

BLACK HISTORY MONTH CAN MAKE US ALL BETTER CANADIANS

BY CRAIG AND MARC KIELBURGER



Muhtadi Thomas teaches during a drum lesson at Harbourfront Centre at the Kuumba festival as part of Black History Month activities. Photo source: Carlos Osorio/Toronto Star, Getty Images.

SearchStanding in front of an auditorium of mostly white faces, the president of the [Ontario Black History Society](#) asked a group of elementary students what they knew of Black History Month. A precocious girl in the first grade raised her hand.

"She said to me, 'That's the month we have to feel bad about black people because they were slaves,'" recalled Nikki Clarke, with the patience befitting a former teacher.

"If that's the way we're teaching black history, we're doing something wrong."

Ask most Canadians about black history and they'll tell you about slavery in America, victories of the Civil Rights Movement and the giants who led it.

But what about [Canada](#)?

Mathieu Da Costa, a renowned translator hired by Samuel de Champlain, was the first recorded black person in the country. Delos Davis was the first black lawyer in Canada and one of the most respected legal minds of his time.

Viola Desmond, the civil rights icon who took a legal stand against segregated movie theatres in Nova Scotia, will be the [new face](#) of Canada's ten dollar bill. But

she made it onto our currency before she made it into our official curriculum.

"We're giving students a touristic view of black history," said Clarke.

A Eurocentric education model has resulted in underperforming racialized communities whose histories and contributions are ignored, Clarke continued.

The high school dropout rate for black students has remained around [40 per cent](#) since the 1990s, more than two and a half times Canada's national average.

Canadian [prisons](#) are disproportionately filled with visible minorities and the number of incarcerated black people has gone up 70 per cent since 2005.

Racial profiling. Criminalization. Poverty. Black Lives Matter activists have taken to the streets to force Canadians to reckon with the [black experience](#) in this country.

Our schools can take the first step in addressing the issues raised.

"Black history is not 'us' and 'them.' This history is who we are as Canadians," said Clarke, who is working towards a federally-mandated black history curriculum in Canada's schools.

With black Canadians at just three per cent of the population, we've heard the argument that Black History Month is less relevant than commemorating the larger Indigenous or South Asian community's respective histories. But Black History Month doesn't come at the expense of others.

In fact, learning about the black Canadian experience builds empathy; it doesn't divide it. Social theorist and author Jeremy Rifkin argues there is a [strong link](#) between education, critical thinking and empathy for others' experiences. [Research](#) going back to the 1980s shows students with increased empathy also perform better academically.

At a launch event for Black History Month in Toronto, writer and activist Desmond Cole spoke about Viola Desmond's story. She did not win her court case, he reminded the audience, and segregation didn't end with her. "She is celebrated not for overcoming racism but for fighting it."

The power of her story is that she fought for something she believed in. That is a lesson for all Canadians. But a ten dollar bill will not teach that—schools will.