

To Public Education.... I owe you... by Dr. Terrance Ruth

I owe a lot to public education. I owe not only my present and future but also my ancestral past. I was reminded of the significance of public education by a Wake County public middle school. Every year I am invited to a Wake County middle school that hosts a universal declaration of human rights, on the old capitol grounds. It is a pleasure to receive an invitation to speak and join in their universal declaration of human rights program. This program is a powerful presentation by students who have memorized the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, created in [1948](#).

The fascinating part of the experience rested on the idea that schools are still training students to value human dignity. Historically, public schools played a key role in establishing human rights here in America. That is why I owe public education. I believe there is value just in the mere recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family.

And for so long, there was a multi-generational fight for justice by Black America that was waged in this country, and in North Carolina more particularly. This fight for human rights all unfolded at the local level, at the school board level. Yes you had the United Nations ringing the bell for human rights, and yes you had national efforts to preserve human rights.

But you can place a parallel journey of the years of human rights struggles in this country... that culminated with the civil rights movement, amongst other movements... side by side with the rights that were either withheld or denied by the decisions of local public school boards. Right now local school officials still matter and therefore local public schools matter in the fight for providing human rights.

We can't afford to overlook the historical resume of the public school system in acting as a catalyst in providing rights and freedoms set forth by the declaration of human rights. The public school is represented by school board members who are also members of the local government. It is significant to understand the amount of influence that local government has on providing human rights...and you must understand the influence that local government has on how we can act in both public and private places. Actually...Black history is saturated with stories of local ordinances or local laws that upheld and enforced racial and economic segregation - across neighborhoods, across schools, across the criminal justice system and across cities.

I owe my current freedoms to the students who marched, the students who were arrested, and the students who sat at lunch counters. Public school students, teachers and superintendents fought for human rights. I owe my career to the pathway created by local public schools. I was a middle and high school history teacher who absorbed the world of local government through the classroom.

Unfortunately, voter turnout for local school board and municipal elections remains low today. You have the best chance to make sure that everyone has the right to life, liberty and security of person, if you support your public school and vote in your local elections. Local school officials matter and therefore local elections matter in the fight for providing human rights. We now owe it to public education to make sure that it is supported in our state.