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Our Opinion: Adding black history to curriculum will benefit all

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"Why is February set aside every year as Black History Month?"

"Because the other 11 months of the year are white history months."

Those unfamiliar with that well-worn exchange ought to reflect upon its meaning while pondering its significance for African-Americans, whose forebears had as much to do with the shaping of this nation as any other group. Black History Month is an attempt to raise the consciousness of all Americans about the contributions made by this segment of our society through highlighting the achievements of such greats as Frederick Douglass, George Washington Carver, Martin Luther King Jr., and the Berkshires' own W.E.B. Du Bois. Their place in American history comprises only the preamble of a narrative encompassing the influence of black Americans on the arts, culture, politics, social justice, science, industry and myriad other aspects of the American experience.

That contribution, sadly, has always gotten short shrift when it comes to claiming its rightful place in the education of America's young people. On Sunday, at the Berkshire Interfaith Organizing 2019 Annual Convention held at Congregation Knesset Israel, Pittsfield's public schools superintendent, Jake McCandless, announced that his district would institute courses in African-American studies and cultural studies.

Mr. McCandless' announcement should be lauded for several reasons: First, polls have repeatedly shown that racism is tempered or eliminated by exposure to groups unlike one's own. College-educated adults tend to be less prejudiced than their non-college-educated counterparts, not because they have been taught more, but because they have been thrown together with other groups in an egalitarian learning environment. The same is true of veterans, because when facing a life-threatening situation that calls for interdependency between individuals, ethnic stereotypes become irrelevant. In other words, familiarity breeds tolerance and understanding.

Mr. McCandless' proposed courses of study have the supreme advantage of catching young people before learned prejudices have a chance to become permanently embedded in their world outlook. It will produce graduates who have at least been exposed to the idea that everybody has something to learn from the struggles and successes of others, particularly those who have suffered because of historical and institutionalized cultural bias and through no fault of their own.

To those who would question why a school system in a county whose demographic makeup is less than 3 percent African-American should teach such courses, the answer is that black history is an integral part of American history, and to ignore it or minimize it is doing a disservice to students and, ultimately, to the country once they reach adulthood. In that vein, it should be mandatory to include black history as a distinct discipline until, ultimately, it is accorded its full and deserved place in general American history courses. If we are ever going to rid ourselves of the seemingly indelible stain upon our society of America's "original sin" — slavery — broad thinking like Mr. McCandless' is essential. We commend him for his decision, and urge every school district in Berkshire County and America that hasn't yet initiated such courses to follow suit.

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