

DIVERSITY EDUCATION

Beyond a one-day observance

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Martin Luther King Jr. Day gives educators a chance to teach about tolerance of diverse cultures. Still, local educators say diversity education goes beyond one day in January. Ottawa-Glandorf Superintendent Kevin Brinkman said teachers in the district will use Monday's Martin Luther King Jr. Day as a teaching moment, but they weave the information into all areas.

"You want to make sure that, whatever you're doing, that the values and ideas you are presenting certainly correspond with racial diversity," Brinkman said.

At a minimum, all Ohio schools must include diversity components in social studies education. Some schools go beyond that with elective courses on specific topics and programs that encourage understanding of other cultures.

"Back when I started out (in 1971), each district and, to a certain extent, each teacher taught what they saw fit," said history teacher Chuck Schierloh, who works as a social studies curriculum team leader for Lima schools. "Now we have state standards and state testing, and that pretty much determines your curriculum."

Not really diverse

Schools teach about diverse cultures to help them understand their world. In our region, the closer you get to Lima, the larger and more diverse the population is. Schools such as Lima, Elida, Perry and Shawnee have diverse student bodies. The more rural districts tend to have fewer minorities.

According to the Ohio Department of Education, minorities make up 66 percent of Lima students, 26 percent at Perry, 20 percent at Elida and 15 percent in Shawnee. Most other districts in the region have minority populations in the single digits.

One school of thought suggests the less diverse schools need less diversity education. Another suggests they need more, since students do not have contact with different cultures.

A third view is that all schools need it equally, since all students are likely to experience diverse cultural influences as they move into the "real world."

Marsha Jackson, who teaches the students understanding culture through English and social studies class at Elida High School, said the student population is more diverse than ever. Still, it's not truly diverse in terms of a variety of cultural influences.

"We're still not really diverse," she said. "That's part of the reason we do this. It's a diverse world out there."

Even Schierloh doesn't think his district's 66 percent minority population is truly diverse.

"People in Lima think they are diverse; Lima's not diverse," he said.

There are two or three distinct cultural groups, such as blacks and Hispanics, but not much more, he said.

"The world out there is not Northwest Ohio," he said. "The world out there is becoming more diverse. We have an obligation to prepare our students."

A shared culture

With all the focus on other cultures, the challenge can sometimes be to focus on what it means to be an American.

The future teachers in the social studies methods class Schierloh teaches at Ohio State University-Lima struggled with that.

"We had quite a discussion," he said. "Is there still an American culture? What is the American culture? As social studies teachers, what is our responsibility to pass on the American culture?"

He said not only his students struggle with that.

"That's the question being asked in education schools around the country," he said. "You could read 50 authorities and get 50 different answers."

Dave Desenberg, who teaches Elida's understanding culture course with Jackson, doesn't claim to have the answer to the question. He has a clue where to look.

"Let's look at the commonalities," he said, "The things we all have in common that tie us together. Those things include family and religion, customs and the way we do things."

The basics

State curriculum requirements include diverse cultures in the social studies curriculum, particularly in the areas of people in societies, history and geography, according to "Academic Content Standards K-12 Social Studies," a manual from the Center for Curriculum and Assessment.

By the end of the second grade, students should be able to:

- Relate stories of people from diverse backgrounds who have contributed to the heritage of the United States.
- Identify the way different cultures have shaped our national heritage.

By the sixth grade, students should be able to:

- Describe cultural patterns in North America today.
- Explain why various groups came to North America.
- Explain the consequences of their interactions.

By the time they reach high school, they should be able to:

- Describe the effects of interactions between civilizations from the 14th to 18th centuries.
- Explain how contact between cultures impacts art, science, language and forms of government.
- Explain how products and ideas move from place to place.

Before graduation, students should be able to:

- Analyze the influence of different cultural perspectives on group actions.
- Analyze how contact between cultures leads to exchanges of cultural practices.
- Analyze how different cultural groups may view issues differently.
- Explain the role of diverse cultural institutions in shaping American Society.

In districts with smaller and often less-diverse populations, the core curriculum is the sole source of diversity education. Van Wert High School Principal Bill Clifton said that is generally the case at his school.

"We don't go out, and we don't emphasize black history," he said. "I'd like to think that is taught in our curriculum without having to emphasize it."

Schierloh said the challenge can be to fit all the information into class time.

"We have 180 school days. We have a diverse culture," he said. "How do you allot that 180 days in classroom time?"

Electing to do more

Many high schools go beyond the core requirements with elective classes focusing on specific cultural events or issues.

Lima schools offer classes focused on African American history, sociology, current events and the Holocaust, Schierloh said. Lima and other schools also offer classes like Elida's understanding culture class.

Elida's understanding culture students are in class Monday, Wednesday and Friday. On Tuesdays and Thursdays, they volunteer in the community. The class began in 1993. There are 21 students in the class this year.

"We start out with American studies," Desenberg said. "What are our values? What are our families like?"

The course then moves on to specific cultural groups, including African, Hispanic, Asian and European Americans, as well as Middle Eastern cultures.

"What we've done with this is looked at culture and cultural diversity in our country," he said, "in terms of, this is who we are and what we can do, how can we learn to get along a little better?"

The lesson plans include books and movies, as well as field trips to ethnic restaurants and other locations, including the Islamic Center in Perrysburg.

"They get to see a lot of things firsthand that they normally wouldn't," Desenberg said.

He said most of the class is just about providing information.

"Most of it is lack of knowledge, period," he said. "They don't understand what Islam is. When you start looking at Islam, comparing it to Christianity, there are a lot of similarities."

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JAY SOWERS

• **The Lima News** Third-graders Tyler Sneary (left) and Markaila Thomas work on a class project Friday as part of the diversity activities at Lima's Freedom Elementary School. Area schools say they are committed to diversity, even in rural districts with few minorities.