

Teaching Street Law Content Involving Race and Social Identity

In your classrooms you strive to affirm your students' identities to instill a sense of belonging. That can become a challenge when the content of the materials you use does not. Sometimes, you can choose materials that affirm your students' identities, but sometimes you do not have a choice. The *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) decision appears in state standards across the nation. This case upheld the "separate but equal" doctrine, which legally reinforced racial segregation. Many teachers cannot opt out of teaching this case, nor do many teachers want to. It is an important part of America's history. However, it is an example of a case that requires us to think critically about our pedagogy.

Street Law's materials do not shy away from content involving race and social identity, whether the content is about America's past or present. When we are able to provide in-person professional development experiences, we try to help teachers critically discuss, grapple with, and incorporate this content. But a very small percentage of teachers who download our materials have had a recent professional development workshop with us.

We have developed this guide to help you bring content about race and social identity into your classroom. It offers some advice and questions to help you make decisions about teaching this content while affirming your students' identities.

First, we want to acknowledge some concerns that you may have in teaching content about race and social identity:

- Fear that teaching the content in the wrong way will be damaging to students
- Concern about how parents and/or administrators will interpret instruction
- Anxiety about not knowing enough about the content to teach about it in a meaningful way
- Worry that the time needed to invest in doing this work well is time taken away from required curriculum

Many of these concerns can be lessened by intentionally planning what must be done before and during a lesson to mitigate them.

Attend to your classroom culture

Building a classroom culture that allows for conversations on race and social identity, while also affirming students' identities is an investment and takes time. Failure to do so before teaching a Street Law lesson could result in some of the above fears becoming a reality. Prior to using a Street Law lesson, we suggest the following:

- Build classroom and small group discussion norms and revisit them often. Discussion norms, listening, and empathy are all important interpersonal factors in conversations about race and social identity. Street Law's [Social-Emotional Learning bundle](#) provides mini-lessons to support building norms, listening skills, and empathy. (Though this resource was originally designed for use with Street Law's Deliberation materials, its lessons reach far beyond Deliberations.)
- Consider proactively sharing with parents that their children will discuss contested political issues in your classroom. Provide parents with an overview of the classroom culture you have been working to build with students, and information and materials about the multiple, diverse perspectives students will be discussing.
- Prepare to address issues if/when they come up:

- [How to address a student who makes a charged statement](#)
- [“Confirmation and Other Biases” lesson](#)
- [Tips on what to do when discussions on race and equity issues stall](#)

Take care when selecting teaching materials and strategies

Simulations (like “Student Law Firms” and “[Moot Courts](#)”): Street Law often suggests that teachers use simulations in their classrooms. When teaching content involving race and social identity, this instructional strategy must be considered very carefully. Preview the materials, then consider:

- Do these materials contain any arguments that denigrate particular groups of people? If they do, what strategies might you use that do not ask students to simulate and/or defend those arguments? Is there an instructional strategy aside from a simulation that is a better fit for this content?
- What background knowledge do you need to know to teach this case? What background knowledge do students need to know? What is your plan for building background knowledge?
- How can you help students be critical consumers of the content given that it may denigrate particular groups of people? (For example, students reading about the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision will note that the Court decided that segregation was not unlawful discrimination.)
- [Read more about considerations for doing simulations from the Cult of Pedagogy.](#)

Teaching About Current Contested Issues (using strategies like “[Deliberations](#)” and the “[Take a Stand](#)” continuum):

- Carefully consider the contested current issues and whether they are “open or closed” issues ([see the 2nd and 3rd paragraphs of page 21](#)). Street Law’s Deliberation materials have been vetted and are all “open” topics. (This can change over time, however, so if you believe this is not the case for one of Street Law’s Deliberations, please email Jen at jwheeler@streetlaw.org.) If you are developing a contested issue statement for your own Deliberation or for the “Take a Stand” activity, consider using the tip sheet in the [“Take a Stand” resource bundle](#).
- What background knowledge do you need to know to teach about this issue? What background knowledge do students need to know? What is your plan for building background knowledge?

Explore other resources

Other resources to support your instruction of content involving race and social identity:

- [“Civil Discourse in the Classroom”](#) – A detailed plan from Teaching Tolerance for building argumentation techniques and discussion norms
- [“Talking Across Divides: 10 Ways to Encourage Civil Classroom Conversation on Difficult Issues”](#) from the *New York Times*.
- Teaching Tolerance’s [“Teaching Hard History” resources](#) for teaching about American slavery
- Cult of Pedagogy’s [“Making School a Safe Place for LGBTQ Students”](#)
- Article from EdWeek in which teachers answer the question: [“What are your recommendations for how all teachers, especially those of us who are white, can approach race and implicit bias in the classroom?”](#)
- [“Countering Islamophobia”](#) by Teaching Tolerance