
ALL AMERICAN BOYS HAS STAYING POWER A DECADE LATER: HERE'S WHY

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Abstract

Four future English language arts teachers explain why Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely's 2015 award-winning young adult novel *All American Boys* remains relevant a decade after its publication.

Keywords: Jason Reynolds, Brendan Kiely, *All American Boys*, police brutality, social justice, systemic racism, young adult literature

Background and Overview

Avery Gathright and Sophia Loerke

Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely's award-winning 2015 young adult novel *All American Boys* is a powerful read that is still relevant in 2025. The story is told from the perspectives of two high school students. Rashad Butler is a Black 11th grader and member of the JROTC who is wrongly accused of stealing at a convenience store and brutally beaten by Officer Paul Galluzzo, who is white. Quinn Collins is a white 12th grader and varsity basketball player who looked up to Officer Galluzzo like a father figure and experiences confusion and disillusionment after watching him brutalize Rashad.

Instances of racism, police brutality, and hate crimes can (and do) happen suddenly in the real world, without justification, and have long-lasting impacts on everyone, not just the single person attacked. Although certainly relevant in 2015 when the book was published as a commentary on how systemic racism is still an issue over 50 years after the Civil Rights Movement, *All American Boys* might be even more relevant now, a decade after its initial publication. In 2025, we are seeing our government regress at an alarming rate, and marginalized people are targeted more and more with each passing day.

All American Boys brilliantly holds space for anger and frustration with the injustices that people of color face, but it also empowers the characters and the reader to channel that anger in effective, safe, and peaceful ways in order to be the voice and force of change. On this 10th anniversary of its publication, we—future English teachers—want to highlight important themes in *All American Boys* and argue for its continued inclusion in school and classroom libraries and English language arts curricula.

Authentically “All-American”

Alice Huelskamp

I think one of my favorite aspects of *All-American Boys* is its discussion of that titular concept: “all-American.” That term seems straightforward, but in a country defined by its diversity and indefinability, describing anything as “American” is rife with ambiguity. Really, to fully exemplify the values of America, you have to embody a set of values that accepts, uplifts and protects everyone’s culture and identity. Unfortunately, our general social concept of “all-American” does instead tend to be confined to the box of affluent, independent, invincible, male, Christian, and—most prominently—white. Especially growing up in a very homogenous rural town, I have seen most people in my community use these ideas to define “American.” It always felt uncomfortable to hear people around me talk about other people as “un-American” and realize what demographics they gave that description. No one ever looked at a violent police officer or a racist politician and called them un-American, but they were always ready to slap that word onto someone peacefully protesting or discussing the history of institutional oppression.

I appreciate that the novel brings up this misuse of the term “all-American.” At the start of the story, Rashad and Quinn actually both fit several of the stereotypical American ideas, like independence, hard work, and loyalty; but only one of them—Quinn—fits the most important standard, whiteness. The novel also makes a point to show how Quinn actually is often less representative of stereotypically American morals and character, by pointing out that he smokes and is quick to duck out of work. As the novel goes on, I really like that it moves beyond those stereotypical standards for American-ness, though. Gradually, it shows that it’s not actually important who does or does not smoke, or who works harder—Rashad and Quinn are “all-American” because they choose to exemplify the most core values of their country. They stand up for acceptance and progress, and, perhaps more noteworthy, stand *against* intolerance and oppression.

One of my favorite quotes from James Baldwin touches on this very idea: “I love America more than any other country in the world and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually.” So many people whom I have heard or directly spoken to seem to believe that America is untouchable, that to acknowledge any issues in its institution makes you unpatriotic, un-American. However, this belief actually seems more “un-American” to me, seeing as our country was originally founded on ideas of questioning and resisting unfair, oppressive, and faulty institutions. Most of our major “American heroes” were people who spoke up and acted against oppression in our country—people like George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Harriet Tubman. Perhaps one of the most “American” things we can do is to continue on that foundational mindset, and have the courage to hold our country accountable, demand it uphold its values of diversity and equality, and work to make the world around us better for everyone.

That’s why stories like *All-American Boys* are incredibly important. This book shows that—no matter who you are—you can be truly American, so long as you lead a life defending everyone’s right to liberty, safety, and joy. Rashad and Quinn become all-American when they have the courage to openly acknowledge the injustice around them and demand better of their community, and the book makes that distinction clear and unavoidable. On top of that, it’s especially important to have stories like this that break down these ideas in a way that kids can approach and understand them. The themes of *All-American Boys* are complex and often scary to deal with in real life, but the book gives kids an example of people like them navigating such a difficult conversation with support and courage. Kids of all different backgrounds have to live in this country and experience all its successes and faults. They should be given a way to understand their country in its entirety, so that they can feel seen and supported through all that complexity. *All-American Boys* gives kids a path to

not only understand their country, but to also go out into their lives and redefine what it truly means to be “all-American” in a nation founded on the unflinching fight for equality.

Silence or Solidarity: The Role of Educators in *All American Boys*

Kaitlyn Chain

Several moments stood out to me in *All American Boys*, but the one that left the deepest impression was the contrast among the teachers’ reactions toward Rashad’s attack. Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely do an excellent job of showing how adults, like students, can respond to injustice in very different ways.

On one side of the spectrum, Mr. Fisher, a history teacher, takes an active role in protesting after Rashad’s attack. He offers to speak to students after school about the police officer’s assault on Rashad, and he designates a class period to discuss the history of police brutality in America and Rashad’s beating. Additionally, Mr. Fisher helps students organize the protest. Rashad’s close friend English describes Mr. Fisher’s support, claiming “‘He kept saying how we are part of history. How this is part of history’” (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, pp. 200-201). Mr. Fisher’s actions demonstrate his belief that educators have a responsibility to engage students in critical conversations about social justice rather than remaining neutral in the face of oppression.

Mrs. Erlich, Quinn’s trigonometry teacher, also uses her class time to actively talk about police brutality, sharing statistics regarding police-involved killings of Black people in the United Kingdom versus the United States. She goes on to state, “‘I’m not much of a talker ... You know that. But I know numbers. The numbers don’t lie, kids. The numbers always tell a story’” (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, p. 255). Though Mrs. Erlich does not take as direct of an activist role as Mr. Fisher, she presents an objective yet powerful argument to her students, showing them the undeniable reality of racial injustice through facts rather than opinion. Both Mr. Fisher and Mrs. Erlich use their positions and voices within the school to actively speak out against the injustice within their community; however, not all teachers at Springfield Central High School do the same.

In comparison to Mr. Fisher and Mrs. Erlich, Ms. Webber, Quinn’s econ teacher, prefers to keep silent on the beating of Rashad, placing herself in a neutral position on the topic. This can be seen in her lesson plans after the attack, where she instructed students to “work on a practice section for the next test. Quietly. She emphasized that. *Quietly*. But as we got started, it was all too easy to see Ms. Webber twitching, smiling like she was reminding herself to, and anybody could tell she was nervous and just wanted a silent and nonteaching day of class” (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, p. 133). When pressed on the topic, she suppresses the students and sends them to the office for disrupting the silence. This reaction illustrates how avoidance can inadvertently uphold injustice, as silencing discussion prevents students from engaging in critical conversations about racism and inequality. Her unwillingness to address the issue directly reflects how some authority figures choose neutrality in difficult situations, hoping to avoid conflict rather than confronting injustice head-on. As the novel teaches, silence is another kind of violence, reinforcing the idea that ignoring oppression only allows it to continue (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, p. 290).

Finally, Mrs. Tracey, Quinn’s English teacher, struggles to deal with Rashad’s beating. Like her colleague Mr. Fisher, Mrs. Tracey was previously known to talk about race actively within her classroom, but she struggles to take an active stance on the injustice within the school, crying in front of her class because her department chair Mr. Godwin wants her to move on to the next unit instead of allowing students to write papers on Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Her internal conflict highlights the difficulty some educators face when institutional pressures challenge their convictions. Quinn speaks of the hypocrisy of Mrs. Tracey’s reaction after the attack: “I remembered Mrs. Tracey making fun of Mr. Godwin, saying she’d never follow what the department head or the

administration wanted her to teach. But now, suddenly, when they did direct her, she was blaming them for not talking about the book” (Reynolds & Kiely, 2015, p. 215). This moment emphasizes how fear and institutional pressure can cause even well-intentioned individuals to waver in their convictions, revealing the challenges of taking a firm stance against injustice. In the end, Mrs. Tracey attends the protest alongside Mr. Fisher, showing how her personal beliefs conquered the fear of administrative actions.

The differing reactions of Mr. Fisher, Mrs. Erlich, Ms. Webber, and Ms. Tracey raise several thought-provoking questions surrounding educators. One major question is how educators and leaders should navigate their roles when injustice affects their communities. Should they prioritize neutrality to maintain order, or should they speak out and risk division? Another question is about the long-term impact of these choices: does silence protect, or does it perpetuate harm? The book doesn’t provide easy answers, but it pushes readers to think deeply and engage in difficult conversations regarding the role of educators in the classroom.

Ultimately, *All American Boys* highlights the power and responsibility educators have in shaping students’ understanding of justice and activism. The novel demonstrates that silence is not truly neutral and has consequences that can either uphold or challenge systemic injustice. By showcasing the contrasting reactions of Mr. Fisher, Mrs. Erlich, Ms. Webber, and Mrs. Tracey, the book forces readers to reflect on the ways authority figures influence conversations about race and inequality. It challenges us to consider how we, as individuals and as a society, can foster environments where difficult yet necessary discussions are encouraged rather than suppressed. In the end, *All American Boys* serves as a call to action, urging educators, students, and communities to actively stand against injustice rather than remain passive observers.

A Model for Effecting Change

Avery Gathright and Sophia Loerke

What’s truly powerful about this novel is that Reynolds and Kiely not only guide young readers through the complexities of racial injustice and the harm of indifference in a way that is digestible, but they also empower readers. They don’t just point out problems; they point out solutions like the peaceful protest Rashad’s community organizes and creating hashtags like #RashadIsAbsentAgainToday to help spread awareness through social media.

Like Quinn in the story, readers might also be prompted to self-reflect on their role in the world around them and their ability to make a difference. The scene in which the students protest against the administrative curriculum change in their English class and read aloud Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* is particularly powerful. It shows the significance that words can have, the impact that literature can make, and the commentary it can provide on society, especially given the right setting. It shows the importance of having (and teaching) books that deal with real, diverse, and tough topics.

Students and teenagers are brilliant, and often they want to effect change but may feel overwhelmed and defeated and not know where to start. Reynolds and Kiely speak the language of kids today, and they appeal to and present options for young adults about how to peacefully and effectively cultivate change. This is the main reason why we will include not one, but multiple copies of *All American Boys* in our classrooms. In addition, we have provided an interdisciplinary unit plan using Wiggins and McTighe’s (2006) Backward Design template (p. 22) to illustrate how educators can go beyond classroom library inclusion and teach *All American Boys* as a whole-class novel.

Interdisciplinary Unit Plan

Avery Gathright

Unit Title: “Are we all treated equal?”: *All American Boys* and Social Justice

Grade Level and Course: 11th Grade English

Unit Texts

- Young Adult Novel: [*All American Boys*](#) by Jason Reynolds and Brendan Kiely
- Historical Documents: [The United States Bill of Rights](#), [The Declaration of Independence](#)

Stage 1 – Desired Results	
KSDE English Standards Reading: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • RL.11.5 Analyze how an author’s choices concerning how to structure specific parts of a text contribute to its overall structure and meaning as well as its aesthetic impact. • RL.11.13 Read and comprehend high-quality literary text (e.g., drama, prose, and poetry) of appropriate quantitative and qualitative complexity for grades 11-12. Writing: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • W.11.1 Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. • W.11.4 Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization and style are appropriate to task, purpose and audience. • W.11.10 Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing. Speaking & Listening: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • SL.11.1 Initiate and participate effectively in a range of collaborative discussions (one-on-one, in groups and teacher-led) with diverse partners on grades 11-12 topics, texts and issues, building on others’ ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. 	
KSDE Social Studies Standard and Related Benchmarks Standard 2: Individuals have rights and responsibilities <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2.1 The student will recognize and evaluate the rights and responsibilities of people living in societies. • 2.3 The student will investigate and connect the rights and responsibilities of individuals with contemporary issues. 	
Understandings: <i>Students will understand that ...</i> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Identifying and fixing issues of social injustice requires advocating from the voices of the oppressed, not just the privileged. 2. People’s backgrounds and life experiences will impact their perspective on social issues and play a large role in their opinions. 	Essential Questions <u>Overarching:</u> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Do all people really have equal rights? Why or why not? 2. What rights and responsibilities do we have regarding social justice as citizens of our country? 3. How can I make a difference in my community and be an advocate for others?

<p>3. Members of oppressed groups do not experience the same privileges as the majority, even if they have the same rights on paper.</p> <p>4. Social change takes effort, including putting oneself in uncomfortable situations.</p>	<p><u>Topical:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How do the characters' perspectives influence their actions and the story as a whole? 2. What lessons can we take from Rashad and Quinn into our own lives?
<p>Knowledge: <i>Students will know ...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To recognize and be aware of their privileges. • The power of perspective, how bias and media can work together and separately to influence how people understand social issues and specific incidents. • Media literacy and analysis through a lens of social justice. 	<p>Skills: <i>Students will be able to ...</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify their biases and privileges. • Identify and explain the role of privilege in <i>All American Boys</i> and in real life. • Distinguish between fact, fiction, and opinion in the media. • Provide examples of modern social injustices from credible resources and articulate the driving forces behind them. • Use credible resources to create and defend an argument relating to social justice and human rights.
<p>Stage 2 – Assessment Evidence</p>	
<p>Performance Task</p> <p><u>Authentic Performance:</u> Major Unit Assignment: Op-ed over <i>All American Boys</i> Students will be asked to write an op-ed article of around 1000 words reviewing the young adult book, how it relates to real-world human rights issues in our country, and what they are inspired to do about it.</p> <p>Students will be encouraged to take this project seriously as their work will be displayed in the school library to encourage other students to read the book and take action. The teacher should also look for places to encourage students to actually publish their op-eds, like the school newspaper or website, submit to contests or sites like the Washington Square Review or even Goodreads.</p> <p><u>Criteria by which performance is judged:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accurate and relevant use of examples from <i>All American Boys</i> in context 	<p>Other Evidence</p> <p><u>Informal Assessments to Check Understanding</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' participation in class and group discussions, seminars and lectures • Daily bell work • Exit slips • Review Kahoot • Writing workshop • Conferencing with individual students • Giving feedback to peers • Self-reflection and review <p><u>Academic Activities/Prompts:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quick writes submitted for review, over issues of social justice, human rights, and privilege • Revising the Bill of Rights Activity • Handouts to turn in at the end of Socratic seminar and book clubs

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use of modern real-world examples from credible sources and news sites to relate the book to real world issues. • A clear stance and thesis • Clear purpose and audience • Fluent writing and correct conventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Written analysis of historical documents and non-fiction writings <p><u>Quizzes/Tests:</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Low-stakes reading comprehension quiz comprised of short answer questions • Quiz over the Bill of Rights
Stage 3—Learning Plan	
<p>Learning Activities (with elements of <i>Understanding by Design</i>'s WHERE TO framework identified in parentheses)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Students complete an anticipation guide relating to the novel and unit essential questions and participate in an interactive classroom discussion/debate in which they move around the room in accordance to the beliefs stated in their anticipation guides. (W, H) 2. Teacher introduces essential questions and explains expected performance tasks for the unit. Teacher states purpose for the project: to get students involved in social justice, and to make them aware of their own privileges and rights in society. (W, E) 3. Students answer the following academic prompt in writing: "What are some privileges you think you have? Provide some examples to support why you have this privilege." (H, E) 4. Teacher introduces the text by having students read the first two pages of both Rashad and Quinn's perspectives. Students make inferences and write their initial impressions about the characters and their lives. Engage in class discussion on the same topic. (H, E) 5. Students read first two sections of the book ("Friday" & "Saturday") as homework and participate in a book club over the events of the book, including initial thoughts, predictions, how it relates to social justice, and how it reminds them of real-world events. Students choose what role to take in prior class meeting with their book club groups, and have a handout to complete during/after discussion regarding what they talked about with their groups which will be turned in for assessment. (E, T) 6. Teacher lectures while students complete guided notes about the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights, emphasizing the first amendment. (E) 7. Students discuss what they think the most important amendment is in the Bill of Rights with their table groups and come back together for a whole class discussion of the question. 8. Students participate in a Socratic Seminar over the first half of the novel, discussing it in relation to human rights, privilege, and EQs. (W, E, R) 9. Students respond in writing to the academic prompt: "Do all people really have equal rights?" (E2) 10. Students work with their groups to discuss and evaluate the Bill of Rights. Then, with human rights and the novel in mind, students will revise them. They should consider what amendments should be kept, which should be replaced and with what, and make revisions to existing amendments. They should also write at least a paragraph explaining their changes. (E, R, E2, T) 11. Students participate in a Kahoot over the Bill of Rights. (H, R) 12. Students complete a quiz over the Bill of Rights. (E2) 	

13. Students explore the front pages of different news sites such as CNN, Fox, Al Jazeera, and AP News to compare headlines and discuss current events regarding human rights and how perspective effects them. (E)
14. Students discuss the impact of perspective with their table groups. (R)
15. Students complete a reading quiz over the second half of the novel. (E2)
16. Students participate in their book clubs; they will have worked with their groups in the prior class to choose (new) roles for their book club discussions. (W, E, R)
17. Students engage in writing workshops over a few class periods for their Op-Ed major writing assignment. The teacher will hold mini-lessons before each workshop day, reminding students of EQs and relating instruction to the writing process. Teacher emphasizes students are not only to review the text, but also discuss the responsibilities it instills onto the reader. (W, E, R, T)
18. After the mini-lesson and during the workshop time, the teacher should conference with each student individually to meet with them, discuss their thoughts on the texts and their progress and approach on the major writing assignment.
19. Students submit a rough draft before class electronically for the teacher to review and bring physical copies to review with their peers. Table groups work either as a whole group or partner up (depending on the number of students) and swap papers, providing constructive feedback and positive encouragement. (R)
20. Students have time in class and at home to review and consider feedback and develop their final drafts. (E, R, T)
21. Teacher displays the Op-Eds in the school library and in the classroom. Students engage in a gallery walk to review their classmates' work. They will submit a written sheet afterword, reflecting on what they liked in their peers' work and what perspectives their peers shared that they had not considered. (R, E2)
22. The class return to the EQs, both overarching and topical, in a whole-class discussion and talk about what steps they can take in their lives to make a difference. (W, H, R)

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