

It's Racial Indoctrination Day at an Upscale Chicagoland School

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What passes for education at many American public schools is too often closer to indoctrination. Consider the seminar day that New Trier High School, in Winnetka, Ill., on Chicago's affluent North Shore, is planning for Feb. 28.

The title for the all-school seminar is “Understanding Today's Struggle for Racial Civil Rights.” That very term, “racial civil rights,” is misleading, since civil rights protect Americans' freedoms regardless of their race. Judging from the roster of scheduled events, the seminar might be more accurately titled “Inculcating a Progressive View of Social Justice.”

Here are a few of the offerings scheduled for presentation to New Trier's roughly 4,000 students: “SPENT: A Simulation to See How Long You Can Survive on Minimum Wage”—which touches on race at best tangentially. “Developing a Positive, Accountable White

Activism for Racial Civil Rights”—which promotes a divisive view of race as a primordial fact, the essence of identity, a bright line between oppressed and oppressor. “One Person One Vote: Can the Voting Rights Act Be Saved?”—which absurdly suggests that the Voting Rights Act is at risk of being repealed.

There are plenty of sessions on the connections that music, art and culture have with civil rights. Very little programming, however, is devoted to actually explaining to students what civil rights are and what their place is in this country’s political tradition.

Yet the continuing quest to fulfill America’s founding promise is unintelligible without a grasp of how civil rights are grounded in the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. Or without an understanding of the often-heroic struggle for civil rights over the course of American history—the abolition movement, the Civil War, the great Reconstruction constitutional amendments, the grievous setback of Jim Crow, the modern civil-rights movement, the landmark Supreme Court cases like *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Instead of teaching, the school’s aim seems to be hammering home to students that racism plagues America and will persist until white people admit their unjust privilege, renounce their unearned power, and make amends for the entrenched oppression from which they continue to profit handsomely. This despite the school board’s written policy to provide a “balanced view” on “controversial issues,” and the seminar’s stated purpose “not to promote the philosophy of one political party or another.”

On Monday a group of concerned New Trier parents will make a final attempt to persuade the school board to alter the seminar’s programming to include a diversity of views about race and rights in America. The parents have proposed, for example, inviting black conservative intellectuals—such as my Hoover Institution colleague Shelby Steele and this newspaper’s Jason Riley—or people like Pastor Corey Brooks, the director of Project Hood, which seeks to end violence and build communities on Chicago’s South Side.

So far, these efforts have been met with stonewalling and vitriol. On Feb. 6, a group of recent New Trier graduates—some of whom helped plan the seminar day—published an open letter to explain why the parents’ proposals are unreasonable and immoral. The letter opens with a long quotation from Martin Luther King Jr.’s 1963 masterpiece, “Letter From a Birmingham Jail.” The implicit message is that the New Trier parents are comparable to the “white moderate” King reproaches for preferring order to justice. King’s admonition to the comfortable—to imagine themselves in the place of the persecuted and downtrodden—is a timeless message, but inapt for the situation. New Trier failed to teach the letter writers the distinction between political activism and education.

The seminar day presupposes that the pervasiveness and potency of racism in America are facts beyond dispute, rather than hypotheses to be critically examined. That’s why the letter writers dismiss the parents’ desire for a multiplicity of views as an effort “to distract the

conversation.”

Let’s hope that the concerned New Trier parents succeed Monday in teaching the New Trier school board about education’s proper purpose. If not, maybe the best thing might be for more families to follow the parent group’s advice: “Excuse your child for the day, and encourage him or her to volunteer”—perhaps with Corey Brooks and Project Hood.

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