

"You cannot understand American history without understanding the African-American experience; I don't care what anybody says". -Paul G. Vallas. In 2012, 72 percent of the students in District of Columbia Public Schools were racially identified with being Black, with some schools having a population of more than 85 percent Black student. A subject that should be required for graduation is African American history or African American studies. All schools have implemented many variations of cultural diversity programs, but very few have developed programs catered to the dominant culture in this school district. Without a proper foundation of understanding of self, where you came from, and the historical events that led to civic responsibilities of today it is very difficult to understand what one's roles and responsibilities are in society.

Working in the District of Columbia Public Schools it has become apparent that many of the Black students do not have a clear understanding of who they are or where they come from outside of the realm of their immediate family and location. Without that understanding, Black students often develop their identity, thru whatever popular culture dictates to be the norm. Additionally, very few Black students have studied or can identify someone in their community, United States, or even the world that they consider to be an influential Black role model or historical figure today or in recent history outside of the banal connection with Martin Luther King or Rosa Parks. As a result of this over usage the impact of their accomplishments do not seem relevant to students today. Many people would argue that African American history does not need to be a stand along course because the topic is covered in standard history courses, but without a dedicated course the importance of understanding the subject is marginalized.

Philadelphia, Illinois, and Florida are among the major school districts that have made African American history a required course for graduation. "It benefits African-American children who need a more comprehensive understanding of their own culture, and it also benefits non-African-Americans to understand the full totality of the American experience," was a statement made by one of Philadelphia's chief executive's in the school system. Many teachers in these school districts also reported that they saw increases in self-esteem, cultural awareness, and pride in all students not just African Americans. Throughout history, African American's have gone through a roller coaster of cultural identity from suppressing it, embracing it, fighting for it, to the current trend of ignoring it. As educators, we are failing our students by not provide the historical background needed for students to understand themselves and the world. I know there are people who will argue that making this a required course would make students of other ethnicities feel that their culture is less important, but there is not as great a lack of understanding of other cultures like there is with African Americans. Hispanic culture is expressed throughout the schools from the speaking of Spanish in the classroom to festivals celebrating their food and culture. For many students and people in the United States African American history began with the start of slavery and ends with its abolishment. A course in African American history will alter that perception.

In the past District of Columbia Public Schools has not made African American history a requirement, and we have increasingly seen a disconnect between Black students and relevant curriculum. We have also seen a trend in a decrease in standardized

test scores and literacy among African American students. Using other school districts as an example of success now is the time to implement change that will benefit the students in high school and beyond. African American history should be a required course for graduation if we intend to see our students succeed in life.