

CRITICAL

CONVERSATIONS

Event transcript featuring Professor Ibram X. Kendi

TURN THE CLASSROOM INTO A LABORATORY OF CHANGE

Hosted by New Roads School

in partnership with

Echo Horizon School, PS1, UCLA Lab School,
and Westside Neighborhood School

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Critical Conversations Speaker Series

Featuring Professor Ibram X. Kendi

TRANSCRIPT



Guest
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MARK VICKERS-WILLIS:

Good evening. My name is Mark Vickers-Willis, the director of community engagement at New Roads School. And it is my pleasure to welcome you to these critical conversations, speak the series event, featuring our esteemed guest Professor, Ibram X. Kendi. On behalf of New Road School and our hosting partners, Echo Horizon School, PS1, UCLA Lab School and Westside Neighborhood School. The framing for this evening event is grappling with the persistence of systemic racism and steps to advance equity. We are at a unique moment in time where finally critical conversations can publicly occur that mirror and drive necessary individual and collective action.

This evening is another step in an ongoing process to develop critical awareness, promote wellbeing and advance racial equity. The program this evening will run for one hour, following this welcome and a brief introduction from New Roads head of school, Luthern Williams. We will commence the discussion broken into four parts, integration and wellness's equity, trauma, resilience and wellbeing, climate and culture, racial identity development and accountability and interest convergence in moving forward. We will allocate 10 minutes to each section, co-moderated by Luthern and Mario Johanson, director of Student Life, Access, Equity and Inclusion at New Roads.

This will leave 15 minutes for questions from you, provided through the Q&A feature of this Zoom platform. And that is open for you to submit questions throughout. I feel humbled to welcome our guests this evening, Professor Ibram X. Kendi, Andrew W. Mellon Professor in the humanities at Boston University and the founding director of the BU Center for Antiracist Research. Among other things, he is a groundbreaking historian, prolific and award-winning author and venerated public discourse contributor. In 2020, Time Magazine named Professor Kendi one of the hundred most influential people in the world. I'd now like to introduce Luthern Williams, our head of school, for a few words of welcome and introduction.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Hello. I'm Luthern Williams, head of New Roads School. I want to welcome you to our inaugural critical conversation series on the persistence of systemic racism. I would also like to thank our partner schools, Echo Horizon, PS1, UCLA Lab School and Westside Neighborhood School for helping to make this evening possible. Tonight, we will be developing our critical awareness and understanding of systemic racism in our schools and society, in order to begin to determine the strategic we can take individually and collectively to dismantle it. The impact of race in independent schools is personal for me. As an alumnus of an independent school, I received a traditionally defined academically excellent education and I graduated in 1996. Oh, 1996. I'm actually giving myself a few years, 1986, 34 years ago.

That education is in part responsible for helping me become one of the 3% of African-American heads of independent schools in the country. But that education came at a high price to my wellbeing because of the racial related stressors and negative messages about my race I encountered on a regular basis. When I wanted to leave my school, my parents who had attended segregated schools in the South, would tell me to ignore what I was experiencing and keep my eye on the prize, equality, education. Like W. E. B. Du Bois, an African-American sociologist, historian, author and civil rights activist says, of his time at Harvard in 1888, 132 years ago, "I felt I was in my independent school but not of it. I was a perpetual visitor."

I think the recent black @ social post in 2020, about the experiences of African-American students at many prestigious independent schools, express similar sentiments to those of Du Bois and me. I would not however have changed my choice of attending an independent school. It was and is a tool of self determination. In fact, I have devoted my life to independent schools because of my belief in them. However, I believe it is time for us to look at the role that private charter and public schools can play in eradicating the largely unconscious systemic racism within our schools in society.

We can not allow our passive complicity and complacency to perpetuate a system that harms and limits all of us, including all of our children and our society. It is time to free ourselves to honor and leverage diversity as America's greatest asset and as an educational, social, political and economic imperative. The sustainability and future of our great American social experiment and the wellbeing of all of our young people then demand that we do the work now. We thank you for taking this step with us tonight. Now, I'm going to turn it over to Mario Johnson to begin our conversation with Professor Kendi, whom we're so pleased to have with us tonight.

MARIO JOHNSON:

Thank you so much Luthern. And thank you, Professor Kendi for being with us this evening. I'm going to jump right into things because we have a lot to cover. The first segment as Mark was sharing integration and wellness's equity. New growth has been grounded in equity work since its founding. However, the research foundation for our racial equity approach in educational model was solidified as a result of the collaborative relationship our head of school developed with UCLA School of Medicine, clinical Professor of psychiatry and a world renowned Harvard trained expert of interpersonal neurobiology, Dr. Daniel Siegel.

Grounded by Professor Siegel's research on integration, new relative and integrative educational model of the development of full human potential. This pedagogical framework rooted and promoting humanity and wellbeing centers on the development of the intellect, heart and spirit as the ultimate goal of any meaningful, relevant and connected educational pursuit. Given the objective of this model with its focus on the development of the intellect, heart and spirit as the ultimate goal of meaningful, relevant and connected pursuit of education, can you discuss the role that anti-racism plays?

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Sure. Well, first let me just express my things for being able to be in conversation with you and thank you, Luthern for your wonderful opening remarks and really pointed. I think that what's really sort of thinking about the development of the mind... When I think of the development of the mind, I'm actually not thinking about pouring as much information into a mind as possible as much as... And the way that that works as it relates to being racist is in many ways, racist ideas are constantly being poured onto the heads of people. At the same time, people aren't necessarily taught how to think or to protect themselves from really that reign of racist ideas. And so, when I'm thinking about the development of the mind from an anti-racist perspective, I'm not thinking about understanding intellect as how much a student knows. I'm understanding interlock as how much a student has a desire to know.

In other words, I think those students who the most intellectual or those students who have the greatest desire to know. In other words, we nurture, you can nurture their critical thought. And they're seeking to constantly grow intellectually as opposed to imagining that they know it all, that they know the reason why black people are disproportionately poor is because there's something wrong with them. And I think, if we're intellectually curious, I think that's also going to then nurture our spirit, right? I think the people who are intellectually curious are also typically people who have a strong moral center and that moral center thereby, really enhances their spirit. So to me, I mean, I just think that in many ways we're taught to be racist, we're educated to be racist. When we're not really educating the fullness of a human being, that's obviously a serious problem and it's a national crime that's happening year in and year out.

MARIO JOHONSON:

Thank you. Luthern.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Before I get to the next question, I did want to really unpack that a little bit. You talked about, Dr. Kendi, intellectually curious. And I'm wondering what you think is the role of intellectual curiosity in anti-racism and developing that stance.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Yeah. So someone who is intellectually curious while also striving to be anti-racist is trying to figure out the policies, the conditions, the structure, the system that is causing, let's say, racial inequality. As opposed to going the easy way out and even though oftentimes wrong way out and saying it's because there's something wrong with those people. So black people are dying at higher rates from COVID-19 because there's something wrong with black people. No, it's actually someone who's intellectually curious, will say, "Okay. What's actually going on? What's really going on? What are the conditions that are leading to black people dying at twice the rate of white people?" So they begin to unpack our society, begin to study the policies and the conditions and practices that are actually leading to that disparity.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Well, that's an interesting thing because what I'm hearing you say and we have a lot of educators who are listening is essentially that there is a central role of critical thinking and systems thinking in terms of really understanding how to effectively approach dismantling racism and protecting oneself, as you said, from the racist messages that it's not simply about information and having information poured in your head. Is that accurate?

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Precisely. I mean, critical thought is everything.

MARIO JOHONSON:

It seems also that there is a humanistic component also, that inherent in the anti-racist perspective also. Can you talk about that just a little bit, Professor Kendi?

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Well, yeah, I mean, I think when you say humanist, there are two ways to understand the relationship. First, that racism is intersecting with many different forms of bigotry. So if we understand the role of racism and we look outside our homes, you got the next street, it's intersecting with sexism and the next street it's ableism and the next street, it's homophobia. And so to really, truly fight against racism is to also fight against other forms of bigotry, because racism is constantly intersecting with other forms of bigotry in the lives of people. So black women are not just facing racism and sexism but they're facing their intersection as both feminists have had long argued.

And so, obviously to really fight off racism, you have to fight off other forms of bigotry too. So you really have to be a fighter for human rights. But I think simultaneously... And I don't think that we realize the ways in which anti-racist policies certainly disproportionately help black, brown and indigenous people but they end up helping white people too. To give an example, we oftentimes importantly talk about the way in which Jim Crow voting policies disenfran-

chised black voters in South Carolina and Mississippi and Arkansas but they also tended to disenfranchise poor whites. We can talk about the ways... And so, I think it's important for us to realize many of the policies that we've advanced will certainly help black people but they'll help the vast majority of humans, because when you create just, an equitable society for all people, you know who benefits? All people.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

So it seems to me, Dr. Kendi that you're also arguing for, looking at anti-racism within an anti-oppression framework. That to just look at anti-racism is not enough, that you're looking at a framework that really liberates all human beings and provides equity for all human beings and this is one lens of this oppression.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Precisely. And the reason being is because as I stated, you can't... I wrote a book entitled... I wrote, *How to Be an Antiracist*. And one of the reasons why there were chapters on gender racism and queer sort of racism and class racism is because the way that racism operates, at least let's say for black folks, black folks aren't just black, they're also the gender, typically. They also are in a class. They're also having an ethnicity. And what's happening with racism, it's intersecting with these other sort of forms. And so, you can't really understand what's happening to black poor people without understanding racism and classism or its intersection.

And what that means is for instance, because of their intersection, black poor people are more likely to live in high poverty neighborhoods than white poor people, right? So there's the disparity between white and black poor people that needs to be addressed just as there's disparities between black people and white people.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

One of the things or one of the questions that was offered by one of the schools that helped to make tonight possible, Echo Horizon, was how can independent schools embrace and advance the ideas of anti racism? What are the first steps? And I think that question it's really interesting because I think schools are asking that question individually in terms of what they can do for their students. But I think also what can they do as institutions to advance anti-racism? And particularly as schools that number of the independent schools have more resources, generally speaking than some of the public or charters.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

So let me give an example like as a... At BU, I direct our center for anti-racist research. And one of the things we're seeking to build through our center at BU which can be also done at independent schools is project-based sort of learning. So in other words, we for instance... It would be incredible for instance, if an independent school was to organize a group of students to help give away food to a community that's experiencing food insecurity. But you

know what that school can also do? It can assemble those students to study why food insecurity is happening or is existing in that community to begin with.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Those students could also assess the types of policies that can be instituted that can eliminate food insecurity. A school is a place for learning and critical thought. And so, we need learning and critical thought in order to eliminate injustices in this country.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Well, one of the things you said and it feels very powerful. And I want to make sure that we get this point out because what I'm hearing from you is you're saying that essentially, that schools really need to really produce students who are curious about the problems and want to understand the complexity of the conditions that give rise to the problems, rather than an oversimplification or simply going into a community it's like... and making assumptions about why that problem exists or attributed it to the individuals or a group who tend to live in those communities under those conditions.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Precisely.

MARK VICKERS-WILLIS:

Now, we're now closing the topic of integration and wellness's equity. And we're now going to move to the next top topic of trauma, resilience and wellbeing. Over to you Mario.

MARIO JOHONSON:

Thank you, Mark. Professor Kendi, can you speak to the significance of trauma informed DEI work as it relates to anti-racism? What I'm hoping to get at with this question is an engagement of the seeming conflict between the provision of safe spaces for victims of trauma and the charge the anti-racism and DEI work are inherently explosive, divisive and trauma inducing.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Excuse me. So, I think the best way to explain this is to talk about... Well, first, I don't think that many Americans realize the source of this idea that when we describe someone as racist, we are attacking and seeking to hurt them and even traumatizing them. I don't think people realize the source of that philosophy because white nationalists

stopped. So white nationalists for decades have been pushing out that idea, particularly the white Americans, that when you're being described as racist people are attacking you and trying to hurt you and harm you. And that indeed that they're trying to divide the country. And indeed talking about racism is creating racism in and of itself. And why are white nationalists parroting that idea? Because they are seeking to recruit white people based on racist ideas.

And so that's what they have. So they want to create a population that believes, "Oh, they're calling this, they're describing you as racist." No, they are the problem. And you should come and join with us, because there's nothing wrong with you. Even though you just said, black people are lazy and Latinex people are invading this country and Muslim people are all terrorists, there's nothing wrong with you. And that's certainly what people like to hear. Just like when people will have symptoms as if there's something wrong with them. They want other people to say, "Oh, there's nothing wrong with you."

And it's hard to go to the doctor and for that doctor to diagnose us with a serious illness. But when that happens, when they're diagnosed with a serious illness, even though they're devastated, they don't view that doctor is trying to hurt them. If anything, most people view that doctor as trying to help them. Now they can now go about getting treatment. Even though that doctor just said something that was devastating and hurt them, they didn't feel that that doctor was trying to hurt them. And then they begin to reflect on those other people who were saying to them, "Oh, there's nothing wrong with you." They're like, "Whoa, maybe those were the people who actually trying to hurt me because they've indeed if I listened to them, I would have continued to hurt myself and others." And so, I just don't... I think if people were to understand, particularly white Americans, were to understand when the nation or even individuals are diagnosed as racist as a diagnosis, I think people would receive it and respond to it much better.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Well, Dr. Kendi, I want to follow up because one of the things that is... And I think this is true at all schools and not just independent schools. And I think one of the complications for teachers and for administrators is if we assume that we all have been conditioned with racist ideas and that essentially children come to an awareness about this as they think more critically. And in coming to that awareness, sometimes they make mistakes that actually injure somebody else because they've said or done something that someone else finds offensive. And so, I think the complication becomes, what is the action to be taken? Is it a punitive action? Are you protecting the child who may have been impacted by it? Or are you trying to also create learning for the child who may have said or done something that impacted the other child? And I think there's a very complicated situation. So I'd love to hear your take on it, because I know this is a situation that happens at schools all the time.

MARIO JOHONSON:

Daily, literally.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Yes. Well, let me say that this also happens in college and I actually would have a different response for college. And I actually think there should be much more punitive response in college. But I think at the K-12 level, I think that first and foremost, the response has to be victim centered. And I think in general, when we're talking about a response thoughts to a racist act, we should be victim centered. And oftentimes see if you take this off of race and you talk about, for instance, let's say somebody who sexually assaulted someone. And oftentimes if they're a white male and they come from a wealthy background, the judge is like, "Oh, well, let me not... I don't want to sort of throw away that kid's life." And that's a 19 or 20 or 25 year old but meanwhile, if a 15 year old black kid engages in some sort of, let's say violent crime, suddenly, they're just considering the sort of victim, right?

And they can throw that kid away for the rest of his life. I'm saying that because I think too often when white folks are the perpetrator, the typical conception is to think about them as opposed to the victim. And then when black folks are the perpetrator, it's... Anyway, I think I've made that point. But ultimately, I think that it should be held in a case-by-case situation. So I can't really speak sort of broadly. And I think that the victim and their parents and their community, that what they desire or what they need or what they want or how they can move on from that incident, should take primacy over what's happening with the perpetrator. I think that in a general sense.

And I'm seeing that partly because when it comes to racism in this country, historically and even currently, we have to start recognizing and looking upon the folks who are being victimized by racism. And we really need to take them seriously. But on the other hand, I think that we should not treat kids as adults. And we should always be looking to use experiences as learning experience. But once you get to college, I'm sorry, you're grown and you should have known better. And I'm saying that because too often you have 22 year old kids and you have... I'm sorry, you have 22 year old grown people, who Professors are like, "Oh no, nothing should happen to this kid." They just didn't know that putting banana peels under a black student's dorm was offensive. Now they can learn that that's offensive. And I'm sorry, that's typically a defensive posture.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

So from what I'm understanding, I mean, you are looking at the developmental stages of the kids in that K-12 framework and understanding too, that the learning that is going to naturally occur as they're socialized in socializing with each other and learning how to be more fully human and humane and compassionate and empathic and be more mindful about the words and thoughts.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Yes.

MARIO JOHONSON:

Why in fact did you distinguish the K-12 space versus the college space? One of the things that I deal with as kind of the discipline guy who deals with these issues on a practical ground level is a lot of frustrated adults that want absolute penalties levels in situations like this. And I continue to have to remind them, well, they're developing their kids and we have to take that into account. And when it's these types of issues, explosive issues around race, often, particularly on the part of BIPOC, they often feel that well, I've had to be patient and I've had to be understanding. I want to see definitive results in the face of conduct like that. And so, the fact that you're recognizing it is a difference between a K-12 space and an adult space. When you're looking at developing minds, our charges are different.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Yeah. And I think... This is a hard, hard question to answer because... I agree with you and I agree that we should treat children as children. And if there's anyone we should be forgiving towards, it's children. On the other hand, we have to create environments where children are safe. And fundamentally, they're just too many black and brown and indigenous children who just do not feel safe from a racial standpoint in their environments, particularly in their schools. And so, how do we simultaneously ensure that people feel safe to be themselves while simultaneously also treating potential perpetrators as children? And I think that's a very delicate sort of dance and that's why I couldn't be in your position.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Well, thank you for [crosstalk 00:32:48] in the room feel better that you've acknowledged the complexities of it.

MARIO JOHONSON:

And [crosstalk 00:32:55] case by case basis, case by case basis everything, because that's what I'm taking back to the school with me, case by case basis.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Well, because I think that the thing that would be interesting to hear your point of view on as well, is that at New Roads, we've increasingly started to think about diversity equity and inclusion work in terms of wellbeing. And really thinking about the wellbeing of all of our students and the kind of unique trauma that students have as a result of oppression that they experience. And so, I'm curious in terms of your discussing the kind of trauma that you think results for African-American students in their school experience?

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Well, first, I mean, if you're in a school environment in which you're constantly being picked on, in denigrated, because of the color of your skin or because of the texture of your hair or because of the language that you speak or because of your accent or because of where you live. And it's just constant and regular. This is bullying. This is racial bullying. This is racial abuse. And oftentimes, our kids are very shrewd, so they know when adults are around and they're not. And they know when they can do it and what adults they can do it in front of and what adults they can not. And so, I think that this isn't... But the way in which a school can actually get in front of this is to actively and aggressively teach in anti-racist education. Right?

Because even if it... because studies consistently show that if you teach kids to be anti-racist, then that's going to have a better, even a greater effect on their behavior and on the way they act in the world, then even what their parents are doing or not doing. And so, if you teach a child that's white, that there was nothing right about you because of the color of your skin... And if you teach a black child actively that there's nothing wrong about you because of the color of your skin, when that child comes around and tries to tease them... And they're certain that there was nothing wrong with them because of the color of their skin. It's not going to land in the same way, as a kid who is still struggling with their sense of self.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Well, we have-

MARK VICKERS-WILLIS:

Luthern, I think we're going to have to move along, unfortunately. We're now closing the topic of trauma, resilience and wellbeing. We're now going to move to the next topic of climate and culture, racial identity, development and accountability. Mario.

MARIO JOHNSON:

Thank you, Mark. Please share Professor Kendi, some critical insights on the ideal climate and culture in which anti-racism efforts are most efficacious to the racial identity development of K-12 students.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Well, I think in addition to what I just described in terms of actively teaching kids how they should be relating to the color of their skin and openly challenging the way in which they're taught to relate to the color of their skin. But then also I think to normalize the perspectives, the literature, the cultural products of different groups. So this isn't... So it's normal for people to one day read F. Scott Fitzgerald and the next day, Zora Neale Hurston, this isn't, "Oh, we're now turning to black literature." This is a literature, right? And this sort of you then normalize it, you're normalizing

the really a multicultural, our curriculum, you're normalizing understanding America or the Western world or the other world from multiple vantage points.

You're also constantly trying to encourage students to think about the structural cause of really human life, rather than the sort of certain cultures or behaviors being sort of better or worse. And you're really consistently modeling of how we can transform and improve society and institutions as opposed to modeling, okay. How can we improve the behaviors of groups?

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Well, Professor Kendi, I want to... You said something that I think is really important to tease out here, because it's interesting because some of the schools, we talk about having a multicultural curriculum and curriculum with diverse voices and history. What I heard from you and I want to make sure I'm getting this right, that it's also the assumptions that the person who may be teaching that literature or teaching that history conveys and that there may be... in terms of talking about it as black literature, rather than seeing it as having its own aesthetic and being part of a larger conversation. And so, I'm curious about that because it seems like you're going beyond the level of the curriculum and onto the level about what are the underlying assumptions about how it is people look at it and what they convey.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Yeah. I mean, let's talk about literature, because it's probably easier to explain. But let's say if you have a novel that conveys the life of, let's say white suburban folks in California. And then let's say you have a novel, like, their eyes are watching God, that conveys the life and the lives of black rural southerners. So let's say if you're teaching their eyes are watching God and the way in which you're teaching it is you're constantly using white suburban examples. Right? What are you standardizing? Even though you're teaching another culture, you're not teaching the culture because you're constantly trying to render it based on white suburban examples. So you haven't really been able to understand the culture to teach it. Right?

And I think that to teach, to educate is largely to teach culture and to teach skills. And so, obviously I think people understand the importance of knowing skills in order to teach them but you also have to know cultures in order to teach them as well. And oftentimes, teachers and educators convey what some scholars have called a multicultural whiteness, in which white... It's essentially whiteness, it's going to a Chinese restaurant but I only really like the Chinese food because it's not authentic Chinese food, it's specifically was made for white folks who quote like Chinese food. I think that we really need to be teaching students the essence of different ways of thinking and being in the world, not dressing it up into a culture that they more familiarly understand.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Are you suggesting that... I mean, there's an assumption that, of what the standard of the yard stick is and that's really not changing or shifting. It's just that people are measuring these other cultural artifacts with that same yard stick. And so, it really isn't going into that culture and exploring that in its own terms.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Exactly. And you're literally putting the... You can't really see the culture because you don't understand the culture. And so, what the teacher or the educator is doing is giving that student the sort of glasses of their own culture to assess that culture, as opposed to teaching that culture so that they can better see it for themselves. And the more you teach the culture, the clearer it will become.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Wow.

MARIO JOHONSON:

So both UCLA Lab school and Echo Horizons followed up on this issue with the following combined question, they ask, how can parents ensure that their children develop and grow as anti-racists? And what are some of the complications of addressing anti-racism with elementary school children? And how should that be done?

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

I mean, I don't see any complications other than just the examples or the explanations that's provided. To give an example, my daughter is four years old. She's about to enter into elementary school. And I think we should be constantly trying to figure out ways to teach students and teach our youngest people about let's say policies and we should be teaching them for instance, that those people do not have more because they are more, those other folks don't necessarily have less because they are less. And then we can explain the reasons why what's actually happening is rules, unfair rules. Like the rule of when you have to go to bed every night that you think is unfair, well, there's unfair rules in society that are unfair to particular groups.

We have to really think outside and that's the beauty of skilled teachers, right? They can have the capacity to really break down these complex concepts in a way that a seven-year-old or five-year-old can understand. And that should be the goal. We should not just assume that it's too sophisticated for kids to understand, because it's our job as educators to clarify those complexities for our children.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

What parents... It's interesting, because we had a some of the questions that got to the idea is what the parents feel that it's not really the place of schools to teach the anti-racism and that they are uncomfortable actually having this topic taught, particularly to kids who are in the K five space.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

So I think it's important for people to recognize that if we're not actively teaching our students to be anti-racist, then we're actively teaching them to be racist. So there is no neutrality, right? And I think that's... People imagine that there's some sort of neutrality. So let's say for instance, we teach the standard U.S. history, the way it's commonly taught, the way in which black folks are typically an afterthought or a paragraph sort of here and there. That is essentially creating and teaching a history of black marginality, which is a racist idea and that's the standard, that's normal.

And so, people call that education. And then when we actively teach an anti-racist education, you have some people who say that that's political or that's indoctrination. So we're not indoctrinating kids that black folks are at the margins. So either way, I think we need to reflect that we're teaching a message. We're either teaching a message of hierarchy, of certain groups being marginal over teaching a message of equality. There's no in-between that. And that's why I'm advocating for our teachers to actively teach children to be anti-racist. And again, if we're not going to teach this in the schools, where are we going to teach this?

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

And how did the schools hold themselves-

MARK VICKERS-WILLIS:

Luthern, I think we're going to have to move on. This is such a wonderful conversation, we could go on for a long time. Thank you to Professor Kendi but we're now going to close the topic of climate and culture, racial identity development, accountability. We're now going to move to our final topic on interest convergence and moving forward. Mario.

MARIO JOHNSON:

Thank you, Mark. So Professor Kendi, critical race theory pioneer Derrick Bell posits the notion of interest convergence, pardon me, which stipulates that black people only achieve civil rights and, or social justice victories when white and black interests converge. In your view, what are the implications of this postulation as it relates to anti-racism and the independent school community?

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

I agree with Derrick Bell's theory because there's certainly been times in history in which interests converged but I also think there are other times in history where black folks forced through organizing, through movements racial change. But I think it's important for Americans to realize that at least as it relates to schools, that there should be a convergence of interest. I think too often you have, let's say, parents who are thinking about their school, thinking about the school that other kids go to. And when they hear someone like me saying, we need to equalize their schools. They think that somehow they're going to lose if we were to equalize the schools, as opposed to they're going to gain. So, in other words, why can't every school in America, not just be a first class school?

So many parents are able to send their kids to first-class schools... And people are like, "Oh, well, if we eliminate sort of coach, then I'm going to lose." No. How about we actually think about creating schools that are like private jets for every single child. I mean, if we're not investing in our children, then what are we doing? And secondly, we should also, if we're not changing, if we haven't been able to change the material conditions on the ground, material conditions where there's all sorts of economic inequality. And if we are going to convey this idea that that education is a way out or a way up, then we need to radically transform our educational system because the current system operates in a nutshell, in a way in which those kids who have the least in their homes typically have the least in their schools. And we need to transform that to the kids who are going to have the least in their home should have the most in their schools. That's how I will reach this place in which education can be an elevator.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

And Dr. Kendi, you said something that I felt was so profound because it's felt to me you're getting that, this idea of what is education and underlying that sort of, what are the assumptions about what kids need to know and be able to do to live as informed citizens? And so it seems to me, it's a much broader question, that this anti-racism piece is really raising a larger question about our society, about our systems, about what does it mean to be educated and that it's not left or right. It's not the polarization but it's of even a matter of what does it mean to do rigorous scholarship and to search for truth.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Precisely. And I think that... I want... I mean, is there anything... I can't imagine anything more precious than the minds of our children. And so, why can't we ensure that that mind is being whole home to critically think and constructively think? Why can't we ensure that that mind is being trained to continuously search for truth, even if it's a truth that goes against everything we are, everything we've been taught. And I think that for me, we have to be willing to face the truth. We have to be willing to teach the truth. And the truth oftentimes is going to tell us that we're dead wrong. And indeed how to be an anti-racist was really me facing that truth of all the times I was dead wrong. And we have to have that sort of vulnerability and willingness to... and even we have to show that to our children.

MARIO JOHNSON:

The faculty of our partner, Westside Neighborhood School asked a related question, they ask, how can the independent school community be impactful in the struggle for equity and education now and when the pandemic is over?

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

I mean, I think that it is important as we talked about earlier to really think about ways to turn the classroom into a laboratory of change but then also to think about ways to encourage students to be involved in racial justice activism in their communities. Our nation has on so many occasions and certainly we're living through one of those times, been led... Like change has been led by young people. So we have to be willing to support our young people to be the drivers of change. And we can't hold them back. We certainly can put seatbelts on them but they're going to go as fast and we need them to push us and to push the society.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

And I do want to just ask this question before we open it up. That is, I know that a lot of the schools, the independent schools, the desire is there to try to affect systemic change inside of themselves as well as in society. What would you say are the first steps for a school that wants to take the journey toward becoming an anti-racist institution? What do you think it needs to do?

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

I think it would be helpful for any school to define a racist policy very clearly or define it as any measure that leads to racial inequity or injustice to really assess its own policies, to see what policies are indeed racist, that they need to rid themselves of, what practices are indeed racist that need to be made anti-racist. But then as we talked about earlier, what is the relationship of the school to the community? Is it a force for equity and justice in the community or is it like a person who is in the game, imagines themselves on the sideline and is not doing anything while the status quo of inequity persist?

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

Wow.

MARK VICKERS-WILLIS:

Well, thank you. I think what we might do is open it up for some of the questions in the remaining time that we have. And they've been so many wonderful questions. What I might start with here is, people have been really interested in the concept of accountability. And this one was, how did the schools or how should hold themselves accountable to teach anti-racism?

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

I think that school has to develop a framework for what is anti-racist teaching, a guidebook, a statement, a set of values, a set of guidelines. And that then allows the school and particularly the members of the school to hold themselves accountable, it's becomes a law, right? That you can then measure yourself against.

MARK VICKERS-WILLIS:

Thank you. This next question is from Asa who says, are there anti-racist educational practice? You have studied in other countries and cultures, that America could look to possibly adopt.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

So, the first thing that comes to mind, I mean, specifically thinking about another form of bigotry in terms of antisemitism is Germany starts teaching its students about the Holocaust in kindergarten. Why can't we teach our students about racism and slavery as early as kindergarten? I just wanted to give an example of what's happening, you know the countries and certainly what's possible here.

MARK VICKERS-WILLIS:

Thank you. These questions from David Bryan saying, I wonder if you could speak about repair or what happens after someone makes a mistake by thinking, saying or doing something that is racist or racially insensitive? Is the founding head of our school and an older white guy. He said, I look back on the errors that I made, the missteps I took. And I also looked back with enormous gratitude for the ways in which my friends, black, brown, Asian and white, both held my feet to the fire and allowed me to recover, to learn, to take different steps the next time. There are times these days I wonder if there's much space for errors of this kind.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

I think if you're really trying to create an anti-racist community, then the question is not whether a person makes an error that determines whether that person is striving to be racist or anti-racist. The question is when that error is pointing out to that person, how do they respond? If they deny it, they're being racist, if they admit it and strive to repair and be different and better, they're being anti-racist.

MARK VICKERS-WILLIS:

Well, thank you. There are so many questions. And I'm sorry to the many people who submitted them. But looking at the time, we will need to move into our concluding remarks. Professor Kendi, on behalf of the communities to New Roads, Echo Horizon School, PS1, UCLA Lab School and Westside Neighborhood School, we want to thank you for your generosity of time and wisdom here this evening. Furthermore, we want to thank you for the tireless and

critical work you are doing to lead and advance long overdue conversations and actions toward creating a vision for America, that honors differences and promotes equity and justice and shared opportunity for all. Sincere thanks from as all. And I'd like to invite Luthern to make some closing remarks.

LUTHERN WILLIAMS:

I also want to thank you, Professor Kendi and just say that I thought your insights were profound and I think they will continue to grow in me and I hope for all of those who were listening. And I want to thank everyone again for engaging in this critical conversation about this complex issue. We invite you to join the New Roads community and mobilize to advance the work of racial equity in our schools, in our society. We will be inviting you to continue this journey with us on January 14th at 6:00 PM, virtually, to celebrate the birthday of Dr. King. New Road School and the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. Westside Coalition, will be hosting an event entitled, unfinished work. Advancing Dr. King's legacy of racial equity. Young orators, filmmakers, musicians and artists will be featured. Information for participating can be found on the website at newroads.org/MLK.

We hope you will join us to keep his dream and the promise of America alive. And the last thing that I would like to say before we sign off is I think that Dr. Kendi is doing just that. I think he's trying to give us a roadmap to figure out how to make this American experiment work and what it's going to take for that American experiment to be one in which all people can thrive. So we thank you from the bottom of our hearts for the work you're doing in the world, Dr. Kendi. And we appreciate you joining us this evening.

MARIO JOHONSON:

Thank you, Dr. Kendi.

PROFESSOR IBRAM X. KENDI:

Thank you. Take care.

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