OUR OPINION

Adding black history to curriculum benefits all

"Why is February set aside every year as Black History Month?"

"Because the other 11 months of the year are white history months."

Those unfamiliar with that well-worn exchange ought to reflect upon its meaning while pondering its significance for African-Americans, whose forebears had as much to do with the shaping of this nation as any other group. Black History Month is an attempt to raise the consciousness of all Americans about the contributions made by this segment of our society through highlighting the achievements of such greats as Frederick Douglass, George Washington Carver, Martin Luther King Jr. and the Berkshires' own W.E.B. Du Bois. Their place in American history comprises only the preamble of a narrative encompassing the influence of black Americans on the arts, culture, politics, social justice, science, industry and myriad other aspects of the American experience.

That contribution, sadly, has always gotten short shrift when it comes to claiming its rightful place in the education of America's young people. On Sunday, at the Berkshire Interfaith Organizing 2019 Annual Convention held at Congregation Knesset Israel, Pittsfield's public schools superintendent, Jake McCandless, announced that his district would institute courses in African-American studies and cultural studies.

Mr. McCandless' announcement should be lauded for several reasons: First, polls have repeatedly shown that racism is tempered or eliminated by exposure to groups unlike one's own. College-educated adults tend to be less prejudiced than their noncollege-educated counterparts, not because they have been taught more, but because they have been thrown together with other groups in an egalitarian learning environment. The same is true of veterans, because when facing a life-threatening situation that calls for interdependency between individuals, ethnic stereotypes become irrelevant.

In other words, familiarity breeds tolerance and understanding. Mr. McCandless' proposed courses of study have the supreme advantage of catching young people before learned prejudices have a chance to become permanently embedded in their world outlook. It will produce graduates who have at least been exposed to the idea that everybody has something to learn from the struggles and successes of others, particularly those who have suffered because of historical and institutionalized cultural bias and through no fault of their own.

To those who would question why a school system in a county whose demographic makeup is less than 3 percent African-American should teach such courses, the answer is that black history is an integral part of American history, and to ignore it or minimize it is doing a disservice to students and, ultimately, to the country once they reach adulthood. In that vein, it should be mandatory to include black history as a distinct discipline until, ultimately, it is accorded its full and deserved place in general American history courses.

If we are ever going to rid ourselves of the seemingly indelible stain upon our society of America's "original sin" - slavery - broad thinking like Mr. McCandless' is essential. We commend him for his decision, and urge every school district in Berkshire County and America that hasn't yet initiated such courses to follow suit.
Due credit on black history class

BY JASON MCCANDLESS

PITTSFIELD — Like most human beings, I enjoy getting kudos and pats on the back, and it is always gratifying when these praises take the form of something public such as The Eagle editorial of Tuesday regarding adding a black history curriculum to the Pittsfield Public Schools range of high school offerings. One of my heroes, President Harry Truman, said that, “It is amazing what you can accomplish if you do not care who gets the credit.” I try to live this in my work as an educator and leader.

Most of the time, the superintendent gets the credit because they are the face of the district and have the title, but often (very often) the real genesis of the idea and the rolled-up-sleeves behind the work are where the real credit lies. The most crucial role I play in most successes my schools and districts have enjoyed is through listening to people and saying “yes” when great ideas are before me.

In this case the real credit, as usual, lies elsewhere than with the superintendent. It lies with several individuals who have helped me come to understand how vital cultural competence is in any community, and understand the vital importance of Pittsfield becoming a more culturally competent and inclusive community. More specifically and germane to the editorial is the work of Berkshire Interfaith Organizing, which stuck with this request and continued to lend their ears and hearts to me, even when it was clear to them that this request was on its surface one more thing to crowd onto an already overflowing plate for teachers, principals and district administrators.

Credit goes to Ms. Mabel Hamilton and to Ms. Wes Gadson for their persistence, patience and offer to help actually make these courses happen. The credit moving forward will belong to the Pittsfield School Committee for its work in approving these courses, and to the educators who will take this idea and translate it into actionable learning opportunities for students of every race. I am grateful to the students who will take this class and expand the depth of their knowledge about themselves, their neighbors near and far, and our shared place in the world.

As the father of two K-12 Pittsfield graduates now in college and of one Pittsfield High sophomore, I know the power and promise of having one’s children attend diverse schools where they learn firsthand that wonderful people and friends come in every way imaginable. My wife and I know the power of sending children off into a wider world well prepared for the reality that not everyone is just like them, and that this is a gift, not something to be feared or shied away from. I am grateful for the leaders, teachers, community members and others who help support this important real-world learning experience.

RACE-LEADERSHIP PRECEPTS

As a white leader in an increasingly diverse community I live and lead by several precepts that I have encapsulated here. This list seems perhaps overly simple, but it serves as a launching pad for the trajectory our community deserves in terms of race-leadership:

1. Be honest with yourself about your own biases, the reality and toxicity of institutional racism, and the role that white privilege plays in every aspect of life.
2. Be brave. As Melody Hopson, president of Ariel Investments, says, “We can not afford to be color blind. We have to be color brave.” Hard, uncomfortable conversations with one’s self and with others is part of the work.
3. Stop being complicit in actions, systems and attitudes that serve to lessen others.
4. Start being culturally competent as an individual and as a community member, employee, leader or in whatever capacity you live and serve your neighbors.
5. Say “yes” when opportunities to be better, do better and lead better are presented. Say “yes” when investments can be made to increase cultural competence. Say “yes” when opportunities to collaborate and celebrate are offered.

Thank you to Berkshire Interfaith Organizing and to Ms. Hamilton and Ms. Gadson. Thank you to countless neighbors here in Pittsfield, in Lee, in the county, and across the commonwealth who have helped me better understand the role of a district leader in building a more equitable and just community. Thank you to our elected School Committee and Mayor Tyer for being well ahead of their superintendent and for their constant support of all students and families, and to creating a more level playing field for all students.

We might be limited in our individual power to undo centuries of hate, of terror, of purposeful efforts to define and dishonor the “other” and the “lesser.” However, as efforts like Berkshire Interfaith Organizing show us, as the efforts of educators in every school building in the Berkshires show us, as the foundational work of groups like Multicultural Bridge, the NAACP, and the Anti-Defamation League show us, as the work of the Berkshire Immigrant Center shows us, as the courage of students across the county, commonwealth and nation show us, together we can do more, be more and create a richer community for every one of our neighbors.

Jason McCandless is Pittsfield superintendent of schools.