching job at Suffolk County's jail, though, is what ultimately pushed him to study educational inequity among blacks and Latinos. "Race becomes in your face," Rose says, remembering a student in his literacy class, "when you have an 18-year-old who's



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reading at the first-grade level. How did that happen, and who was looking out for him?”

After working in the jail, Rose went on to teach math in a Boston middle school and practice the techniques he and his team now promote districtwide, including forming authentic relationships with students by better understanding their culture, and altering curriculum and discipline methods to ensure they're not biased against students of color. “A lot of our kids are told they are not good at math, especially brown and black kids,” Rose explains. “I had to change the narrative in the classroom and get them to understand I was there to support them.”

Rose also showed his students that it was okay to distinguish themselves racially and culturally from those around them.

In short order, Rose's students began racking up some of the biggest math score improvements in the district. Their teacher's success did not go unnoticed. Members of the Male Educators of Color group, which mentors younger black educators and often grooms them for leadership positions, urged Rose to apply for the assistant superintendent's post in late 2015. Though he was reluctant to leave the classroom, the challenge of a new gig, and the notion that others thought he was too young for it, intrigued him: “There's something about me, maybe it's the athlete in me,” he says. “But when somebody tells me I can't do something, I love thinking about strategy, building, and innovating.”

Still, it wasn't an easy transition. When he started the job at age 34, Rose had a trusty laptop computer, no staff, and no funds. Those first few months, he felt at times like he was banging his head against the wall in his office because of the lack of resources. He recalls going to community meetings where few seemed to take him seriously; after all, the guy formerly in his shoes wasn't able to accomplish much as a team of one with little money. “I started going to advocacy groups and people were throwing stones and saying, ‘This office is BS. We did this 10 years ago. They marginalized it,’” Rose says. But he had something his predecessor did not: a school-committee-appointed task force on equity, established the year he was hired, that agreed to provide a budget and the flexibility to hire a team who could help with educator training. Bit by bit, Rose began adding staff. All he needed now was buy-in from the teachers themselves.

THIS PAST NOVEMBER, ROSE AND HIS director of cultural proficiency, Hayden Frederick-Clarke, prepared for a training session at Dorchester's Freedom House, just a few blocks from Rose's house. Before launching into a heady discussion of racism and internalized racism—the type that people of color experience when they view themselves as inferior—with the attendees, the two men greeted each other more like brothers than colleagues: Frederick-Clarke, his dreadlocks pulled into a ponytail, walked up to Rose and picked the lint off his jacket. “Thanks,” Rose said with a chuckle. “He has my back.”

Frederick-Clarke walked to the front of the room and began to speak to the group of about 30 people, which included parents, teachers, and leaders of local community organizations, all sitting at tables and munching on snacks. Frederick-Clarke described the concept of self-negation and how black students are taught by the adults in charge that they need to be quieter if they want to conform to school policies, even while their African culture traditionally promotes the beauty of having loud, colorful conversations with friends and family. “When they get to school, the miseducation begins: ‘You are now too loud.’ ‘You guys need to be on your best behavior,’ or, ‘You need to show ‘them’ your best behavior.’ Who is them?” asked Frederick-Clarke, whose parents hail from Trinidad and Tobago.

Listening, Gina Desir, a Haitian American who teaches English as a Second Language at the Kenny School in Dorchester, nodded in recognition at Frederick-Clarke's words. “It was like, ‘Oh, ding, ding, ding, we do that,’” said Desir, adding that she had been trained to discipline and teach that way in education school. She has seen the kinds of microaggressions Rose and Frederick-Clarke highlight not just in her current school, but in other places she's taught over the past 12 years, including two other BPS schools and a Somerville charter. Desir said she appreciates the training sessions and has even teamed up with the principal of her own school to co-lead workshops on cultural responsiveness, including sessions on bias and on teaching beyond the white European perspective in history.

Still, she has doubts about what Rose and his team can accomplish on a large scale. “Can Hayden, can Colin, can this

team change this? Or...should [they] start going into teaching programs and making sure these teachers are taking courses in these things?” Desir asked. Her skepticism is shared by other people of color within the BPS community, who also fret about districtwide decisions, such as school closings in struggling neighborhoods, that have a negative impact on black and Latino students.

Rose, though, already has plenty of proof that he's chipping away at years of structural racism. He started by zeroing in on the city's most elite exam school, Boston Latin, and questioning why so few black and Latino students end up there. Part of the problem? A free summer test-prep program for exam-school admissions that attracted overwhelmingly white and Asian students. Barriers for students of color included no transportation and no food offered at the summer program. Rose proposed reserving seats for students from historically underrepresented schools and expanding the program; as a result, the number of black and Latino students going to the test-prep program has nearly tripled since the summer of 2014.

Working with the BPS social studies department, meanwhile, Rose co-led a highly publicized push to change the maps in K–12 classrooms so that they more accurately reflect the sizes of countries and continents (the old maps, for instance, made North America appear bigger than the much larger Africa). He also worked with researchers to determine the neediest schools, and allocated \$9 million to these campuses and students.

But it is his lesson plans for teachers that Rose hopes will make the most difference. Three years ago, he and his team began cultural-proficiency training with central office administrators and principals—on such topics as the history of racism, white privilege, diversity within cultures, and internalized racism. Rose and Frederick-Clarke now offer similar sessions for educators, community leaders, and parents, with the goal of vanquishing misinformed (if well-meaning) behavior when it comes to teaching kids. “People were trying to take the PC approach of ‘I see all my kids the same,’” Rose says of BPS teachers and administrators, but “you need to at least get to the point where you understand that race matters, that culture matters.”

THE MESSAGE IS SINKING IN AT THE Dever. This fall, a staff training session there opened with a slide of two photos. In the first, prisoners in a juvenile detention facility walked on lines; in the other, schoolchildren followed the lines on their school's hallway floor. The slide was headlined “Hit to the Head.”

Looking down at the notebook in his hand, Fishburn, the school's principal, read aloud to the room his reflections from the third time Rose and his team had visited the Dever the previous school year. “The school is a plantation,” he said. “The principal, me, is the plantation owner. Our white teachers are the ‘slave owners.’ Our black para-educators are the ‘slave drivers,’ and our students are the ‘slaves,’ and the most our students could ever aspire to be is a para-educator.” He also revealed to his faculty and staff that initially he felt surprised when Rose offered up that depiction. Fishburn had never been in a prison. How was he supposed to know the lines mimicked such a scene? Fishburn says the most important thing was that he eventually listened. “Obviously, I'm a white male, privileged, in power,” he explained to me before the train-

ing. “I never thought about it before, or at least I didn't think I thought about it.”

Today, Fishburn is taking ownership of the problems Rose and his team highlighted, starting with a cultural-awareness training session every three weeks for staff, co-taught by assistant principal Gomes. During the same fall workshop at the Dever, for example, teachers watched a three-minute talk by cultural commentator Jay Smooth, who described how to tell someone they sound racist versus accusing them of being racist. “You don't hear this stuff in a textbook,” said Mike Bortolussi, a white fifth-grade teacher. But he was still trying to figure out why Rose and his team thought the lines were a problem: “I would say it's an innocent act.”

Asked for reactions to the principal's “Hit to the Head” presentation, other teachers at the Dever wondered what Fishburn's plan would now be to keep children from misbehaving. Instead of relying on lines and suspensions for control, Fishburn told me later, the school would instead focus on building trust with students and their families. “When you're in the hallway, you can have a conversation with the kids: ‘Are you being a

good citizen by throwing paper on the floor?’” Fishburn explained. It may be a less tangible approach than the lines, but Fishburn is confident it will be successful.

Several weeks after Rose's third visit to the Dever, Fishburn and Gomes had finally yanked off the taped lines winding their way around the school. “To me, it was just a blessed moment,” Gomes said. “Now [Fishburn] is saying, ‘I see it. I see what the lines are really about. I see it. I believe it. I'm digesting it. This was a blind spot.’”

Rose, though, sighed when he heard that Fishburn viewed his criticism as a “hit to the head,” a reaction he says is common when white people are told that their practices appear racist: “We can't just coddle,” Rose said. “There has to be a sense of urgency.” Yet he still credited Fishburn, and the Dever, with making progress. Removing the tape showed an awareness that Rose wants to spread to every educator in Boston. “You're literally taking something that may be damaging to students off the ground,” he said. And in Rose's battle to get educators to see the biases he notices every time he enters a school, even the tiniest step forward matters. □