

## OPINION

**An Essay for Teachers Who Understand Racism Is Real****Our schools need abolitionists right now, not reformers****By Bettina L. Love**

June 12, 2020

This essay is not to enumerate the recent murders of Black people by police, justify why protest and uprising are important for social change, or remind us why NFL player Colin Kaepernick took a knee. If you have missed those points, blamed victims, or proclaimed "All Lives Matter," this article is not for you, and you may want to ask yourself whether you should be teaching any children, especially Black children.



This article is for teachers who understand that racism is real, anti-Blackness is real, and state-sanctioned violence, which allows police to kill Black people with impunity, is real. It is for teachers who know change is necessary and want to understand exactly what kind of change we need as a country.

Politicians who know the words "justice" and "equity" only when they want peace in the streets are going to try to persuade us that they are capable of reforming centuries of oppression by changing policies, adding more accountability measures, and removing the "bad apples" from among police.

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These actions will sound comprehensive and, with time, a solution to injustice. These reforms may even reduce police killings or school suspensions of Black students, but as civil rights activist Ella Baker said, a “reduction of injustice is not the same as freedom.” Reformists want incremental change, but Black lives are being lost with every day we wait. And to be Black is to live in a constant state of exhaustion.

Centuries of Black resistance and protest have had a profound impact on the nation. As Nikole Hannah-Jones, the creator of “The 1619 Project,” points out, “We have helped the country to live up to its founding ideals. ... Without the idealistic, strenuous, and patriotic efforts of Black Americans, our democracy today would most likely look very different—it might not be a democracy at all.” Those civil rights achievements were critical, including the reformist ones.

But reform is no longer enough. Too often, reform is rooted in Whiteness because it appeases White liberals who need to see change but want to maintain their status, power, and supremacy.

Abolition of oppression is needed because reform still did not stop a police officer from putting his knee on George Floyd’s neck in broad daylight for 8 minutes and 46 seconds; it did not stop police from killing Breonna Taylor in her own home. Also that: Largely non-White school districts get \$23 billion less in state and local funding than predominantly White ones; Black people make up 13 percent of the U.S. population but account for 26 percent of the deaths from COVID-19; and with only 5 percent of the world’s population, the United States has nearly 25 percent of the world’s prison population. We need to be honest: We cannot reform something this monstrous; we have to abolish it.

Abolitionists want to eliminate what is oppressive, not reform it, not reimagine it, but remove oppression by its roots. Abolitionists want to understand the conditions that normalize oppression and uproot those conditions, too. Abolitionists, in the words of scholar and activist Bill Ayers, “demand the impossible” and work to build a world rooted in the possibilities of justice. Abolitionists are not anarchists because, as we eliminate these systems, we want to build conditions that create institutions that are just, loving, equitable, and center Black lives.

Abolitionism is not a social-justice trend. It is a way of life defined by commitment to working toward a humanity where no one is disposable, prisons no longer exist, being Black is not a crime, teachers have high expectations for Black and Brown children, and joy is seen as a foundation of learning.

Abolitionists strive for that reality by fighting for a divestment of law enforcement to redistribute funds to education, housing, jobs, and health care; elimination of high-stakes testing; replacement of watered-down and Eurocentric materials from educational publishers like Pearson, McGraw Hill, and Houghton Mifflin Harcourt with community-created standards and curriculum; the end of police presence in schools; employment of Black teachers en masse; hiring of therapists and counselors who believe Black lives matter in schools; destruction of inner-city schools that resemble prisons; and elimination of suspension in favor of restorative justice.

Abolitionist work is hard and demands an indomitable spirit of resistance. As a nation, we saw this spirit in Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass. We also see it in 21st-century abolitionists like Angela Davis, Charlene Carruthers, Erica

### **Abolitionist Resources From Bettina L. Love**

#### **Organizations**

- [Free Minds, Free People](#)
- [Critical Resistance](#)
- [Black Youth Project 100](#)
- [Quetzal Education Consulting](#)
- [Assata's Daughters](#)
- [Black Organizing Project](#)
- [Teachers 4 Social Justice](#)

#### **Reading**

- ["Reading Towards Abolition: A Reading List on Policing, Rebellion, and the Criminalization of Blackness"](#)

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For non-Black people, abolitionism requires giving up the idea of being an “ally” to become a “co-conspirator.” Many social-justice groups have shifted the language to “co-conspirator” because allies work toward something that is mutually beneficial and supportive to all parties. Co-conspirators, in contrast, understand how Whiteness and privilege work in our society and leverage their power, privilege, and resources in solidarity with justice movements to dismantle White supremacy. Co-conspirators function as verbs, not as nouns.

The journey for abolitionists and our co-conspirators is arduous, but we fight for a future that will never need to be reformed again because it was built as just from the beginning.

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Bettina Love: On Black Girls, Discipline, and Schools



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