

# A Response to “Teaching About Laquan McDonald: A Toolkit for Teachers.”

[education.uic.edu/toolkit](http://education.uic.edu/toolkit)

In anticipation of the release of video of the killing of 17-year-old Laquan McDonald by a Chicago police officer, Chicago Public Schools (CPS) created a document titled [“Teaching About Laquan McDonald: A Toolkit for Teachers”](#) that was made available to teachers over the Thanksgiving holiday. The toolkit is “designed to help guide a difficult conversation, if you choose to discuss the case in class.” It aims “to ensure teachers feel comfortable and prepared,” anticipating that many CPS students will have seen the video of the shooting and media coverage of the ensuing protests.

As teachers and teacher educators at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) College of Education, we support CPS’s aim of helping teachers and students productively discuss LaQuan McDonald’s killing and its aftermath. This is a critical and tragic moment that demands our attention, and teachers need to be supported in their efforts to create educational spaces for young people to make sense of these events.

However, the CPS toolkit raises many questions and concerns for us. There is no mention of the reasons why this case has sparked massive protests, nor that it is one of numerous police killings and assaults on African American citizens that have been documented and protested within the last year alone. While the details of this case are unique, the events surrounding it are not isolated. A culmination of similar historical moments nationwide (many not captured on videotape) has led up to this moment in Chicago.

As public educators, we wish to offer some suggestions of how to better serve youth, communities and educators in Chicago. We are all struggling to understand these events, and how they reflect larger historical, social and political forces and conditions. We hope to reframe the discussion on the important teaching and learning that needs to happen at this time.

## CPS’ Summary of the Case

The Introduction to the lesson plan describes the killing of Laquan McDonald on October 20, 2014, and offers an account of the events that followed. This account mirrors the account given by City and police department officials: it uses the word immediately (twice) and the phrase several days later to suggest a timely investigation, and emphasizes that the officer was charged with first degree murder, as if to imply an aggressive prosecution of the case. Not mentioned are the reports that officers at the scene dispersed witnesses, failing to take statements from those who might have provided a different account. There is no mention of the fact that the video contradicts CPD testimony, that the charges were not brought until a judge ordered the video’s release (against CPD’s wishes), or of widespread demands for the resignation of the States Attorney, CPD Chief, and Mayor.

The introduction to the lesson plan also makes excuses for delays by the City and State’s Attorney Anita Alvarez throughout the investigation. These delays have been widely criticized by local and national press, and especially by local community members. The introduction fails to point out that the \$5 million settlement with the family was not the result of a lawsuit, but was initiated by the City in apparent acknowledgment of the egregiousness of the case.

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Also omitted is the fact that the murder occurred four months before the mayoral primary election of 2014, and the \$5 million settlement was finalized one week after the runoff election. It is not accurate to state that the only reason the video was not released earlier was “so as not to interfere with an active criminal investigation,” and both national and local press have challenged this assertion.

We are troubled that CPS would repeat this much-questioned narrative from City officials in a lesson plan for teachers and students, as if it were the district’s own narrative of the events of the case. No news outlets have offered an account of events that so cleanly adheres to the official story. Mayoral control of the district should not mean that CPS curriculum is used to parrot City officials’ talking points. A lesson plan designed to meet the learning needs of young people should not be used as a vehicle for political manipulation.

## **The Learning Goals of the Lesson**

CPS frames the lesson around six learning goals:

### **1. “Give students a safe outlet for expressing their thoughts without arguing about the incident.”**

The killing of LaQuan McDonald, and the circumstances and events preceding and following it, are complicated and troubling. It takes time, energy, and political will to create space for young people to grapple with these issues in all of their complexity. We believe that differences of opinion, as well as intense emotional and physical responses -- anger, grief, distress, confusion, fatigue -- are appropriate and necessary when confronted with the violent and unjust loss of human life, especially that of an adolescent of color. Rather than suggest that teachers suppress students’ reactions (“without arguing”), we recommend curriculum activities like those developed by Project NIA (see links below) that encourage students to experience and process these reactions.

### **2. “Have students imagine the best possible outcome.”**

The best possible outcome of what, and for whom? This focus simply on students “imagining” outcomes does not suggest much faith in the ability and agency of young people, and misses the fact that many students are already actively engaged in demanding and working towards real social change. Students can learn, in this moment, what it means to take collective action to hold public institutions and officials accountable, and to redress past and present injustices. This is most urgent for students who are most negatively impacted by institutional racism and poverty. As teachers, we should help our students move beyond “imagining” outcomes, to develop their agency to make change.

### **3. “Avoid further perpetuation of the fear and hatred of law enforcement that these incidents encourage.”**

This does not point to any positive learning goal, and seems to ask teachers to “teach” students not to be afraid or angry. We assume that “these incidents” mean police killings and brutality against people of color. It is hard to imagine a lesson that instructs children not to be afraid, after they have watched the nightmarish image of a teenager gunned down by a police officer as he walks down the street.

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Teachers need ideas for how to help children of all ages process these feelings, and to understand the causes of these terrifying and enraging experiences, rather than try not to feel. There is an urgent need to establish honest and trusting relations between the police departments and communities of color nationwide, aggravated by institutional racism and patterns of police violence.

People are demanding transparency and accountability to the public. These are essential in a democratic society, and this is a perfect moment to teach these concepts clearly, and help students understand their right to demand them. Following curriculum materials like those linked below, an examination of the history of policing and the causes of police violence can allow for a deeper understanding of the reasons underlying distrust between communities of color and the police.

#### **4. “Help students to consider the tools for civil protest that are in the tradition of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and in the spirit of brotherhood.”**

The teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., are powerful, revolutionary, and highly relevant today. However, we find it puzzling that CPS looks backward a half century for a model of protest in response to oppressive forces and conditions, when powerful models of peaceful protest for social change are being organized, led by young people of color all over the country, and especially here in Chicago. An examination of the historical traditions of social movements, resistance, and struggles for liberation is a valuable goal for young people’s learning. But when they are looking out the window and seeing protest actions happening today, it seems also important to teach and learn about those movements for change that they now have the opportunity to participate in. By having a fuller understanding of historical and present day resistance, youth will be able to critically analyze representations that characterize protest as violent, criminal, and unjustified.

#### **5. “Help students to examine the role that race, class, privilege, and stereotyping plays not just in this incident, but in our society.”**

These are important concepts to teach in the current moment, but this language still skirts some of the most important issues. “Race” is the use of categories to name members of a certain demographic group, but the more relevant issue that must be addressed in this moment is “racism.” Beyond the idea of racism as a problem of certain individuals, this is an opportunity to learn about systemic racism: the views, values, and processes engaged by institutions that subordinate, marginalize and discriminate against members of particular racial groups. The concept of “stereotyping,” while an important and harmful issue, is not enough to help students understand the frightening and pervasive pattern of police killings of young people of color. The concept of systemic racism can give students a way to understand racism in its historical context, and to interrogate the relationship racism has to their lives.

#### **6. “Bring historical context to the conversation.”**

We agree with the need to provide historical context, but none is provided in the lesson plan; instead it is stripped of any reference to history. The current moment of social and political protest must be connected to the history of

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Chicago, including the relationship many communities of color have had to law enforcement throughout the city’s history. Whereas the Introduction of the lesson presents the killing of Laquan McDonald as an isolated and “difficult” case of possible police misconduct, the event -- and the protests -- cannot be understood without learning about the legacy of systemic racism and violence that African American people have been subjected to throughout our history. To change these historical patterns, we must confront this history squarely, and understand today’s events in light of that history.

A number of educators and organizers have developed powerful materials for teaching and learning along the lines described here. We recommend that CPS teachers join these conversations and seek out support for teaching lessons that can truly help all of us to understand the events playing out in our city.

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## Resources for Teachers

In addition to the resources provided in the CPS lesson plan, we suggest the following:

1. [Talking About Policing and Violence with Youth](#): An Activity & Resource Guide, edited by Miriam Kaba, Project NIA - many lesson plans, readings and resources for teaching
2. [#Ferguson Syllabus - Talking and Teaching about Police Violence](#): lesson ideas and links to readings & resources
3. [Black and Blue](#): History and Current Manifestations of Policing, Violence & Resistance
4. [Blue and Black](#): Stories of Policing and Violence, a zine by Rachel Marie-Crane Williams that can be used in lessons
5. [Project NIA](#): links to many teaching resources and ways to get involved
6. [Black Youth Project 100](#): a Black youth organization dedicated to organizing, advocacy and education
7. [#FergusonSyllabus](#) (via Twitter): a working collection of curriculum ideas compiled by teachers since the killing of Michael Brown, to which you can add your own lesson plans. Also see this [archive](#), which is also linked from the CPS lesson plan
8. [#ChicagoSyllabus](#) (via Twitter): a new collection of lesson ideas focused on current events in Chicago - [editable google doc](#)
9. [The Invisible Institute](#): a citizens’ police data project
10. [Chicago Public Schools students judge Mayor Rahm Emanuel’s Laquan McDonald speech](#): a lesson plan devised by CPS teacher and The White Rhino blogger Ray Salazar.

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