

# **The State of Human Rights Education in Washington, D.C.**

2021

By: Karen Hopkins & Rachel Bergsieker, Co-Regional Representatives for HRE-USA



## **Introduction**

In 2008, DC was declared the first Human Rights City in the United States. This [historic City Council Ceremonial Resolution](#) specifically noted the importance of continuing to educate DC residents about their human rights.

*WHEREAS, This is an opportunity to call attention to human rights violations around the world and to continue to promote the importance of educating our citizens about human rights;*

*WHEREAS, The District of Columbia Public Schools has partnered with the American Friends Service Committee to create courses that teach our students about human rights issues;*

In the intervening 13 years since this declaration, the call to action included in the resolution has inspired significant progress in human rights education in DC. This report will detail the efforts of the American Friends Service Committee, Long Live GoGo, and HRE USA to promote and expand human rights education in the District of Columbia.

## **GoGo, Human Rights and Social Action Elective Course:**

In 2009, the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) DC Peace and Economic Justice Program created its “Human Rights Learning Project” to expand human rights education in DC schools. From 2009-2018, AFSC offered human rights education workshops to over 800 DC students.

Human rights education was formally embedded in DC schools with the introduction of a “Human Rights and Social Action” elective course in DC Public Schools (DCPS) high schools during the 2019-2020 school year. The curriculum for the elective was developed by the AFSC DC office. In its inaugural year, the elective course was offered at 3 DCPS high schools: Anacostia High School, Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, and Theodore Roosevelt High School.

Following the closure of the AFSC DC office in May 2020, leadership of its education program was transitioned to Long Live GoGo who further tailored the curriculum to the DC community by adding a taste of GoGo culture. GoGo is the official music of Washington, DC and has historical significance in community-led activism.<sup>1</sup>

During the 2020-2021 school year, the elective course is being re-offered at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, and Theodore Roosevelt High School.

The elective introduces students to their human rights and uses experiential-based learning for civic engagement. The curriculum for “GoGo, Human Rights, & Social Action” culminates in a social action project where students are challenged to identify human rights violations in their own communities and demand change. For example, in previous years, students at Anacostia High School successfully petitioned to have their school uniform policy updated, following the death of a student who was out of school for a dress code violation. The students argued the policy was an infringement on their human rights to education and safety.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://washingtoncitypaper.com/article/512625/long-live-gogo-the-movement-shows-that-moehella-is-about-more-than-music/>

### **2020 NCSS Conference:**

In December 2020, the DC Regional Co-Representatives for HRE-USA participated in a presentation at the National Council on Social Studies (NCSS) Annual Conference. Rachel Bergsieker and Karen Hopkins were joined by Jessica Sutter, DC State Board of Education Representative for Ward 6; Shelina Warren, GoGo, Human Rights, and Social Action teacher at Dunbar High School; and Rosemary Blanchard, emeritus chair of the NCSS HRE Community.

The presentation, entitled “Creating a Human Rights Education Culture in Your City,” explored how to foster a culture of human rights education in a city through both curriculum and standards, using Washington, DC as a case study.

Panelists Rachel Bergsieker and Shelina Warren spoke about the creation and implementation of the GoGo, Human Rights and Social Action DCPS elective course, while panelists Karen Hopkins and Jessica Sutter discussed the revision process for DC’s Social Studies Standards and efforts to embed human rights and humanitarian law principles into the revised standards. Rosemary Blanchard served as the panel’s moderator.

Following introductory remarks by moderator, Rosemary Blanchard, panelist, Rachel Bergsieker spoke about the creation of the “GoGo, Human Rights, and Social Action” elective course as part of the American Friends Service Committee’s (AFSC) DC Human Rights Education Project, including both the institutional process with DCPS and curriculum development. The elective evolved from AFSC’s Human Rights Learning Project, following 10 years of classroom engagement through partnerships that brought AFSC’s HRE lesson plans into schools once a week.

In 2018, this work evolved into the elective course. Curriculum development began with a desk review of HRE practices and pedagogy. From there, the 7-unit outline was developed. The curriculum’s first units focus on identity and community, recognizing that these are foundational elements to understanding human rights. Unit 3 is a deep dive into human rights, including a history of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Unit 4 is titled “Analysis of Power.” Once students understand the human rights they possess, they dissect and analyze the power dynamics that can result in human rights violations. Units 5 and 6 transition to civics and organizing. Students develop a toolkit for taking action to demand their human rights. Unit 7 is the curriculum’s culminating social action project. Human rights education is not a passive process. At its core, HRE centers experiential learning through civic engagement. Once students learn about their human rights, they are driven to create the communities they envision, influenced by a human rights framework.

Rachel highlighted the two elements key to HRE’s institutionalization in DCPS: available curriculum and teacher support. This demonstrates the important role organizations such as AFSC & Long Live GoGo can play in supporting the development and continuation of HRE communities in schools. When outside organizations can promote and partner with teachers/schools to support the implementation of HRE curriculum, a culture of human rights education spreads from classroom to classroom.

Shelina Warren, implementing teacher of the GoGo, Human Rights and Social Action elective course at Paul Laurence Dunbar High School spoke next. Shelina shared a unit-by-unit overview of the curriculum’s content and reflections from her student’s learning. The curriculum is offered as part of Dunbar’s

Eleanor Holmes Norton Law and Public Policy Academy. The elective aligns with and furthers the Academy’s goal to create socially aware citizens, by showing students how to use their voice to effect change.

Shelina highlighted the curriculum's prevalence of arts and media through the incorporation of photography, documentaries, music, etc., and pinpointed this element as key to connecting students with the content. DC-specific artwork deepens this connection. Students' own use of media throughout the curriculum, including photography and poetry, provides a tool for dialog and expression.

Shelina provided examples of the curriculum's activities and content including: a survey for students to determine the "human rights temperature" of their school, creation of 6-word stories to demonstrate the difference between human rights and legal rights, and "Soapbox" speeches to propose solutions to community issues the students feel passionately about. Shelina also spoke about her appreciation of the curriculum's probing questions that connect the students' background to the task at hand.

Following Shelina, Karen Hopkins and Jessica Sutter spoke about the social studies standards revision process in DC as an avenue for deepening a culture of HRE in DC. Karen & Jessica's work on this initiative is detailed in the "Standards Revision" section of this report.

The presentation's slide deck is included with this report as Appendix 1.

Due to the ongoing coronavirus epidemic, the 2020 NCSS Conference was held virtually. The proposal was accepted as part of NCSS's 100th Anniversary Conference. The 100th Anniversary Conference will be repeated in-person in 2021 in Washington, DC. The panelists will participate at this year's in-person conference, updating the "Creating a Human Rights Education Culture in Your City" presentation with progress made during the intermittent year.

## **Standards Revision**

Among other activities, HRE USA's [\*\*Collaborative Action, Policy and Advocacy Committee \(CAPAC\)\*\*](#) advocates for the inclusion of HRE in social studies standards. CAPAC monitors standards revision processes in all 50 states and develops an understanding of how each process works and the timeline. We then begin organizing to influence how those state standards are revised with the goal of finding ways to integrate human rights into the standards. There are a few ways CAPAC is able to influence the process. First, by encouraging individuals who will bring a HR perspective to apply for positions on revision committees. Recently, we've had members on the NJ and DC standards revision committees. Second, we encourage folks to participate in public comment stages of the revision process by providing feedback on draft standards and by suggesting ways that human rights can be integrated within the

standards. CAPAC has participated in the public comment period for 6 states.<sup>2</sup> Once standards are finalized, CAPAC will review them to see which suggestions were implemented. As a member of CAPAC, DC's Co-Regional Representative, Karen Hopkins has been encouraging DC to update their 2006 Social Studies Standards.

In September 2017, CAPAC members wrote to the DC Council Education Committee, Office of the State Superintendent for Education, the State Board of Education, the Deputy Mayor of Education, and the Mayor urging them to begin the process of revising DC's social studies standards, which were last reviewed and

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<sup>2</sup> CAPAC has commented on Social Studies Standards in California, Colorado, Kansas, Massachusetts, the District of Columbia, and South Carolina.

revised in 2006, with emphasis on the incorporation of human rights and humanitarian law principles into the social studies core. In September 2017, a CAPAC member testified before the DC Council Education Committee to urge the Council to revise social studies standards and to create a human rights elective for high school and middle school students. We met with the Legislative Council in November 2017 and shared what other states are doing as far as standards, budgets, and Amnesty International USA's Human Rights Friendly Schools model. A CAPAC member also testified at a 2017 public meeting before DC's State Board of Education urging them to begin the process of revising DC's social studies standards, with particular emphasis on the incorporation of human rights and humanitarian law principles.

This advocacy garnered support from then Board member, Ruth Wattenberg, who later became the DC State Board of Education (SBOE) President in January 2019. In March 2019, the [DC State Board of Education Resolution on Establishment of Priorities](#) included "review and appropriate revision of state standards." The DC SBOE also indicated that the "revision process present[ed] an opportunity for the District's social studies standards to be culturally responsive, anti-racist, to impart important social studies content in the early grades, strengthen student knowledge of democratic principles and values, and promote civic engagement."<sup>3</sup> Thereafter in 2019, the DC SBOE began planning and mapping out the revision process.

In Summer of 2020, the DC SBOE solicited applications for the Social Studies Standards Advisory Committee (SSSAC) to develop Guiding Principles for the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) Writing Committee to follow in revising the existing standards. Karen Hopkins, DC Co-Representative of HRE USA, served on the Advisory Committee, as did Shelina Warren, one of the teachers implementing the Long Live GoGo Curriculum in DCPS.

SSSAC met monthly from August-December 2020 to develop [Guiding Principles](#) that the OSSE Writing Committee would follow when drafting the revised Social Studies Standards. HRE USA was able to specifically author Guiding Principles that foster HRE, Environmental Literacy, and Digital Literacy, which were all ultimately incorporated into the final document. The SSSAC also approved [Guiding Principles](#) focused on anti-racism, power and bias, and a global lens. In November 2020, the draft Principles were released for public comment and underwent another round of revision before finalizing them for adoption by the SBOE. During the SBOE's December 2020 meeting, the SBOE [voted to adopt the final Guiding Principles](#).

HRE USA also promoted [OSSE's Technical Writing Committee](#) application among members in the hopes that HRE friendly teachers would apply. Applications closed in late January 2021.

### **Digital Rights Lesson Plan**

The [Human Rights Education Curriculum Integration Guide](#) provides model lessons to help social studies and other educators implement human rights education in their daily practice.

This project was developed by a team of New Jersey educators and is tied specifically to their state's social studies standards. However, the guide can be used as a model for any educator seeking to integrate human

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<sup>3</sup> <https://sboe.dc.gov/page/social-studies-standards>

rights into their curriculum.

DC HRE USA members decided to draft a Digital Rights Lesson Plan as part of this project. The aim of the lesson plan is to expand student understanding of laws, rights, and responsibilities when we access and use the Internet in order to better understand our digital rights, and empower students to be good digital citizens and insist that companies and the government develop technology in an ethical and responsible way.

The lesson plan was designed to be as interactive and engaging as possible with activities on mapping of digital rights and responsibilities and discussions prompting critical thinking about conflicts of rights and responsibilities and how those conflicts can impact others; systemic abuses of digital rights, namely cyberbullying, policing and facial recognition, cell phone data tracking, and race detection software and bias; students are also coached on how to protect their privacy and what data is shared via their cell phones.

The lesson was updated based on peer review feedback and is currently being field tested by NJ teachers. Another round of revisions will take place based on the field testing prior to publication on HRE USA's website.