

Case 6.1: Black Lives Matter

It was a Friday afternoon. Ms. Simmons, a teacher at East City School, wondered how the protest was shaping up. Local Black Lives Matter (BLM) activists had organized the protest just a few blocks from the school. They had done all the proper paperwork to site their protest in the area. Still, because the protest was scheduled for the block of time between when schools let out and when rush hour ends, Ms. Simmons knew tensions would be high.

If the mood of the adults who came by East City to pick up their children was any indication, her concerns were warranted. When she left school around 4:30, traffic was still a mess. She noticed several school buses trapped in the gridlock. Although she found an alternate route and got home just a half hour later than usual, the buses weren't as easily navigated through intersections full of pedestrians and protesters.

Having been an activist herself, Ms. Simmons understood protests could be disruptive. She was proud of the protesters for raising awareness about racism and demanding accountability in light of the recent spate of police shootings of unarmed African American men. These included one incident just a couple towns over from East City. For Ms. Simmons, the inconvenience posed by a blocked road was well worth the message being spread by the protesters.

Unfortunately, many adults trying to get to the school to pick up their children or waiting for their children at home were not as forgiving. They were frustrated with the protestors and angry the city allowed them to protest at a busy intersection near the school. Local news outlets covered the protest's traffic disturbance and parent frustrations about the traffic as heavily as the protest itself. Parents complained about BLM's "divisiveness" and circulated their complaints on social media.

Monday morning Ms. Simmons noticed a few students wearing t-shirts with the words "All Lives Matter" and a few wearing shirts with the words "Black Lives Matter." She could feel the tension. She saw an opportunity to engage students in a conversation about the protest and racism in the local community, but when she mentioned her desire to raise these issues in class to colleagues, they discouraged her. "Stick to academics," one colleague said.

With the first period bell set to ring, Ms. Simmons decided to ignore her colleagues' advice and hoped her teaching instincts would be sufficient to make the conversation constructive and informative. She wondered what she should say first.

Questions

1. What are some reasons educators might be fearful about introducing conversations about racism in their classes? What can school leaders do to alleviate that fear? What can we do as individual educators to alleviate that fear in ourselves?
2. If you were a teacher at East City, how would you respond to students wearing "All Lives Matter" shirts to help them distinguish that point from the importance of a movement insisting "Black Lives Matter"?
3. If you were Ms. Simmons, what pedagogical strategies would you use to engage students in a conversation about racism and the BLM movement? Are there issues or topics about which you feel you would need to learn more before doing this?