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Kristopher Edmonds, 15, is remembered by his friends and family during his July 20 funeral. "Be-Bop," as his friends called him, was fatally shot July 13 in Norfolk. **TRENT SPRAGUE/STAFF**

'A history that they had never heard'

As many states remove Black history from schools, Virginia is doing the opposite

By **Sonia Rao**
Staff Writer

Patricia O'Shea, a rising senior at Granby High School in Norfolk, hadn't heard of Louis Latimer, a Black inventor who helped Alexander Graham Bell and Thomas Edison.

Or Henry Brown, who climbed in a box and mailed himself from Virginia to Philadelphia to gain his freedom.

Or Sarah Garland Jones, the first female licensed to practice medicine in the commonwealth.

An elective class on African American history this past spring opened O'Shea's eyes to these and many more Black Virginians who helped shape the state over the centuries. In previous history classes, she said, topics such as slavery and Jim Crow laws were barely talked about — one unit at most.

But as other states across the country introduce legislation restricting educators from teaching about race, Virginia has gone in another direction. The state started an initiative to incorporate more African American history into its public schools' curriculum. More Black history is included in all history classes now, but students like O'Shea who want to explore it deeper have the option with the new elective.

Experts say it's an effort to move away from looking at Black history as separate from the

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TOO MANY BULLETS HIT TOO MANY KIDS

10 children were shot last month in Norfolk. Communities are hurting. Activists want change.

By **Olivia George**
and **Katherine Hafner**
Staff Writers

NORFOLK — The casket had been polished and the flowers arranged. Children filed into the church to remember their friend, a rising ninth grader.

Some had yet to attend a school prom. Others had only the first traces of facial hair. Yet here they were, filling the pews of Bethany Baptist Church to mourn the 32nd person killed in Norfolk this year, Kristopher "Be-Bop" Edmonds.

They wore red, white and black clothing personalized with Kristopher's name. "The good die young,"

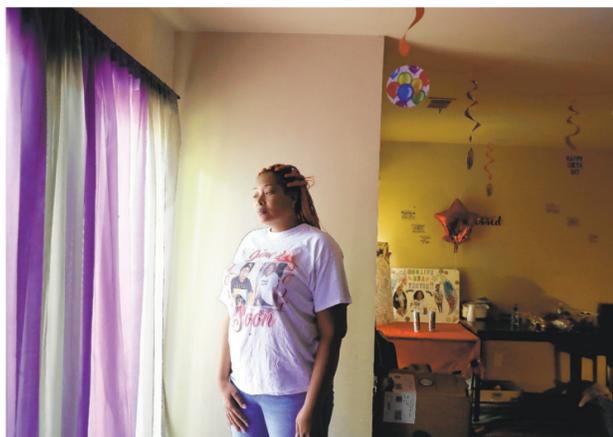
read the T-shirt of one boy who looked no taller than 5-foot.

And they sat and stared at Kristopher's smiling face on the projector screen, listening as a reverend spoke from the stage. "Father, we declare the guns have to be put down."

Kristopher, 15, had been struck by gunfire the week before, in the early hours of July 13, near his Norfolk home.

He's one of 10 children shot in the city last month — a jarring string of violence involving Norfolk's youth, even for a city peppered with gangs trying to woo them. The city hasn't seen that much gun violence involv-

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Marcia Keeling looks out the window of her wife's Norfolk home last week. Keeling's 15-year-old daughter, Teonna Coburn, was fatally shot July 10 in Norfolk. **JONATHON GRUENKE/STAFF**

Cape Charles district joins plea to lawmakers

'Crumbling Schools' tour urges General Assembly to act this week

By **Sara Gregory**
Staff Writer

CAPE CHARLES — The Christmas Day flood at Kiptopeke Elementary was the last straw.

A staffer discovered a burst pipe when he stopped to check on the building after visiting his family. Standing water filled the art classroom, spilling down the hall and into the library.

Brooke Thomas found out when she got the call from a colleague. Just wanted to give you a heads-up, Operations Director Chris Truckner told the district's chief financial officer.

Truckner finds problems. Thomas has to find the money to fix them.

How are we going to pay for this, Thomas wondered.

Superintendents and school boards across Virginia with the same dilemma have been pleading for help from legislators for years, mostly in vain. In a state where more than half of schools are 50 years old or older, recent estimates put a \$25 billion price tag on needed repairs in those schools. That's up from about \$9 billion when the state last studied the issue in 2013.

Lawmakers will take up the issue again when the special session starts Monday. Gov. Ralph Northam has proposed a \$250 million state match for school HVAC repairs from Virginia's share of American Rescue Plan stimulus funds. Many critics say it's not enough, won't be distrib-



Tom Hubert of ABM Building Services LLC stands in an empty classroom last week while leading educators, lawmakers and municipal officials on a tour of renovation being done at Kiptopeke Elementary in Cape Charles. **KAITLIN MCKEOWN/STAFF**

uted fairly and hamstrings districts by limiting the money to one use.

"It's really tone-deaf," Bristol Superintendent Keith Perrigan said. Perrigan, the president of the Coalition for Small and Rural Schools,

said the state is squandering a "once in a lifetime opportunity" by not putting more of the \$4.3 billion from the stimulus toward bigger school

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He's going for gold at the Tokyo Games

Chesapeake hurdler Grant Holloway has his eyes on the Olympics' top prize. **SPORTS**

Fire, ice, beauty near the Arctic Circle

We give you a firsthand look at the wonders of Iceland. **SUNDAY BREAK**

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POP

History

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country's history and to see it for what it is: an integral part of the American experience.

What changes were made to Virginia's curriculum?

Dr. Cassandra Newby-Alexander has spent much of her life studying Black history.

When the Norfolk State University professor was asked to help lead a commission to shape how history is taught in Virginia schools, she immediately said yes.

Gov. Ralph Northam created the African American History Education Commission to review Virginia's standards and instructional methods of teaching African American history in August 2019. The commission recommended changes to classes from Virginia studies to U.S. history. Approved by the Virginia Department of Education, they'll be implemented this fall.

It's important, Newby-Alexander said, because African American history is often "othered" as an optional component of American history.

"It's not — it's this central part of the American landscape," she said. "To talk about history, and the American past somehow devoid of African Americans, is part of what the commission was trying to correct."

That includes adding Juneteenth to a list of holidays for kindergartners to explore. Or learning about Mary Bowser, an African American Union spy. Or creating a timeline of how 20th-century Jim Crow laws restricted rights, economic decision-making and choices of African Americans.

The commission also helped develop a statewide African American history class to be taught as an elective in high schools. Norfolk, Portsmouth and Suffolk were part of a group that piloted the course during



Cassandra Newby-Alexander, professor of history and the dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Norfolk State University, served as a co-chair of a commission that made recommendations on how educators in the state can better integrate African American history into their curriculum. **KAITLIN MCKEOWN/STAFF**

the past school year. Every school district can offer it this fall.

Ed Allison, who taught O'Shea's African American studies class at Granby High, learned about Black history mostly from his parents and his own research, not his classes at Bayside High School.

At age 17, he picked up the second edition of John Hope Franklin's "From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans." He couldn't put it down.

"I remember seeing stuff like, pregnant women had to work in the fields until they had the baby. And then the next day, they were back in the fields," he said. "And I was like, 'What?'"

The ninth edition of Franklin's book is one of the textbooks used for the African American history elective. Topics include the first Africans in British North America coming to Virginia in 1619, Bacon's Rebellion, Virginia's slave codes, the founding of the local Black colleges Hampton University and Norfolk State University, and Black musicians, athletes and scientists.

Christonya Brown, the history and social sciences education coordinator for Virginia's education department, said she's been blown away by what students in different elective classes



Students Patricia O'Shea, left, and Aren De La Rosa and teacher Ed Allison outside Granby High School in June. Allison started teaching African American studies at the school in 2019. He learned about Black history mostly from his parents and his own research, not his classes at Bayside High School in Virginia Beach. **KRISTEN ZEIS/STAFF FILE**

have done so far. Students in Allegheny County are creating a website about an all-Black community, Wrightsville. A student in Covington created a children's book about what freedom means. Students in Allison's spring semester class worked with Fort Monroe and presented at a global United Nations conference.

"As long as you have students at the forefront of everything you do, it's OK to make adults uncomfortable," she said, repeating

advice a supervisor once gave her. "Because we're adults."

Getting rid of historical inaccuracies

At a Gloucester School Board town hall meeting this month, about 150 parents and community members gathered in an auditorium. Many were there to protest or ask questions about "critical race theory" and the state's new

history curriculum.

This isn't a new phenomenon — parents have been speaking out to school districts across Virginia and the country.

Critical race theory is a concept taught in law school, Newby-Alexander said, and unrelated to the African American History Education Commission.

The commission's work has focused on getting rid of inaccuracies and adding important parts of history that have been left out, she said.

Brown said she gets letters and emails from students all the time about topics their history classes didn't cover.

One student in Norfolk told her for years she rode the school bus, which always crossed Evelyn T. Butts Avenue. One day, she googled the name and discovered she was a Norfolk civil rights activist who fought against the poll tax.

"That's important," the student told Brown. "And I didn't learn it in my U.S. history class."

Matthan Wilson, who teaches the African American history elective at Woodside High School in Newport News, said it's a scary environment for teachers right now.

Wilson attended I.C. Norcom High School in Portsmouth, Norfolk State University and North Carolina A&T — historically black schools. As a child, he didn't go to the Virginia Beach Oceanfront, which was segregated until the early 1960s — instead, his dad took him to the Black beaches in Ocean View. His mother's side of the family has been free since the late 17th century.

Wilson grew up surrounded by the history of his people. So to those pushing back against teaching Black history, it can feel like he doesn't exist.

"I was taught your world in school," he said. "I was taught your history, from your point of view, but as soon as I started talking about mine, you shut down. I'm like, 'Wow!' You know nothing about me, I just want to tell you about me."

'A history they had never heard'

When Allison started teaching Granby's African American studies class in 2019, a year before it became a statewide course, he created his own curriculum.

Now, he can use state resources to help guide content, such as the Dr. Carter G. Woodson Collaborative, an open education resource created by the state education department, social studies specialists, local museums and libraries.

It includes sorting cards to match important names, phrases and places from the Civil Rights Movement, and modules examining topics like Black poetry, freedom rides and the legacy of HBCUs in the U.S.

Ma'asehyahu Isra-Ul is president of the Virginia Social Studies Consortium and oversees the history program for Richmond Public Schools. One of his jobs is helping teachers work statewide edits into their districts' curriculum. He said the focus is to teach students how to research, think critically and analyze primary sources.

For example, if a student asks if Thomas Jefferson was racist, a teacher wouldn't say "yes, of course he was, he had over 600 slaves."

Instead, Isra-Ul said, they'd point the student to primary sources and look at Jefferson's views toward African Americans and indigenous people. They'd align Jefferson's actions with their understanding of the term "racist."

"Our job is not to come in and try to push our kids into our views that we have, or may have, as adults," he said. "Our job is to present information to the kids."

Wilson, who taught three sections of the African American history elective remotely last semester, said his students have loved it.

Even parents will call him to tell him they learned something from his class.

"You're telling them a history that they had never heard," he said.

Sonia Rao, sonia.rao@virginiamedia.com

/// I think having art is an important element in a place that's dedicated to health and wellness because it offers a break from whatever the patient or family is going through in that healthcare facility. Art promotes healing during a time that can be very stressful. ///

Gary Ryan
Director & CEO, Virginia Museum of Contemporary Art

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