



# Herald-Tribune

## Sarasota fourth-graders will learn history of Newtown

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### Students will tour historical markers as part of Florida history curriculum

SARASOTA — Local fourth-graders will now have the chance to learn more about the history of Newtown, Sarasota's historically black community, through a new partnership.

Beginning the day after Martin Luther King Jr. Day and continuing until the start of Black History Month in February, Sarasota County School District fourth-grade students will have the opportunity to embark on a field trip touring 15 historical markers around Newtown and taking in a Westcoast Black Theatre Troupe play. District administrators hope the program, partially sponsored by Embracing Our Differences, will expose students to local civil rights history, especially combined with Black History Month curriculum and the Florida history that fourth graders learn.

The district introduced the curriculum and Newtown Alive's compilation of archival documents and history to a group of fourth-grade teachers at a training session at Booker High School Wednesday night. Vickie Oldham, lead consultant for the Newtown Conservation Historic District project, then led about 20 teachers on a school bus tour of the Newtown markers, stopping for a brief description of each one and showing the teachers how to use the project's new mobile application, which offers an interactive look at every marker.

As the bus wound its way around the neighborhoods of Newtown, focusing on major thoroughfare Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Way, Oldham touched on issues that have impacted the community, including gentrification, racism and education. Driving out of Booker High's parking lot, she pointed to a house

immediately on her left, one that had been her grandmother's. Oldham tried to buy the house back when she returned to the area as an adult, but was priced out.

"That's what's happening in the Newtown community," Oldham said, alluding to the increasingly gentrified real estate surrounding downtown Sarasota. "People that live here may not be able to live here. We're dealing with change."

The bus passed the Robert L. Taylor Community Complex, a hub in Newtown, built on land that once held military barracks. Oldham said she wanted people to know that "African Americans participated in World War I and World War II and trained and served in the military as well."

While Oldham explained each marker, many of the teachers swiped through their phones, following along with the app's offerings as well. They will be able to share that knowledge with their students when they begin discussing the area's history.

Still, not all of the area's history is fourth-grade-level material. Oldham became emotional when discussing lynchings that took place in Sarasota. "We had to write about the lynchings — that was hard," she said. "I don't think fourth graders can handle the lynching. But high schoolers — they definitely can and should."

The district does not yet know the fate of the program past this year, said K-12 social studies program specialist Bernadette Bennett.

"I don't know how this is going to evolve," Bennett said. "This is our first foray into how this curriculum is going to be put together."

But Booker High School social studies teacher Gail Foreman, who has taught a civil rights course at Booker before, said this is an important piece of education that needs to be taught.

"You're black every day," Foreman said she tells her black students. "We have a tendency to compartmentalize history, but it's really important from my kids' and my standpoint to look at it from a broad perspective."