

Rachel Thomas

Rachel Thomas is in her seventh year as a teacher and currently teaches sixth grade English language arts and seventh grade English at School Without Walls at Francis-Stevens in Washington, D.C. Before joining the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS), Thomas taught at a charter school in Washington D.C. She was a substitute teacher and was an adjunct professor of English as well. She is a member of the Washington Teachers Union, Local 6.

Although she was the child of career educators, Thomas initially wanted to pursue a path outside education. She earned her bachelor's degree in telecommunications and master's degree in English and managed a summer literacy program for the Lorain County Urban League before working as a long-term substitute teacher in Columbus, Ohio. There, she was encouraged to give education another look. Although she did not have a teaching certificate, she applied to teach at a charter school under the highly qualified candidate exception.

"After starting my career in a charter school, I took the leap and applied to DCPS in order to get more support union-wise, gain professional development opportunities, and expand my network," Thomas says. "This is where I'm supposed to be."

Since joining DCPS, Thomas has been active in the American Federation of Teachers. She participated in the union's Teacher Leaders program for two years and facilitated the program for two years. Through that program, she connected with the AFT's civics education professional development efforts. Although civics is not her primary skill set, she wrote the curriculum for her district's social studies team during her second year at DCPS, and she agreed to join the civics design team.

"There are so many opportunities within the union to help shape policy, grow the capacity of the union, and amplify the impact of teacher presence and teacher voices," Thomas says.

For Thomas, helping to design research-based professional development modules and identify best practices that can translate across school districts is one of those opportunities. Civics education is a major area in which the union can lead the way forward.

"Civics is vital, not only to education, but also to how the country will be run 10 or 20 years from now," she says. "All AFT professional development is research-based, and the work that we are doing to understand how that research can inform our professional development is pivotal."

One of the most interesting areas of overlap, Thomas says, is the way in which culturally responsive pedagogy and identity work can be embedded in civics. "One idea that emerged from our civics focus group work was that many times, teachers don't feel comfortable having tough conversations because they don't know how those conversations will be received," she says "Before you can have tough conversations, you need to know, and build a bond with, your students."

By looking at civics education through the lenses of culturally responsive pedagogy and identity development, the design team can create effective and engaging tools and strategies for educators. "Civics is not all roses and butterflies," Thomas says, "and students need to learn how to become productive global citizens starting in kindergarten."

Thomas is researching case studies and examining the intersection between problem-based learning and project-based learning. "As part of the elementary team, I'm working on defining how problem-based

learning can be used for the lower grades. “What is an important, yet bite-sized, problem that a kindergartener can use to look at the different avenues available to solve it?” Having a tangible, relevant question is a key starting point, as is maintaining focus on developing problem-solving skills among elementary students.

Thomas hopes the strategies the team develops will promote action civics, not just textbook civics. The strategies should help create a generation of students who can be active in different facets of their communities and can apply the lessons they’ve learned to real-world situations. She is confident that the AFT has convened the right team for the job.

“The team, a microcosm of diversity, works well in sharing ideas. This is becoming a labor of love for all of us. We all want to see this program be successful,” Thomas says. “I’m excited to bring this to life with the team we have.”