ThoughtExchange

U-46 Students Shape Critical African American Studies Curriculum with ThoughtExchange

Illinois' Elgin School District U-46 is committed to including all students. Especially those who have been historically marginalized, made invisible, and forgotten—resulting in persistent gaps in access, learning, and opportunities. The district's equity mission to systematically meet students' unique learning needs while preparing them to contribute to a global community means U-46 has critical work to do. When a group of African American students revealed that they didn't feel represented and called for a mandatory African American Studies course, Dr. Teresa A. Lance, Assistant Superintendent of Equity and Innovation, was ready. A champion for inclusive, equitable education, she'd recently proposed a similar course.

ThoughtExchange surfaces critical student insights to develop curriculum

Dr. Lance desired student input because she knew their voice and perspective were vital to creating an African American Studies course. She knew from experience that African American history was either missing or insufficiently covered in K-12 education, and that representation matters as it relates to student outcomes and their sense of belonging. As the first of its kind in the U-46 district, this course was critical and needed to

be done right. So she used ThoughtExchange enterprise discussion management software to reach out to all students, gathering their ideas and perspectives. Through an Exchange, Dr. Lance asked: "What should we consider as we create an African American Studies course?" The Exchange garnered 1,321 participants, 796 thoughts, and 10,557 ratings.

These top 5 thoughts show how students' insights may shape future curriculum

1 **"There's more than just slavery, segregation, and violence that come from African Americans.** So that more people get to learn about some of the great things African Americans have done for future generations."

2 **"Explore African American figures that we do not know much about!** Yes, we all know about Martin Luther King Jr., etc, but there are tons of others! There are so many influential African American figures that we do not know about, and we should take time to explore them!"

2021 THOUGHTEXCHANGE BOLD LEADERSHIP AWARD

ThoughtExchange 2021 Bold Leadership Award

In recognition of her efforts in making a meaningful impact by using ThoughtExchange to lead inclusive conversations and launch African American Studies curriculum at Elgin Area School District

3 **"Historical figures, slavery, and literature.** I feel a lot of historical figures impacted a lot of the African American culture. Books are an amazing way of seeing how people viewed the past."

4 **"Include the perspective of actual African American historians and people.** This involves African American literature and input as part of the course. A course cannot successfully capture the history of a specified group without their perspective, especially if it's been suppressed."

5 **"Sensitivity to those in the class and whom the class is being taught about, and choosing appropriate staff.** In order to avoid stereotyping as well as giving the incorrect perspective—definitely should be taught by an African American."

Why ThoughtExchange is the most effective medium for a student-led curriculum

When asked why she thought ThoughtExchange was the best tool for the project as opposed to a survey or a Zoom town hall, Dr. Lance replied:

> "If ThoughtExchange were a person, I would hug them. I used it in my previous district as a superintendent. What I love about ThoughtExchange is that there's this opportunity for ideas to be put out anonymously, and then a coalescing around ideas—and that's what I was looking for. I wasn't looking for a Likert scale. I wasn't looking to lead students by saying, here's what should be included—do you agree or disagree?"

Dr. Lance recognized the value of asking an open-ended question and seeing what the students had to say. She appreciated that the platform allowed students to share freely, without fear of judgment. As well, she liked that students could contribute by seeing each other's thoughts and rating them.

After closing the Exchange, Dr. Lance shared the report with teachers and cabinet members with this revealing statement, "Here's what our children have been saying. We've been missing it."

Anti-bias, moderation, and theming features help Elgin U-46 get the most authentic data

Dr. Lance appreciates that ThoughtExchange "provides a safe and brave space" with its built-in anonymity and anti-bias software. It allows students to voice their honest opinions without fear of judgment or reprisal.

This feature is especially significant for middle and high school students who often struggle with peer pressure, especially when discussing sensitive issues.

Additionally, Dr. Lance valued the **Moderation** feature. It flags inappropriate or hurtful thoughts based on criteria pre-set by the leader. This allowed her to review and remove them if necessary.

The **Theming** feature was also crucial for Dr. Lance, especially because she had so many thoughts; the most she'd ever generated in an Exchange. The themes helped her and her team sort responses, ensuring they included what students said was essential to them. Without theming, they may have missed important thoughts.

Developing a new African American Studies course with student input

Based on the students' input, Dr. Lance sought an expert in the field to assist in creating an African American Studies course. Now, the curriculum and instruction department is collaborating with Professor Kim Gallon (Purdue University). Dr. Lance reached out on Twitter for a curriculum developer, and she received many responses. Dr. Gallon, who had recently completed the curriculum for the Philadelphia City Schools, was the perfect fit—and she was thrilled to have cohesive student input to work with. Dr. Lance believes that ThoughtExchange's contributions will be essential to the course's success. She says:

> " The student Exchange we ran helped our curriculum team more deeply understand the essential nature of some critical pieces that were missing in the planning and development of our new African American Studies course. We now feel confident that what's being developed will reflect all voices more equitably.

Dr. Lance and Dr. Gallon plan to develop the African American Studies course in the latter half of 2021 and implement it in August 2022.

ThoughtExchange helps U-46 build community and achieve its equity mission

Dr. Lance's Exchange has impacted other underrepresented groups at U-46 as well. After participating in the African American Studies course Exchange, other students have asked to see new courses developed to tell their stories.

When we asked Dr. Lance if she'd be using ThoughtExchange in the future to include student voice in curriculum development, she said she would recommend it every time:

> " We use adults to vet curriculum and resources, but we miss the student perspective in all of it. And we've got to do better. Building student agency, allowing students to have voice and ownership on what's in front of them, is crucial, and ThoughtExchange allows that opportunity on such a grand scale.

Dr. Lance hopes Elgin U-46's African American Studies course will be an inspiration to other districts as well. She's optimistic that other educational leaders will recognize the power of student voice, seek to build their own courses, and increase the representation of African American students in education across the country.

***Ask us how** ThoughtExchange can help you get better data and engage with your community.*