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'Who deserves a monument?' New lessons teach Baltimore students to find strength in city's history

by Talia Richman / *Baltimore Sun* | / OCT 02, 2019 |

Holabird Academy sixth grader Angie Castro, 11, offers a suggestion for a monument in Baltimore. Four pedestals that once held statues of Confederate-era figures now stand empty across Baltimore. If sixth grader Angie Castro had her way, a monument in honor of celebrated local photographer Devin Allen would be erected on one of them.

Angie's social studies class at Holabird Academy is pondering the question: Who deserves a monument? The students had plenty of suggestions — renowned Baltimore artists, doctors and lawyers among them — but that was secondary. The real goal is to get students thinking about their city and the local "heroes" who once walked the same streets and, in some cases, sat in the same classrooms as they do now. It's part of the district's new "BMore Me" curriculum, a series of social studies lessons for middle and high schoolers that probes the history of the place they call home and their place in it.

The Baltimore public school system, under CEO Sonja Santelises, has focused on revamping the curriculum with a goal of making classroom lessons more relevant to students. A recent Johns Hopkins audit of the district's coursework showed kids were being taught much about slavery but little about the Harlem Renaissance. Santelises said students in Baltimore — about 80 percent of whom are black — were missing out on the kinds of lessons that show African American strength and excellence. The BMore Me rollout last spring was one of the district's answers. "If students aren't engaged and really owning their own learning, they just go through the motions," said Janise Lane, the district's director of teaching and learning. "To get to students, you have to get to the center of who they are."

While people in Baltimore are bombarded with gloomy depictions of their hometown on social media and TV screens — President Donald Trump recently labeled it a "rat and rodent infested mess" — these students are learning to draw strength from their city's stories. "We heard loud and clear from teachers and from parents, especially, that they wanted curriculum that was representative of Baltimore."

Angie, an 11-year-old aspiring photographer and singer, knows about the bad stuff, the shootings and the crime she hears about from the news. But she also sees the good. So when her teacher Sidney Thomas assigned students to pick a Baltimore hero and craft an argument for why that person deserved a monument, Angie knew Allen was her guy. On a recent morning, she and other sixth graders at Holabird put together PowerPoint presentations making cases for their monument ideas. Her classmates researched a variety of mostly African American leaders from singer Billie Holliday, who dazzled audiences at clubs along Pennsylvania Avenue, to Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall, who as a lawyer paved the way for there to be both black and white students in this sixth-grade class. Angie did a Google search for Allen's images, clicking past the most famous one: a black-and-white photo from the 2015 unrest that landed on the cover of *Time* magazine. Instead, Angie chose an image of a man, with his hands pointing to the sky. In the background, slightly blurred, is a row of boarded up houses. Like Angie, Allen's photos don't ignore the bad or the good. "People need help to see beauty," Angie wrote on a PowerPoint slide explaining why Allen is her hero. "He helped me to realize that Baltimore has beauty."

There's a push among some school systems nationwide to develop curriculum that more honestly reflects the environments in which students are growing up, something research finds keep kids more interested and motivated. The recent BMore Me rollout also represents schools' focus on resurrecting social studies, which for many years was sidelined in favor of drilling the math and reading skills needed for standardized tests.

Urban districts, especially, are embracing these kinds of lessons, said Tina Heafner, president of the National Council for the Social Studies. "By nature, these more diverse, urban areas are trying to be responsive to the shifting demographics of their communities," Heafner said. Baltimore teachers and community leaders met last year to develop lessons they believe will resonate with middle and high school students. Students taking world history consider, "Was the Industrial Revolution good for Baltimore?" Those taking American Government have a unit called, "How can we build a better Baltimore?"

Eighth graders probe, "What is Baltimore's narrative?" Thomas, the Holabird teacher, has projects from last year's class hanging above her classroom windows. A student's drawing of his street shows his rowhouse next to a Family Dollar store and a bar. The caption read, "I think that Baltimore is just misunderstood."

Thomas was part of the team that developed the high school curriculum. Something she said that drove her was enforcing the idea to students: "You are not crime, you are not dirty, you are not anything negative, and here's the history to show you how people just like you have showed brilliance." As her students did their research, Thomas asked the sixth graders to consider why some people got monuments in the past. One student raised her hand with a theory: "In history, white people liked to put up white people monuments."

In the middle of an August night two years ago, Baltimore crews quietly dismantled three memorials to the Confederacy and a statue of Roger B. Taney, the Supreme Court justice who wrote that black people could never be considered citizens in the Dred Scott decision upholding slavery in 1857. In doing so, Baltimore joined a wave of cities removing such monuments — or watching angry citizens topple them on their own. Thomas dimmed her classroom's lights and pulled up a WBAL TV news clip, where a reporter asks people the next morning what they think about the monuments coming down. "It's a pretense for white supremacy and am really glad we see it for what it is now," one said. The students asked questions about why the statues were being called racist. "You'll learn more about this in eighth grade," Thomas said, "but Confederate soldiers were fighting to keep slavery." Rylee Allen, 11, thinks a statue of actress Jada Pinkett Smith ought to replace one of those old monuments in Baltimore. As she built up her argument, Rylee typed out on slide two of her PowerPoint: "No matter what your color is you're able to be a hero."