

Making History Today: An Interview with Andre Williams



Andre Williams
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Can you tell us a little bit about your personal and professional background?

I am a teacher at East Boston High School. I have been teaching for about three years now, mostly teaching biology, chemistry, and biotechnology. I got my master's degree at the University of Texas in Austin and bachelor's degree from Hiram College in Hiram, OH. Both are biology focused— a Bachelor's in biology and Master's in molecular biology. While I was doing my Master's, I found a love for teaching. I enjoy interacting with people, interacting with the content, and teaching people about it. It's been really fun for me and I very much enjoy it.

What does a typical day look like in your role at East Boston?

It's hectic. It goes different ways, depending on whether we're in person or remote, but for the most part, it is trying to engage the students virtually, which is awesome. The students are great. They are very entertaining. They have lots of little quips and things that keep the day fresh. So, I usually start off with a couple of classes in the morning when I try to do lots of interactive things. We try to keep our students stimulated with simulations and are starting some hands-on activities, as small as they may be, to keep them interested. We try to make sure that they have a physical reference for the things that they are learning about. A lot of the teachers get together in professional learning communities. We sit and talk about what the students are learning, how we can best improve our craft, and how we best can engage the students. There's also time spent setting up simulations and activities for the students so that it is all seamless for them, even though it's work on the back end for us.

How has COVID-19 affected your work recently?

Starting the new semester, we have the highest of high needs students coming in—students who are homeless or food insecure - where services are just not available to them otherwise. We have those students in the building but have to keep our distance, of course. I think bouncing back and forth between hybrid and remote all year has been challenging for the teachers. But when the students do it, it's even crazier. It feels very overwhelming at times, because not only do we have to deal with kids getting sick with COVID-19, but they will also tell me that their family members are ill, and they will not be able to make it to class. It's actually happening in the classroom while I am trying to teach them, so trying to get the students engaged can be a challenge, but I do everything I can.

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Who would you say are some of your role models?

I've got a couple of role models in education. A few teachers I follow on Twitter share how they are increasing student engagement during COVID-19, and that is one of the ways that I find a lot of my role models. Lee Ferguson teaches at Allen High School in Texas. She's really awesome. Nick Covington, I believe teaches in Iowa. And then there are some big-name teachers like Alfie Kohn who is a big advocate for increasing student agency. So, there are a couple of people who I found who really inspire me to keep being a great teacher. But my college professors have been instrumental in getting me interested in teaching. Some great professors in the UTeach Program and my professors back at Hiram are all people who were my educators and role models, and I really appreciate that.

What are some of the differences you've noticed in teaching in Texas versus Massachusetts?

There are actually a lot of similarities, because working in urban districts is very similar across the country. But I think the biggest differences have been perceptions of biology in certain topics. Texas is a more conservative state with more conservative views. So, the topic of evolution is somewhat contentious with students. They sometimes have a more adversarial view of evolution because it doesn't fit in with their beliefs, and so I have to be very careful with that. And here, I found that I don't have to do that as much. I also find that there's more support for social justice causes here. I think that it's more apparent that there are teachers who are working to focus on racial representation and support for LGBT students. There is more overt support. But I think, in actuality, there are a lot of similarities. Coming from TX to MA, you see that the struggles of urban students across the country are very similar, so it's about dealing with the biases that we all have and wealth inequality. It is very real for urban students across the board.

How have ongoing protests against systemic racism impacted your work?

I think one thing that's very interesting is that a lot of the students seem to be more aware and vocal about how these things affect them, like we can actually talk and share. Students seem to have a lot more voice, and they feel empowered to talk about the issues that they have. Across the board, our school district has stated that it wants to be anti-racist and focus on how to close the gap between students of color and white students. What we do as teachers affect that, and I think that while it is very noble, there is still a lot of work that we have to do until we get to a point where that is a reality for the students. The work is just beginning, and I want to see that continue. I want to see people continue to talk about it, because if we can keep it going, then I believe that we will see change. But we can't just let it be one season or one year and talk about it and just let it disappear. We have to keep it going.

Do you feel that science is any more of a significant topic area for this important work to be integrated into?

Yes. A lot of biotech companies we partner with over the years have focused on increasing the number of people that they put in front of students who are of color, so that students really can see themselves as scientists, especially because the population that I teach is so heavily dominated by students of color. It is

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really important to have someone who looks like them or is of color and can understand their struggles. Having that diverse representation opens their eyes to the possibility of having jobs in the field. A lot of the students are more interested in getting internships and hosting career panels. I think the students are starting to see themselves as scientists and as people who can be a part of the biotech industry.

What are you hopeful for in 2021?

I am hopeful for the opportunity to get to work with the students in person. It has been difficult with Covid to get students interested 100%. In-person teaching allows you to show them the technique, as well as discovery, news, and how everything is impacted by science. I really miss being in school. The remote teaching environment is a challenge. It's not easy when you try to re-create interactive lessons that usually happen organically in a classroom. I also hope those that move forward in the Biotech program find a place that is valuable to them where they can see a future for themselves.

As an educator in the life sciences, what are you most proud of?

I am most proud to see the change that is starting to happen, and like I said before, it is still very early. A lot of people are still working through systems that do not benefit students of color, and how to properly navigate the space they are in. But the conversation has changed from *Why aren't Black people doing this?* to *How can we increase the numbers of Black people to work here?* The onus has moved from Black people not being capable because of their schools, to how we as educators can assist, which is where we need to be. I hope students who may not think of biotech as a career and now find it interesting, learning about it, and working with their hands, continue to do so. As a person who follows, you know other Black scientists on Twitter and social media, it's very comforting and makes me very proud to see Black people making strides and starting to make headway. There are miles and miles to go, but we've started moving forward and hopefully we can keep that going.

How are you planning to celebrate Black History Month?

By being authentically me. I think that it's important to recognize the contributions that have been made by the many scientists who have come before me, who've trailblazed and really made space for me, allowing me to be in a position that I am now. But I think that it's important to also recognize that I don't have to have the same incredible accomplishments for myself and the fact that I am here and representing myself as a Black individual is important. For me, some of the celebration is going to come from talking with students about what Black people have done in the sciences, talking about contributions that we've made as patients and as researchers. I want to make sure that I don't only talk about Black scientists during Black History Month but continue to work to incorporate Black scientists into my curriculum so that it is just a part of the conversation year-round. But this is a great time to focus on those individuals who have made contributions. For me, it's about celebrating those who came before me and those who are to come, the students who are in front of me, and then just existing as a Black individual, scientist, teacher, whatever you want to call it.