

**Changing the White Curriculum, One Story at a Time** (FLHS News, NPR) (Podcast)



<https://soundcloud.com/user-337019702/changing-the-white-curriculum-one-book-at-a-time>

They clutched their posters. They chanted in Spanish and English. Their chests rose and fell. A sea of parents, teachers and students poured onto the steps of Tweed Courthouse, which houses the NYC Department of Education, on Monday, Dec. 9, 2019.

The group represented the NYC Coalition for Educational Justice, which strives for educational equity in the city's public schools. It rallied in response to its report, which found that white authors make up 80 percent of the books that NYC students from preschool to middle school read. The report did not include data on high schools. However, the issue of representation of authors of color concerned me -- concerned a student of color who was older than the demographic. The omission drove my curiosity. As a result, teachers and students at Francis Lewis High School told me what a culturally responsive education is -- and what high schools can do to make their students from marginalized backgrounds feel represented by their books.

## Camera Policy Raises Equity and Privacy Concerns (FLHS News) (Investigative Piece)



The babysitter canceled at the last minute. She emailed a teacher whose class she had not taken yet, asking them if they could excuse her from the school-camera policy. Behind her camera, she took care of her baby brother on the first day of remote classes.

“I couldn’t imagine having to run after my brother, feed him, carry him or just give him the attention that he needs on camera for my whole class to see,” said Kimberly Masaya, a junior at Francis Lewis High School.

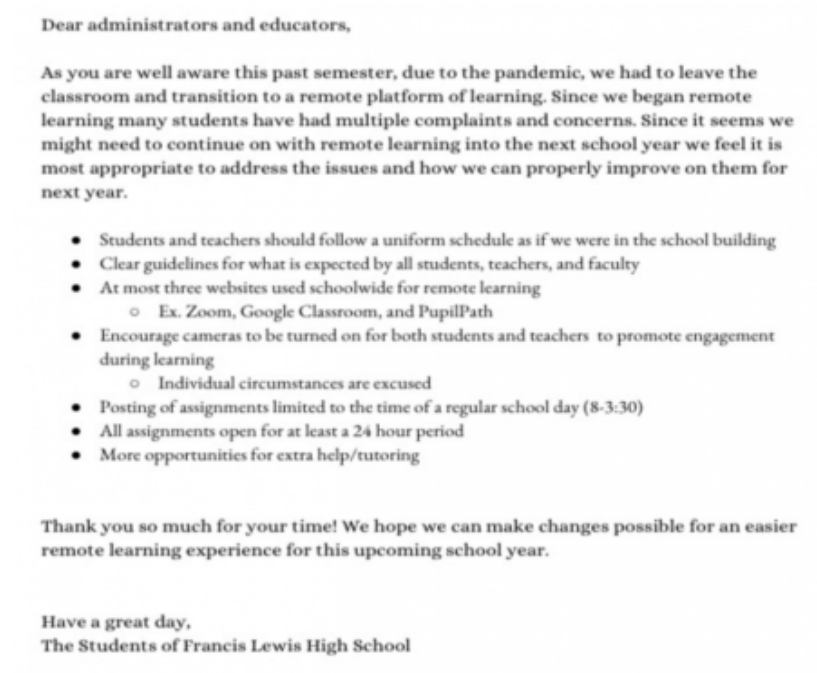
She said that her teacher excused her from turning her camera on, although she did not know if other students in similar circumstances experienced similar treatment. The teacher, who declined to share their name in fear of retribution from the administration, confirmed with *FLHS News* that they did exempt the student from enabling her camera.

In a policy by the Reopening Committee and the School Leadership Team, which went into effect Monday, Sept. 21, 2020, students must turn their cameras on during remote learning over the platform Zoom. Teachers can deduct points from participation rubrics if students fail to comply with the policy. Academic departments can determine not only the rubrics but also their weight on students’ grades.

Experts, teachers and students said that the policy raises privacy and equity concerns, disproportionately affecting students from marginalized backgrounds.

Dr. Marmor, the principal of Francis Lewis, said that the on-camera rule is an “absolute vital necessity.”

“If we can’t communicate with each other and we don’t know what’s going on on the other side of the screen, we can’t effectively educate and expect you to really move forward with your education,” he said.



*The Student Organization filed a petition to the committees.*

Dr. Marmor noted that the committee members considered a petition by the Student Organization (S.O.), which requested that teachers and students turn their cameras on “to promote engagement during learning,” when they enforced the policy.

Abigail Katzap, a senior and the president of the S.O. at Francis Lewis, said that the petition’s stipulation was an effort to improve the conditions of remote learning. She filed the petition in spring 2020.

“In school, it’s very difficult to pay attention if your camera isn’t on,” she said. “I already have difficulty paying attention to online classes, but I think having the camera on and knowing that I am on screen helps me engage in the lesson a little more.”

But for students of color, from low-income backgrounds and from the LGBTQ community, whose race, class and gender can intersect with each other, Masaya said that she finds the on-camera rule “not fair.”

“We don’t want to share that part of us,” she said. “If someone’s home and they’re just trying to learn, making them share that side of themselves might give them anxiety or some sort of stress. It’s going to deter us from wanting to learn.”

Athina Halkiadakis, a senior at Francis Lewis, said that her teacher does not give her or her classmates participation credit if they do not exercise in front of their cameras.

“There’s so many problems in that,” she said about the policy under the department’s rubric. “Not everyone has a space. Not everyone’s comfortable with classmates and teachers.”

The teacher did not respond to *FLHS News*’ request for comment. However, over 20 of their students corroborated Halkiadakis’ claim.

NYC students in high school must take physical education for 90 minutes per week over eight semesters, [according to the NYC Department of Education](#). Although she worries that she cannot graduate from Francis Lewis, she added that she is part of the population of students who do not want to show their bodies on camera.

“Some people can have body-image issues or they’re insecure about [their bodies] and the idea of them doing jumping jacks on camera,” she said. “I’m pretty insecure about myself. I literally left my gym class midway, when my teacher said we’re going to do that stuff today. I left. I just left the class.”

Dr. Marmor said that students can show guidance counselors medical documentation, describing why they cannot be on camera, so that the school can exempt them from the policy.

Students can instead enable virtual backgrounds to cover their surroundings if they cannot obtain the documentation, he added, responding to privacy concerns.

“We’re not suggesting that everyone has to have an open window into their homes because the technology exists,” he said. “If anybody needs to blur out their background with a virtual background, it’s perfectly fine.”

But according to Brad Shear, a lawyer who specializes in privacy issues and social media, medical exemptions and virtual backgrounds do not address “major privacy issues” with the camera policy.

“[Francis Lewis] cannot mandate that you have your cameras on,” he said. “They must give the students the ability to opt out of being recorded in their own home. They must. It’s the law.”

The protocol violates students’ privacy rights under the Fourth Amendment because the platform displays their homes on camera, Shear said. Anything in the background -- from political signs to “parents naked” -- can happen in class over Zoom, raising privacy concerns for the students.

A virtual background is not a valid solution to the privacy problems, he said.

“In order for the virtual background to work, you need a background with just one color,” Shear said. “Mine is white, so of course, it will work.”

Pointing to my background in an interview over Zoom, he noted that the “variety of things” prevented him from seeing me. In the context of a classroom over the platform, he said, my background would not work.

“It’s an equity issue,” Shear said. “Not everyone has the most ideal circumstances where they have no family members walking behind them or no surroundings behind them. A lot of students have problems with that.”

Dr. Marmor declined to comment on Shear’s assertions about the policy’s privacy and equity issues.

The school can temporarily exempt a student whose virtual background does not work from the regulation, Dr. Marmor said.

“We would work with you to try to get it fixed,” he said, referring to the background.

Without the on-camera policy, students can be “not home,” “sleeping” or “playing video games” during class, Dr. Marmor added.

“If we don’t know what’s going on on the other side of the screen, then we can’t effectively educate,” he said.

Leonie Haimson, the co-chair of Parent Coalition for Student Privacy, said that the policy is “invasive” yet necessary for teachers to measure student engagement.

“There’s lots of ways to participate,” she said. “You could participate orally, you can participate in the chat, you can participate by raising your hand. You can participate by doing the Google polls. And most importantly, you can participate by doing your homework. All those things should be counted as attending the class.”

Until the administration implements alternative methods to assess student participation, however, Haimson noted that she urges people in positions of power to advocate for students with disabilities -- for more accessibility to online classrooms.

Teachers make up one of the groups who are in those positions of power, addressing their issues with the rule. Mr. Felder, an English teacher at Francis Lewis, said that he understands that one rule cannot apply to 4,500 students.

“We, as teachers, have to be very sensitive to the fact that some kids just don’t have the luxury of having their own bedroom or having family members that actually understand that they have to keep the noise down,” he said.

The rule also does not engage his students because they can perform other activities over the platform, Mr. Felder said.

“You can actually have your camera on and still be online shopping and have your phone hidden and doing all sorts of other things,” he said. “[Zoom] just shows me that you’re staring at your computer screen, but I don’t know exactly what you’re doing.”

But some teachers supported the regulation. One of them included Mr. Goldstein, an ESL teacher and a UFT chapter leader at Francis Lewis.

“I am very happy that the principal insisted there are cameras,” he said. “We’re going to have better exchanges. We’re going to have more involvement. Look, this whole thing sucks. I mean, this whole pandemic and this whole not being able to be together, it’s just a tragedy. But we have to make the best we can out of it. I think we need to see each other’s faces.”

While the majority of the experts, teachers and students are in opposition to the policy, our investigation found that they do not fully support their position. They said that they oppose the policy but want the administration to find other methods to survey student engagement.

Masaya said that she feels strongly about her stance on the policy despite signing the petition in spring 2020.

“I did believe that this petition offered solutions to many irregularities we faced during the spring semester,” she said. “However, as soon as the beginning of what would become the current camera policy was discussed, I immediately contested the idea.”

The rule exacerbates educational inequities that students from marginalized backgrounds face, Masaya said. But she hopes that the administration changes the rule to let those students choose to turn their cameras on -- choose to, in her case, take care of her brother.

“[The administration] want[s] that sense of community and that sense of face-to-face normality, but [the policy] really just leaves out a huge population of our school that already goes unacknowledged,” she said. “If [students] don’t want to share, they shouldn’t have to.”

**Student Voice: Two Weeks, Five Siblings and One Working Laptop. How I Navigated the Nation's Largest School System in Search of an iPad and What It Taught Me About America's Digital Divide (FLHS News, The 74) (Feature)**



I set my alarm for 5:50 a.m., Monday, March 20 -- 10 minutes before the city's tech department opened. I quickly typed in their number, put my phone on speaker and waited. And waited. I was on hold for an hour until I couldn't take it anymore and hung up.

My first day of remote learning at Francis Lewis High School in New York City had begun.

Still, the largest public school system in the country couldn't take my call, fix my problems or hear me out. It was like speaking into a void.

On March 15, Mayor Bill de Blasio responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by shutting down New York City's public schools until April 20 -- and has since proposed [extending closures](#) for the rest of the school year. The day of the mayor's announcement, the screen on my 10-year-old Sony laptop flickered on and off, glitchy from excessive use. A notification of a [tweet by the Department of Education](#) popped up, informing us that we needed to fill out a form to get one of the [300,000 devices](#) available for students across the city who lack access to broadband. So I sat my parents down and translated the message into their native Cantonese.

Filling out the form took 15 minutes -- not because of the form's length, but because of the speed of our laptop, connected to nothing but a broken charger and weak Wi-Fi.

I wanted to make sure that our form didn't get lost in the district's vast bureaucracy. With each call to the education department, a stern voice emerged putting me on hold for an hour only to inform

me after my 14th attempt that week that they had no answers -- that they could only help us fill out the form.

“Sorry, sir,” the provider said. “I can’t help you with that. If I could, I would. But I can’t.”

“No, it’s all right,” I said, my voice breaking.

“Why’s this so hard?” my mom asked, crying.

I gave her a tissue, squeezing her shoulder. “I don’t know. I really don’t.”

She gestured to the faint screen. It cast some light into the dark corner of our living room, where the blinds were drawn -- my mom likes it like that in the morning. “All we want is *one* iPad,” she said.

“We shouldn’t have to do this.”

Gov. Andrew Cuomo mandated that nonessential workers stay home, but my dad is a cashier at a Chinese restaurant in Flushing, where the number of coronavirus cases is [61 percent higher than the city average](#), and my mom works at the same post office where [three employees have tested positive for the coronavirus](#).

They feed seven mouths: my grandmother, my five siblings and myself. That arrangement is somewhat unusual. My siblings and I are two sets of triplets: three sisters, six years older than me, and my two brothers and myself, all age 17 and preparing to apply to college next year. Because of the financial toll my sisters, who graduated from college last year, took on my parents, my brothers and I worry about getting enough federal financial aid. My parents paid for my sisters’ room, board and tuition, and they have shelved their retirement plans now that my brothers and I are on the same trajectory. My eldest sister has taken out more than \$40,000 in loans for her master’s, and my two other sisters have been laid off from work due to the virus.

I know my parents. They’re resilient. They emigrated from Hong Kong over 40 years ago, when they were my age, and made something of themselves. They’ve raised six children and are putting all of them through college. But their hard work won’t protect them from the virus. They’re on the front lines of getting it.

I’m scared they’re not going to make it. I’m scared they’re going to die working, that we’ll be evicted and end up living out on the streets. They hide their fear of spreading anything from work to us with hugs, kisses and smiles -- dangerous though such actions may be in this strange time. They didn’t explicitly say I shouldn’t worry, that I should focus on attending Zoom meetings on my phone, studying for the SATs and applying for summer programs after my junior year.

But I worried that we wouldn’t get a device. And for weeks, we didn’t.

Distribution has been a [common problem](#) for hundreds of thousands of students like me across the city who couldn’t get a device in the first two weeks of remote learning, Chancellor Richard



Carranza said, primarily because priority was given to students with circumstances more dire than mine -- homeless students, for example. To me, this cold economic calculation had the effect of shrinking me down -- smaller than I already was -- in the dark corner of my living room, my life.

For two weeks, my siblings and I butted heads to get to the router at the center of our living room for a bar of internet connection. Whichever of my brothers, usually the eldest, arrived there first, got the laptop. The rest of us -- my sisters, my younger brother and me -- wound up using our phones for homework and leisure. I often pinched the corners of my iPhone 6 screen wide, squinting to see my trigonometry and physics teachers doing practice problems on paper.

Even so, my parents still bicker in the background of my Zoom meetings. I double- or triple-check whether my microphone is off to refrain from giving away too much of my home life to teachers and classmates. My next-door neighbor's dogs yap at sunrise when we're trying to sleep. I blankly stare at them through my window until they stop.

But somehow, we're making do. While internet access issues have distanced me from my education, I feel surprisingly OK about it. I'd rather have butting heads, bickering parents and yapping dogs than no education at all. And I did end up getting a device on Sunday, April 5 -- two weeks after distance learning started in New York City and just as the give-and-take of Zoom and Google Classroom started to feel normal.

My story, unfortunately, is a common one for New York City public school students of color from low-income backgrounds. As many as [41 percent of households](#) in my Flushing neighborhood lack access to broadband. This is a cycle that keeps poor communities poor. I know because I'm living it.

Don't get me wrong: I'm luckier than a lot of my peers whose zip code determines their level of learning. I attend one of the most selective and applied-to public high schools in New York City. Since elementary school, I've recognized that my education was a privilege. After all, I live in a house with two working parents, multiple phones and one laptop. My three sisters have all gone to college. So will my brothers and I.

Not every student has it so easy. Still, it shouldn't have taken two weeks to get a laptop, and it shouldn't have been so hard to get simple answers from the district. Now, I sit here wondering how many other children have had to act on their own with parents at work -- playing the roles of traffic cop, translator and support system, trying to find light in the dark corners of our education system.