



STL Equity Matters

By Erika Whitfield • Feb 07, 2023
 Smart Brevity® count: 6 mins...1527 words

Welcome to the 18th edition of our newsletter: STL Equity Matters ...

How it works: We shine a light on how race, ethnicity and gender is lived in our region.

Who is behind this: This newsletter is brought to you by the [River City Journalism Fund](#), a non-profit journalism project formerly known as Before Ferguson Beyond Ferguson.

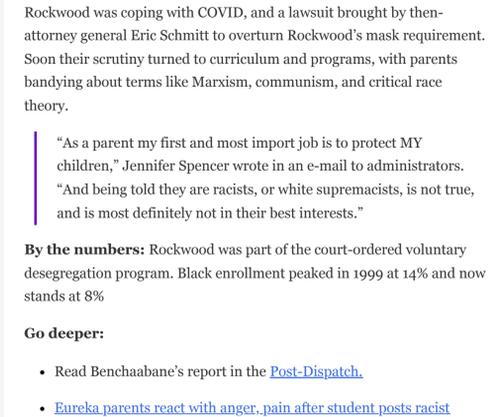
This rebranding and new collaboration brings additional resources and brainpower that will boost reporting on local government, the environment, criminal justice, the arts, the business community and more.



You can learn more by reading this story in the [Gateway Journalism Review](#).

Let's dive in.

1. Rockwood parents stoke outrage, district ends diversity programs



Rockwood parents waiting in line for a seat at a school board meeting held in 2020. (Photo by Robert Cohen/St. Louis Post-Dispatch)

What's new: In a deeply reported story, St. Louis Post-Dispatch reporter [Nassim Benchaabane](#) describes how the Rockwood School District reversed efforts to create a more inclusive curriculum and halted programs that touched on issues of race, equity and diversity.

Why it matters: Rockwood represents a nationwide trend in which conservative groups have begun flipping representation on school boards. Parents have questioned and called out administrators and teachers at meetings and through social media. The Rockwood district covers the western section of St. Louis County and with 20,000 students is the third largest district in the state.

Alarm bells rather than school bells: The initiatives have made some educators fear for their safety. Others have quit their jobs. Rockwood student services director Terry Harris resigned in October after the board voted to cancel contracts for programs that served Black students

Parent activists respond: The furor among parents developed as Rockwood was coping with COVID, and a lawsuit brought by then-attorney general Eric Schmitt to overturn Rockwood's mask requirement. Soon their scrutiny turned to curriculum and programs, with parents bandying about terms like Marxism, communism, and critical race theory.

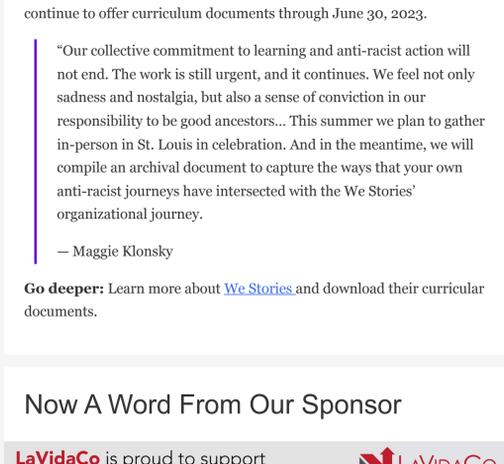
“As a parent my first and most import job is to protect MY children,” Jennifer Spencer wrote in an e-mail to administrators. “And being told they are racists, or white supremacists, is not true, and is most definitely not in their best interests.”

By the numbers: Rockwood was part of the court-ordered voluntary desegregation program. Black enrollment peaked in 1999 at 14% and now stands at 8%

Go deeper:

- Read Benchaabane's report in the [Post-Dispatch](#).
- [Eureka parents react with anger, pain after student posts racist video online.](#)
- [National survey](#) describes how political conflicts are having a chilling effect on public schools.

2. Khamari Makes His Mark



Khamari Smith with his mother, Ebony Smith-Thomas, and grandfather, Zachary Smith.

What's new: Football fans know that Feb. 1 was national signing day for college-bound high school athletes. The media focused on highly-touted quarterbacks, wide receivers and running backs from big time high school programs. But here we give you a lineman for the Webster Groves High School Statesmen, a team that won just a single game in 2022: Khamari Smith.

Why it matters: Khamari announced that he will be attending Northwest Missouri State in Maryville on a scholarship. An honor roll student, Khamari's journey is nothing short of remarkable.

Back story: Just three years ago as Khamari was getting started at Webster and with football, his mom, Ebony Smith-Thomas underwent heart transplant surgery. With her health failing, Smith-Thomas had to give up her job at Harris-Stowe State University throwing the family's financial situation into disarray. She would face multiple surgeries and visits to the emergency room over the next three years. On Feb. 2, Smith-Thomas was back in the hospital for a double mastectomy. Through it all, Smith-Thomas has shown up for her son at school and on the gridiron.

Smith-Thomas's Facebook message to her son:

I have accomplished ALOT in my life but [Khamari Smith](#) is My ABSOLUTE BEST accomplishment and my other children...of course!!!

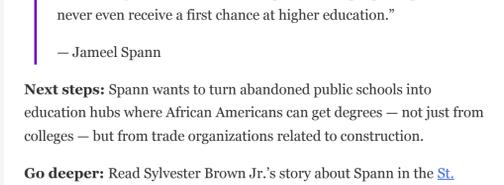
Son, you really have showed that you are ready for the next level & this new chapter of life.

You! Did this and worked your A\$\$ off to make this happen. I hope you're proud of yourself and know you got a village supporting you on this life journey.

Go deeper:

[Ebony Smith-Thomas, her family and her journey are part of the 63106 Project](#), a series from Before Ferguson Beyond Ferguson (now the [River City Journalism Fund](#)) chronicling the plight of families in the midst of the COVID pandemic.

3. We Stories To Cease Operations



What's new: Executive director Maggie Klonsky sent a message to community stakeholders announcing that We Stories will cease operations in 2023.

Why it matters: Laura Horwitz and Adelaide Lancaster started We Stories in 2015 as a means for parents, caregivers and educators to more advance the cause of anti-racism through children's literature. More than 1,400 families participated in the non-profit's Family Learning Program. Both founders have moved on to other pursuits.

Legacy for learning: Though We Stories is ceasing operations, it will continue to offer curriculum documents through June 30, 2023.

“Our collective commitment to learning and anti-racist action will not end. The work is still urgent, and it continues. We feel not only sadness and nostalgia, but also a sense of conviction in our responsibility to be good ancestors... This summer we plan to gather in-person in St. Louis in celebration. And in the meantime, we will compile an archival document to capture the ways that your own anti-racist journeys have intersected with the We Stories' organizational journey.

— Maggie Klonsky

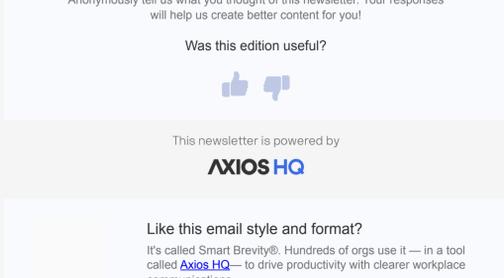
Go deeper: Learn more about [We Stories](#) and download their curricular documents.

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4. Student Loans Create Generational Debt For Black families



Cecilia Castell/NPR

What's new: Some St. Louis families find themselves in a double-bind when it comes to student loan debt, producer Miya Norfleet reports for *St. Louis on the Air*. Parents are, nonetheless, contemplating borrowing money to finance their educations.

Why it matters: Nicholas Hillman, whose [research](#) looks at the ways policy, race and geography play a role in college debt, notes: “People of color, Black men and Black women in particular, have consistently been disenfranchised by the lending system, not only needing to borrow more money to go to college, but then in the labor force, [they] don't have the same kind of return on that investment, even for the same degrees, and therefore don't have the capacity to repay their loans.”

Generation to generation: “For younger generations, watching their older relatives struggle financially because of federal student loans may be a deterrent to college all together,” said Faith Sandler, executive director of The Scholarship Foundation of St. Louis.

Go Deeper: [Read and listen to](#) Norfleet's report at St. Louis on the Air.

5. He Aims To Put Prisons Out Of Business

Jameel Spann outside the shuttered Harrison Elementary School that he once attended. Photo by Wiley Price/St. Louis American

What's New: In 2003, St. Louis native Jameel Spann, a junior at Fisk University student, was on a fast track to success. That fall he returned to his home town to attend a football game. He got high and stupidly joined a friend in a street robbery. Today he is putting his life back together and spearheading an effort to provide higher education opportunities for felons.

Why it matters: While in prison, Spann found ways to save time off his sentence by furthering his education. After serving nearly 13 years, Spann completed his education through the [Prison Education Project](#) at Washington University.

“Everyone, even felons, should have access to education but everyone doesn't. I received a second chance because I already had some college before I was locked up. But most people in prison never even receive a first chance at higher education.”

— Jameel Spann

Next steps: Spann wants to turn abandoned public schools into education hubs where African Americans can get degrees — not just from colleges — but from trade organizations related to construction.

Go deeper: Read Sylvester Brown Jr.'s story about Spann in the [St. Louis American](#).

6. Soccer Fans Will Stand And Deliver

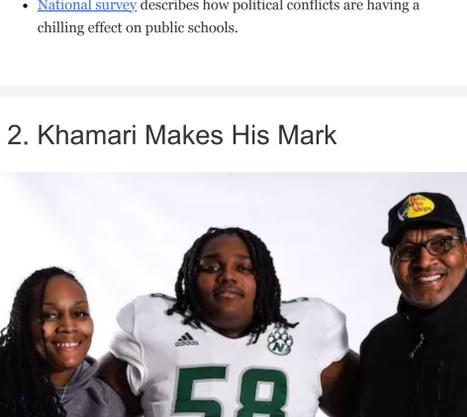
Marc Winkler with daughter Zoey at a St. Louis CITY SC exhibition match. Photo courtesy of the Winkler family.

What's new: Julian Trejo, a Washington University freshman, makes his professional debut as a soccer writer with support from the River City Journalism Fund.

Why it matters: Trejo comes from a marginalized community in Arkansas where less than 25 percent of students at his high school went on to higher education. Trejo defied the odds in part because of the discipline and resilience he learned from soccer where his teams won state championships. Trejo says his lived experience will provide insights as he covers the debut season of City SC, St. Louis's expansion franchise in Major League Soccer (MLS).

First Story: Trejo writes that soccer fan culture is nothing like what fans have experienced before at Busch Stadium for the Cardinals, Enterprise Center for the Blues, or at Faurot Field for the Missouri Tigers.

“Fans at baseball, football, and hockey games normally sit during a game, only standing at important moments. Soccer fans stand throughout a match. Support Groups ensure that fans at CITYPARK will be chanting, jumping, playing instruments, and waving flags. The atmosphere they create will be electric.”



Julian Trejo

Go deeper: Read Trejo's story in the [St. Louis American](#).

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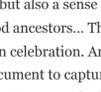
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