Teaching for Social Change, Activism, and Leadership

At each grade level, students experience a year-long, integrated civics, equity, and leadership curriculum, grounded in social justice pedagogy. We draw inspiration from our founders’ vision: a learning environment in which students become active and socially responsible citizen-leaders, committed to advancing social justice in their communities.

Social Change at Burke

Since our founding in 1968, civic responsibility and social change have been central to the Burke philosophy. Our founders drew inspiration from these words, attributed to Edmund Burke:

“All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.”

In June 2018, as our 50th anniversary year began, Burke received a grant from the E. E. Ford Foundation to integrate social justice fully into our curriculum. With “resident scholar” Dr. Katy Swalwell, who focuses on social justice pedagogy in independent schools, Burke looked to move beyond traditional models of service and leadership and to prepare students to become activist allies and ethical leaders in middle school, high school, and beyond.

In 2019-20, as part of this transition, Burke’s service requirement will no longer depend on students earning service hours independently. Direct service will remain a part of each grade’s experience; however, rather than experiencing service as an endpoint, students will be oriented toward a social change mindset – engaging in critical research, reflection, root cause analysis, and advocacy through long-term institutional partnerships.

Curriculum by Grade

All students experience an integrated civics, equity, and leadership curriculum, unified around a different theme in each grade:

- **6th Grade**: Citizenship at the Margins
- **7th Grade**: Exploring Dystopian, Utopian, and Just Societies
- **8th Grade**: Social Change and the American Civil Rights Movement
9th Grade: Food Justice in Washington, DC
10th Grade: Action Civics in the DMV
11th Grade: Environmental and Social Justice in West Virginia
12th Grade: Effective Allyship and Ethical Leadership

Grade Trips

Trips both in and beyond DC are essential components. The 6th grade “core” culminates in an interdisciplinary DC Museum Presentation and a trip to New York City. The 8th grade travels to Alabama for a four-day civil rights tour in the spring. In high school, destinations include Spruce Knob, WV, where students meet with local activists and storytellers and work with local nonprofits to address community needs.

Hands-On Projects

In each grade, students engage in hands-on projects that tie into their theme. This fall, the 8th grade furnished an apartment for a local refugee family, while the 9th grade engaged in direct service and organized a food drive to benefit the Rosemount Center’s clients. Each 10th grade student wrote a “soapbox speech” about an important issue facing their community, with the top four speakers advancing to the citywide Project Soapbox competition.

As a culmination to their Burke careers, each 12th grader develops a full-time, off-campus internship or project; seniors then return to Burke to present the projects to the community. In 2019, students solo-hiked on the Appalachian Trail, shadowed in Washington Hospital Center’s maternal health department and in the US House of Representatives, and interned at the Women’s Center, Levine School of Music, Asian Americans Advancing Justice, and Goddard Space Flight Center, among myriad other pursuits.

Our Partner Organizations

Capital Area Food Bank
DC Humanities
DC Oral History Collaborative
Experience Learning
Food & Friends
Homes Not Borders
Horace Mann ES
Mikva Challenge
North Brentwood AME Zion Church
Rosemount Center
Share Our Strength
Solutions in Hometown Connections
StoryCorps
Thrive DC

Learn More Online