Our Community Query:
How can we as a Friends school safely situate teaching and learning in personal and political contexts, and embrace the plurality of identity in our society?

Crucial, Courageous Conversations
Talking to Students about Equity, Inclusion and Social Justice

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By the time you read this, your kids will have made their plans. They are planning their response to protest against the gun violence that led to the murder of innocent teachers and students in Parkland, FL. They will do this planning in the Quaker Student Life Center because that is a place on our campus where courageous ideas are shared, where Civil Discourse meetings are held and where those who narrowly escaped the Holocaust and those who provide free legal counsel to Dreamers share their stories during lunch and learn sessions.

We gave time for this planning session following February break for those members of our community, student and adult, who were moved to plan the Friends Academy student response to the shootings at Marjory Stoneman High School. The kids will lead the way and the adults will let them.

They have already agreed to engage in some type of response to be carried out during the 17-minute “National School Walkout” on March 14th. Beyond that they will take the lead in planning a cross-divisional activity through our Worship Buddy program so that all Friends students, even the youngest, can focus on the Quaker Peace testimony. Time will go on, but I hope they don’t let up.

In this month’s Among Friends, Shanelle Robinson, Director of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs raises the very real anxiety teachers experience when faced with “hot button” issues that can-
not be ignored in an educational setting. Shanelle reminds us, “As a community of Quaker educators, we must remember that our primary objective is not our own comfort, but that of our students’ growth as moral and ethical citizens.”

I am incredibly proud of our Friends Academy students. They immediately let their desires be known. Before we returned from break they were emailing their teachers imploring us, “We have to do something.” I am humbled, but not surprised that our nation’s youth have mustered their strength, their passion and their courage to speak truth to power and to tell us all, “enough.” But even more, I feel incredibly fortunate to stand alongside them.

This will be Shanelle’s last Among Friends column for Friends Academy. After seven years of serving as Friends Academy’s first Director of Diversity and Multicultural Affairs, Shanelle will move on from Friends Academy. Thank you, Shanelle for your service and dedication to Friends Academy, your commitment to equity and inclusion and your unbridled passion for social justice. May it serve you well in your next chapter.

All the best,

[signature]

Director of Diversity & Multicultural Affairs Shanelle Robinson teaches the first session of a two-part workshop to third grade students. During the first week, third grade students learned of the heroic actions of child activists, including Ruby Bridges and Claudette Colvin from the 50s and 60s, as well as modern-day examples, such as Marley Dias, Cory Nieves and Jakhil Jackson.
Student-Artist of the Month: Alison Mosher

“M y ability to mix colors and paint with different media has improved and developed throughout the past year. During the summer, I spent a lot of time using acrylic paints and learning new techniques for mixing colors. I found that I enjoyed the process of mixing all the colors I needed from the three primaries. However, when I started painting class during the fall semester, the first project was an oil painting in the grey scale. Working with oil paint was very different for me and I had to get used to having more time to work with the paint instead of adding a new layer each time. Despite all of this, I gained a better understanding of the grey scale and am now more comfortable with a medium that I didn’t have any previous experience using.”
As the ongoing political, cultural and social climate continues to impact our school communities, we may find ourselves met with a heightened sensitivity and anxiety when it comes to addressing certain topics. There are many things in the news that children ought not be exposed to (e.g. gun violence) but, unfortunately, it is our current reality. Engaging students in civil discourse about events in Parkland, FL, Charlottesville, VA, DACA, #takeaknee, hurricane relief and response, etc., may feel particularly risky and politically charged. Yet, while I believe educators in general have the greatest intentions, some may still feel underprepared for the types of

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complexity they must face every day in their classrooms.

Teachers might avoid discussing “hot-button” issues like the aforementioned topics because they feel such issues are too complex, or because they don’t feel prepared to handle the strong feelings and opinions such a discussion can stir. Moreover, students themselves may shy away from participating in discussions about sensitive topics because they worry that they will be teased, their opinions will be ridiculed, or other strong feelings will arise.

Central to our mission as a Friends school, however, are the Quaker principles of equality and integrity that implore us to teach students respect for all and help them form their own understanding of the world. In a time of profound polarization and division, how can we as a Friends school safely situate teaching and learning in personal and political contexts, and embrace the plurality of identity in our society?

Throughout the month of February, I worked with students in each of the three divisions (Lower, Middle and Upper schools) to explore concepts of

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VIDEO! Third grade students lean into crucial and courageous conversations as they learn about discrimination, poverty, stereotypes and more in guided lessons with Director of Diversity & Multicultural Affairs Shanelle Robinson.
bias, prejudice, discrimination, stereotyping and privilege. Though young children cannot always understand the complex factors that have driven past and present racial, religious and/or political discord, it is extremely important to provide them, and students of all ages, with the time and space needed to ask difficult questions that can help them process the use of offensive and hurtful language, violence and the host of other injustices they see and, sadly, sometimes experience.

**Understanding the feeling of discrimination in 3rd grade**

In the Lower School, I helped 3rd grade students examine the above topics by making connections between how these issues affect their lives as individuals, and how it may affect members of society at large. Together we viewed and discussed the documentary, “A Class Divided,” which highlights teacher/activist Jane Elliott’s famed 1968 “brown eyes, blue eyes” classroom experiment. After the assassination of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Elliott separated her third grade classroom students, white children from a rural town in Iowa, by those who were blue-eyed and brown-eyed. She then facilitated a two-day experience to help them feel and understand privilege and discrimination first-hand. In this lesson, I led students in conversation about their understanding of privilege and discrimination; how they saw it

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impacting the students’ lives in the film; discussed the ways in which they believed privilege and discrimination may affect them personally, their family, friends or community; and, lastly, took time to reflect upon why this is an important topic for young children like themselves to understand.

In her class, third grade teacher Nikita Desai guides students to consider various perspectives as she deftly makes use of opportunities to embed social justice work into the classroom conversation, including the Winter Olympics in South Korea, Black History Month and Take a Knee.

“My goal as a teacher when it comes to being an activist for diversity, equity and inclusion is to bring an awareness of the world around them by teaching them to have opinions and an ability to reflect on if those are their own opinions or someone else’s,” explained Desai. “I want them to understand the perspectives of others and at the same learn how to be an upstander, instead of a bystander,” she added.

Every Friday, Desai weaves in social justice learning with the children by posting a picture on her Smartboard of a current event and asking students three questions: “What do you see?” “What do you notice?” and “What do you know about this?”

During the Winter Olympics, Desai taught students to correctly pronounce the name of the host city,

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Pyeongchang, and impressed upon students the importance and respect of language. In addition, students learned how to dismantle stereotypes about South Korea.

I was inspired by the depth of the dialogue had with our 3rd graders, and reminded of the notion that young people inherently want to do what’s right, fair and just. It is a disservice to our young students not to engage them in these conversations, and we hope they will find them catalyzing in making a difference in their lives, classrooms and communities. Not only is social justice dialogue important, it also proved highly engaging as students in Desai’s class shouted, “These are the best lessons!”

8th grade takes a tour of power, privilege and discrimination

In the 8th grade Diversity class, we took our discussion of power, privilege and discrimination to the Dolan Center Art Gallery where Teacher John Scardina led us in an examination of the American Friends Service Committee: 100 Years of Waging Peace banners exhibition. From civil disobedience and the fight

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for civil rights and the LGBTQ rights movement; to issues of immigration, poverty and mass incarceration, we tied our discussion of the social issues raised in the exhibit to our classroom conversations on equity and inclusion and the Quaker value of respecting the value and dignity of every person. By asking the Middle School students one simple question, “What do you know and how do you know it?,” I was able to find out what they already knew or have experienced about these topics and was able to correct any missing or misinformation along the way. An August 2017 Vox article on ways to reduce bias stated, “the innate resistance and defensiveness to conversations about bigotry don’t mean that you should never talk about racism, sexism, homophobia, or other kinds of hate. But those conversations may have to be held more tactfully — positioning people into a more receptive position to hear what these problems are all about.”

**Examining offensive language in Upper School lunch & learn**

In the Upper School, members of the student Diversity Committee hosted a lunch and learn to discuss perspectives on use of the “n” word and other offensive language amongst their peers. Conversation was centered on the query, “How can we

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best communicate to others when we find their language offensive to us?” Together, we developed a way to have this conversation that didn’t make some people feel condemned for their opinions.

By promoting dialogue, as opposed to debate, Upper School students modeled how to talk about sensitive and controversial topics by being honest and understanding, respecting different points of view, willing to be open to change, and accepting of others’ feelings. The key to these conversations is empathy. And it will take a lot of empathy — not just for one conversation but many, many conversations.

Our world is on a 24-hour news cycle and, in real time, students must be provided with room to engage in authentic discourse about social, political and current events. As teachers (and parents too!), we might be tempted to shelter them, but we do students a disservice by doing so. They watch the news, they hear and observe adults in discussion, and their peers may also raise the topics. There

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are so many teachable moments. At Friends Academy, there are outstanding individual teachers who go into the classroom, close their doors and create space for students to have such courageous, critical conversations. Julie A. Helling, Associate Professor and Director of the Law & Diversity Program at Fairhaven College, Western Washington University asserts, “We pursue education to understand the world. The more we let the world into education, the more we all stand to gain.”

This is urgent work. Mastering the skill of difficult conversations, as both a speaker and listener, requires patience, openness, forgiveness, resilience, and courage… and lots of time.

As a community of Quaker educators, we must remember that our primary objective is not our own comfort, but that of our students’ growth as moral and ethical citizens. Therefore, it is our responsibility to be fearless in educating, disrupting and confronting issues of diversity, equity and social justice. As former First Lady Michelle Obama noted (on the importance of parents and teachers as role models), “With every word we utter, with every action we take, we know our kids are watching us.”

The children are indeed watching and listening, waiting for us to make sense of this for them. We also need to make sense of it for ourselves.
Here at Parent Council, we are very excited for the community-building activities and meetings we have planned for 2018. We recognize that lives can be busy, so in order to more easily highlight how to get involved, Parent Council has created a monthly “Get Connected” e-mail that will provide you the exact dates, times and places about where and when you can connect with the FA Community.

### Parent Council - “Get Connected”
**March 2018**

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<th>DATE</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Thursday, March 1</strong></td>
<td>• Health &amp; Wellness Speaker – District Attorney Madeline Singas (Dolan Center, 7 pm)</td>
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<td><strong>Saturday, March 3</strong></td>
<td>• Family Sandwich making (Dolan Center Commons, 10 am)</td>
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<td><strong>Wednesday, March 7</strong></td>
<td>• FA Blood Drive (Main Gym, 8:15 am to 12:45 pm)</td>
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<td>• Parent Quaker Life Meeting (Jackson House, 8:15 am)</td>
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<td><strong>Monday, March 12</strong></td>
<td>• Early Childhood Parent Coffee (Jackson House, 8:15 am)</td>
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### Friday, March 16
- Friends Academy Dinner & Auction (Garden City Hotel, 7 pm)

### Monday, March 26
- Grades K-2 Parent Coffee (Jackson House, 8:15 am)

### Tuesday, March 27
- Middle & Upper School Math Pathways for Grades 5-8 (Jackson House, 8:15 am)

### Friday, March 30-April 9th
- **WE MADE IT – HAPPY SPRING BREAK!!!**
Q:

Should you be reading *Inside FA* each week?

A:

Yes!

Why?

View video trailers of shows & concerts, glimpse into classrooms, and more. It’s what you need to know this week at FA... in one bulletin... every Sunday... delivered to your inbox.