

**Virginia Commission on**  
**African American**  
**History Education in the Commonwealth**



**Virginia Commission on African American History Education in the Commonwealth**

Meeting Minutes

Full Inaugural Meeting

University of Virginia – Newcomb Hall South Meeting Room

180 McCormick Road, Richmond

October 28, 2019

**Attendees**

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**Present Commission Members:**

Cainan Townsend, Beau Dickenson, Alice Reilly, Pastor Michele Thomas, Robert Watson, Maria Burgos, Christine Harris, Vanessa Thaxton-Ward, Derrick Alridge, Leah Walker, Jarvis Bailey, Crystal Edwards, Crystal DeLong, Renita Williams, Christonya Brown, Rosa Atkins, Cassandra Newby-Alexander, Annie Evans, Ed Ayers, Chris Van Tassell, Betty Jean Wolfe, Pam Croom, Makya Renae Little, Pat Fisher, Gloria Randolph-King, John Lee, Bill White, Mechelle Hankerson, Tyson Gilpin, Linda Deans, Bruce Peters, Katie Whitehead, Diane Cole, Jonathan Zur, Dietra Trent, Brian Jordan

**Absent Commission Members:**

Rodney Robinson, Christy Coleman, James Lane

**Intercultural Development Research Center Staff:**

Michelle Martinez Vega, Aurelio Montemayor, Paula Johnson, Morgan Craven, Celina Moreno

**Governor's Office Staff:**

Atif Qarni, Holly Coy, Traci DeShazor, Victoria Noles, Chidi Uche

**Virginia Department of Education Staff:**

Leah Walker

**Public Comments:**

Dr. Linda Deans, Karen Wilson, Kent Ruffin, LaShawn Smith

**Additional Speakers:**

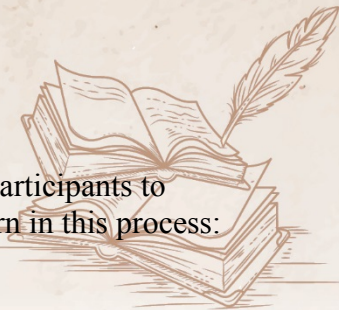
Governor Ralph Northam, James Ryan, President, UVA

**10:00am Welcome**

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Secretary Qarni welcomed commission members to the inaugural meeting by asking participants to answer a question: what excites you about this work? Leaders found a common concern in this process:



often, incomplete or inaccurate history is taught in schools. Essentially, committee members are concerned that teachers are not equipped to deliver this content, and that many have no cultural understanding and responsiveness to African American history. One goal of the committee is to help educators and policymakers rethink the format and framework of history to help their students learn how to think and engage with African American history and, broadly, to engage with their communities starting from a young age. Additionally, a major theme that needs to be addressed in African American history is how present-day challenges are linked to this history, and they must be taught in a meaningful way.

Traci DeShazor swore in all commission members with an official oath.

## 10:45am Commission Charge, Roles and Responsibilities

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Secretary Qarni led the discussion on the commission's roles and responsibilities. The Commission is made up of two subcommittees; one on standards and one on professional development.

Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander chairs the standards subcommittee, they will address charges 1 and 2 from the executive order, which will focus on technical edits and comprehensive reform in Virginia's history and social studies standards.

Dr. Derrick Alridge chairs the professional development subcommittee. The subcommittee will address charge 3 and give recommendations about teaching these standards to history teachers along with culturally-responsive pedagogy that supports all teachers.

Dr. Rosa Atkins serves as a facilitator between group conversations and will guide the committee toward the final goals.

The Intercultural Development Research Center (IDRA) will work with the committee to support their work in the coming months, bringing their experience in standards revision and deep expertise in professional development in addition to co-facilitating, co-planning, recording and transcribing to prepare for the Commission's final report.

## 11:15am Virginia's History Standards

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Dr. Christine Harris and Christonya Brown, staff at Virginia Department of Education, presented foundational knowledge about the history standards in Virginia and how they are typically reviewed.

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They stated the Commission's task is not to rewrite the standards, but to make recommendations on edits that can be done in the short-term and look at how the standards could be organized to provide a comprehensive picture of the African American story. Dr. Harris and Ms. Brown's address included the following points:

- The Code of Virginia outlines the Board of Education's responsibilities and the requirement to set educational standards. The goal is that students are successful in school and are preparing for life.
- 1995: The Board of Education began reforming education, beginning with four core areas (English, history, mathematics, science) and technology.
- 1999: The Board was charged with creating new standards for other educational areas. Most recently, computer science was adopted by the board.
- The Board's obligation to review and revise the standards is on a seven-year cycle, though the Board can revise standards at an earlier time if necessary.
- Public comment is vital during the standards review process.
- Educator committees are convened from all over the state to make recommendations on standards. These recommendations are brought through the chain of command in the Department of Education before they are brought to the Board.
- There are typically two to three public hearings at this point. Information from the hearings is taken, processed, and brought back to the Board of Education.
- Currently, there are 1,853 public schools in Virginia that serve 1.2 million students.
- Revisions to Virginia's education code are a lengthy process. In 2014, the Virginia Department of Education presented the Board of Education with a schedule outlining the revision process. The standards were adopted March 26, 2015, and the process was wrapped up in January of 2016, with school districts encouraged to implement the standards in the 2018-19 school year. During this time, the Department of Education processed about 1500 public comments that were integrated into the standards for review.
- The committees for these innovations are diverse: for the 2014 standards change, the first committee was made up of educators, administrators, division specialists and coordinators. The external committee was made up of museum educators, organizations, colleges and university, and those interested in history and social science.
- A major catalyst in making recommendations for revising Virginia's history standards is the realization that the current framework in public schools was basically built for teachers to help students pass the tests rather than gain a genuine understanding of history.
- One goal of the process is to raise the level of rigor in Virginia's schools. To move from students demonstrating knowledge to students applying the social science skills they have learned.
- The committee is charged with recommending how to build capacity with classroom teachers and provide proper resources. Equity is a part of it, and the notion of equitable teaching and learning needs to go beyond social sciences.
- Content that the committee recommends also must be measured against the realities of teaching – the United States encompasses more than 400 years of African American history, but the school year is only 180 days long and teacher have obligations beyond academics to fill.



## Lunch Break

### 12:30pm Greetings from Governor Ralph Northam

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Governor Northam communicated his administration's vision on how to improve education, especially for African American students and all those who have been excluded or left behind. Diversity and equity are major priorities of the administration. Questions moving forward include: Who is teaching in Virginia, how are they prepared to teach, and what are they teaching? It is vital to address African American history in the classroom because oppression is still a major factor in the lives of African Americans across the country. He noted that learning must go beyond the boundaries of the classroom so that students may fully experience history at historical sites and museums.

### 12:40pm Greetings from UVA President, James Ryan

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UVA President, James Ryan, addressed the commission and emphasized his dedication to pursuing the truth and understanding the past to make sense of the present. He further addressed how the Commission's first official convening at the University of Virginia aligns with their efforts to honor the history of African Americans in the state through university commissions on slave labor and segregation. The commission's work is not dissimilar to the sort of scholarship and thinking done in universities, and Ryan emphasizes dedication to pursuing the truth and understanding the past to make sense of the present. The work the commission is doing will help future students be able to face the past honestly.

### 1:00pm A Vision for Redesigned Professional Development

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Dr. Derrick Alridge led the segment by addressing professional development as it pertains to teaching African American history. He began by acknowledging evidence from his own teaching career that teachers were not prepared to discuss or teach African American history with their students because they themselves were lacking in knowledge and strategies. His ideas about how to engage teachers with African American history include:

- Reading the works of influential African American historians, such as W.E.B. DuBois' *Black Reconstruction* and *The Souls of Black Folk*. Educators must approach history truthfully, no matter how difficult it is.
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- Understanding that the African American experience is not monolithic – perspectives are dependent on the time period and region.
- Broadening the scope of African American history beyond the period of the Civil Rights Movement, Brown V. Board of Education, and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.
- Focusing on black women’s history and their experiences by capitalizing on recent works that explore these important accounts.
- Utilizing primary sources of oral history.
- Including film as history, which includes giving teachers the tools they need to use film in the classroom and inform their students.
- Incorporating hip-hop as a viable form of culturally relevant pedagogy. A model for this approach is educator, historian, and MC Gabriel Benn, aka Asheru, who uses rap music to teach history.
- Reaching out to professional associations that already have experience helping educators understand African American history, such as the Association for the Study of African American history, founded in 1915 by Carter G. Woodson.

Leah Walker followed Dr. Alridge at the podium and discussed culturally responsive instruction. Her talking points included:

- It is essential to approach the work of improving African American history in the state by acknowledging that African American students have been excluded from learning their own history.
- The framework for culturally responsive practice must be based in love and understanding. Achieving equity is not giving all students the same resources, it is providing the resources that each student needs, which will depend on the student’s identity.
- Virginia is a diverse state in terms of student population – 52 percent of their students are young men and women of color, but their teaching staff is 82 percent white. There is work to be done in helping educators understand and genuinely engage with all of their students.
- Ms. Walker describes two definitions of culture, one that serves as the basis to inform educators, and the other serves as an output:
  - Basis: “Culture is the customary beliefs, values, social forums, and material traits of a racial, ethnic, religious, or social group.”
  - Output: “Culture is the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, or behavior that depends on the capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations.”
- Culturally relevant pedagogy recognizes the importance of students’ cultural references in all aspects of learning and does not just reinforce the values of dominant culture.
- Educators must expect and yield academic success; they must help students develop positive ethnic and cultural identities while helping them achieve academically.

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- A critical aspect of the committee's work involves teachers gaining knowledge and understanding of African American history and being unafraid of the difficult questions and conversations students have about history and how it impacts social inequities in the present day.
- Culturally responsive teaching requires educators to make changes on every level – instructional techniques, materials, student-teacher relationships, classroom climate, and self-awareness.
- Educators must view all their students through an asset-based lens and create learning communities where all heritages are valued. They must challenge stereotypes, prejudices, racism, and other forms of intolerance and oppression and mediate power balances in the classroom.

## **1:45pm Subcommittee Discussion and Report Out**

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Commission members identified two subcommittees: the professional development subcommittee and the standards subcommittee, before breaking into groups for smaller targeted discussions. The professional development subcommittee underscored two major ideas they want to address in their work: the teaching of African American history and cultural competency. The standards subcommittee will begin by defining what excellence is, and teaching that it must be geared towards understanding history as opposed to remembering factoids. Accuracy, relevancy, and coherency are major themes that must be addressed in the standards subcommittee.

The professional development committee wants to find what exists in terms of professional development for African American history, what is required for the submission of professional development recommendations, and what kind of professional development Virginia's community of teachers, principals and students need. The subcommittee wants to align all their objectives to Virginia's Standards of Learning.

The standards subcommittee is also excited about potentially providing student surveys to ask what they want to know about African American history that is not currently taught. Standards must consider the ways that the current student generation receives and understands information in the age of cell phones. Today's students have a wealth of knowledge at their fingertips and must learn how to process it properly and think critically.

## **2:30pm Public Comment**

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Four members of the public spoke during this initial committee meeting.

Dr. Linda Deans commented from the perspective of a former educator helping rewrite and adjust curriculum at Loudoun County Public schools. She has observed that teachers do not really understand

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what they do not know, and they do not know how to properly help their students learn unfamiliar history. Dr. Deans suggests that the committee connect with superintendents, central office, supervisors, and administrators before the teachers themselves.

Karen Wilson represents African American Heritage 365, which does Jeopardy-style bowls on African American history. Though it is an exciting program, she has noticed that there is little public engagement in their events beyond people who come to support their students. One question that the committee can address is how to get the public out and engaging with history.

Kent Ruffin is a Virginian businessman whose comments encouraged the committee to keep in mind how to engage all stakeholders. Teaching African American history to students also involves the approval and understanding of their parents and families.

LaShawn Smith works with African American Heritage 365 and shared his perspective as a historian and father who teaches his young daughter African American history that he does not see her get in the classroom.

## **3:00pm Closing and Next Steps**

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Rosa Atkins thanked commission members for their commitment and participation in bringing a positive change to Virginia's K12 African American History standards. She addressed next steps for when the commission returns for another meeting in mid-December.

The meeting adjourned at 3pm.