

Teach Us All

Documentary Film + Social Justice Campaign

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Film Overview

On the eve of the 60th anniversary of the 1957 “Little Rock Crisis,” **disparities in access to quality education remain among the most urgent civil rights issues of our time.** With its school district hanging in the balance following a state takeover in January 2015, contemporary Little Rock presents a microcosm of the inequities and challenges manifesting in classrooms all across America. Through case studies in Little Rock, New York City, and Los Angeles, our feature-length documentary and social justice campaign seeks to bring the critical lessons of history to bear on the current state of U.S. education and investigate: **60 years later, how far have we come—or not come—and where do we go from here?**

The Story

“To separate [black children] from others of similar age and qualifications solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone.”

-Brown vs. Board of Education, 1954

Repeating History

Nearly 60 years after its 1957 Central High School, Little Rock’s students remain on the frontlines of the fight for racial and social justice. Following a controversial state takeover, the future of the Little Rock School District (LRSD) hangs in the balance, with “school reformers” actively pushing charter school measures that many see as exacerbating inequalities based on race, income, and neighborhood. Eight miles from Central High, the exclusively low-income minority students of Baseline Academy, LRSD’s worst performing elementary school, embody the endemic challenges facing the district: poverty, racism, immigration, and—perhaps most pernicious—seemingly intractable political divisions. In June 2015, LRSD leadership fired the entire, predominantly minority teaching staff of Baseline and appointed 27-year-old Jonathan Crossley, the youngest-ever Arkansas Teacher of the Year, to serve as its “turnaround” principal. Facing the highest of stakes, Crossley and his colleagues now aim to make Baseline Academy a national model for serving our most disadvantaged students in a city that seems hell-bent on repeating the mistakes of its past.

We Are All Little Rock

“Most black children will not be killed by police. But they will attend segregated schools that leave them more likely to go to jail, end up in poverty, live in segregated neighborhoods and repeat the cycle.”

-Nikole Hannah-Jones, Peabody award-winning journalist

Across the nation, inequities in resources and teacher quality start early and persist, with low-income students of color being taught by less experienced and less effective teachers. Desegregation progress made through *Brown v. Board of Education* has been reversing for decades, with the U.S. experiencing

an alarming “re-segregation” of its schools. Children who attend segregated schools are less likely to graduate high school and more likely to go to jail, and earn an average of 25% less over their lifetimes.

This is not just a Little Rock story, or even a Southern one. This is our American story.

While recent media attention on race relations in America has focused heavily on police brutality, mass incarceration, and immigration, we have yet to adequately address the root cause of many of our most urgent social challenges: education. Educational inequities are not only the product of racism and classism, but also a key factor concertizing widespread discriminatory policies and attitudes. In our highly competitive and individualistic public school system, we lack a sense of collective responsibility for *all* of America’s children—and our schools remain the battleground of the Civil Rights Movement.

In order to connect viewers with the national reverberations of what happened in Little Rock 60 years ago and its continued relevance to widespread educational inequity today, *Teach Us All* includes case studies in **New York City, the most segregated school system in the U.S. for African-American students, and Los Angeles, the most segregated for Latino students.**

In New York City, we explore the idea of “double segregation” (race + income) by looking at the relationship between residential and school segregation, and the impact of classism in shaping school composition. Through two schools in Brooklyn, we posit the role of gentrification, which is taking place en masse in urban centers across America, as both an opportunity to push equity and a force pushing out the neediest students. Finally, through the student activist group Integrate NYC4Me, outspoken administrators at the Bronx Academy of Letters, and a Muslim student activist named Hebh Jamaal, we highlight the growing youth engagement emerging in response to New York’s inequitable school system.

In Los Angeles, against the historical backdrop of *Mendez v. Westminster*—the 1946 California school desegregation case that set the precedent for *Brown v. Board of Education*—we hone in on “triple segregation” (race + income + language) and the barriers faced by Latino students. We interview civil rights trailblazer Sylvia Mendez and spend time at the east LA high school named in her family’s honor—which is, ironically, 100% Latino. Further, through time spent with the student activists of the Brotherhood Crusade and Community Coalition, we explore community-based responses to restorative justice issues in education (eg. the criminalization of youth and the school-to-prison pipeline).

A Time for Change

“I want my students to wake up with their minds on freedom. If they don't have voices, they won't feel like they are empowered with their voices to be able to make that difference.”

- Jonathan Crossley, 2014 Arkansas Teacher of the Year

In search of answers, we have gathered the expertise and perspectives of many adults: Civil Rights icons, historians, academics, policymakers, teachers, administrators, parents, and more. Ultimately, however, we emphasize the hopes and challenges of students. After all, throughout history, young people like the Little Rock Nine have been powerful agents of social change, and education remains their foundational gateway to opportunity and freedom. *Teach Us All* therefore seeks to symbolically pass the mantle from the Little Rock Nine and issue today’s youth with a call to action to carry forth their legacy in the fight for equity and justice.

Key Interviews

- **Elizabeth Eckford** and **Terrence Roberts** of the Little Rock Nine
- **Spirit Trickey**, daughter of Minnijean Brown Trickey (Little Rock Nine)
- **Sylvia Mendez**, of *Mendez v. Westminster*, the 1946 California school desegregation case
- Peabody award winning New York Times journalist **Nikole Hannah-Jones**, the foremost reporter on school segregation
- **Pedro Noguera**, one of the nation's most prominent professors of urban education
- **Gary Orfield**, Director of the UCLA Civil Rights Project, whose highly-cited research illuminated the re-segregation of America's schools
- Social justice thought leader **Bryan Stevenson**, a Columbia University professor and lawyer working to reverse the mass incarceration of minority youth
- Professor **John Kirk**, an expert on the Little Rock School Crisis, race relations in the U.S. and the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court case
- Key administrators of the Little Rock School District and Arkansas State Board of Education
- **Eva Moskowitz**, CEO and Founder of Success Academy Charter Network in NYC
- Former LAUSD Superintendent **John Deasey**
- School-to-prison pipeline expert **Tia Martinez**

The Teach Us All Campaign

Timed to coincide with the 60th anniversary of the Little Rock Crisis, the *Teach Us All* national social justice campaign will harness connective technologies to spark a timely discussion about educational inequality in the U.S. and the re-segregation of America's schools. Through cause-driven social media and traditional media marketing strategies, the *Teach Us All* movement will leverage partnerships with social justice, youth, and educational organizations. The campaign will include community screenings and town hall discussions around the country, as well as the development of free educational materials that expand on the historical context and contemporary issues highlighted through the film.

Current partners include the NAACP Youth and College Division, League of United Latin American Citizens, Advancement Project, Integrate NYC 4 Me, Appleseed, Brotherhood Crusade, Youth Policy Institute, the Arkansas United Community Coalition, Noble Impact, Little Rock Central High Historic Site, and Clinton School for Public Policy—with many more to come.

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