

STL Equity Matters

Welcome to the 29th edition of our newsletter: STL Equity Matters ...

How It Works: We shine a light on how race, ethnicity, religion, and gender are lived in our region.

Who Is Behind This: This newsletter is brought to you by the [River City Journalism Fund](#), a nonprofit journalism project formerly known as Before Ferguson Beyond Ferguson. This rebranding and new collaboration bring additional resources and brainpower that will boost reporting on local government, the environment, criminal justice, the arts, the business community, and more.



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Let's dive in ...



Francis Howell School Board member Mark Ponder, left, talks with Francis Howell North High School senior Lauren Chance on July 20, after Ponder joined the board majority in voting to rescind an anti-racism resolution. (Photo by David Carson for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch)

1. Francis Howell School Board Faces a Big Test

What's New: The Francis Howell School Board will vote this month on a new approach to Black history and literature, perhaps bringing to an end a controversy that has drawn national attention.

Why It Matters: The board in December voted to remove some courses because they relied in part on the Southern Poverty Law Center's social-justice standards. Now board members will vote on a new approach on March 21. The revised courses don't include the social-justice standards.

An Outcry: The board voted 5-2 in December to drop the courses but faced immediate pushback from students and parents, and coverage from national media. The board announced a week later that the classes would return under a "politically neutral" curriculum.

A Pernicious Trend: Writing in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Antonio French during Black History Month cited the Francis Howell controversy, among many others, as part of "a movement to limit the teaching of history, particularly aspects that deal with race, racism, and the legacy of slavery and segregation in America."

Go Deeper:

- Read Chad Davis' coverage of the Francis Howell controversy at [St. Louis Public Radio](#).
- Read Antonio French's commentary in the [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#).



Advocates for transgender rights at a recent rally. (Photo by Theo Welling for the Riverfront Times.)

2. An 'Avalanche' of Transgender Bills

What's New: In a recent commentary for the *St. Louis American*, Sylvester Brown Jr. notes that Missouri is facing an "avalanche" of transgender bills that are "rife with untruths and fabrications."

Why It Matters: Brown notes that the American Civil Liberties Union is tracking 48 anti-LGBTQ+ bills in Missouri — more than any other state except Texas. The *Riverfront Times*' Kallie Cox reported that a bill introduced in the Missouri House would force teachers to register as sex offenders if they use the names and pronouns of transgender children or otherwise support them and their identity.

Outsize Impact: Though the number of transgender youth or those considering transitioning is small. Such bills can have a devastating impact if passed into law, Cox noted.

"A 2018 study (one of the most recent in this field of research) found that trans youth who were able to use their correct names (those that align with their gender identity) in multiple contexts had a lower risk of depression and suicide, according to the [Suicide Prevention Resource Center](#)."

Go Deeper:

- Read Brown's commentary in the [St. Louis American](#).
- Read Cox's story in the [Riverfront Times](#).



Absentee voters stand in line to vote at the St. Louis County Board of Elections in St. Ann on the final day of absentee voting on Monday, Nov. 5, 2018, before the Tuesday midterm election.. (Photo by Robert Cohen for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch)

3. Missouri Steps Back in Assuring Accurate Voter Rolls

What's New: Janelle O'Dea, a reporter for the Center for Public Integrity, reports that Missouri pulled out of a collaboration that helps states keep voter rolls accurate.

Why It Matters: Eric Fey, the Democratic director of elections in St. Louis County, told O'Dea he is bracing for Election Day snarls when people discover at the polls that the address on their voter-registration record is incorrect.

Based on Faulty Info: The move to drop out of the collaboration, known as the Electronic Registration Information Center, or ERIC, followed on the heels of a baseless article published by a St. Louis-based website, Gateway Pundit, that alleged ERIC is a left-wing plot funded by billionaire George Soros. In fact, O'Dea noted, ERIC is funded by its member states — now 24 of them, plus Washington, D.C. — and helps them both remove ineligible voters from the rolls and register new ones.

Go Deeper: Read Janelle O'Dea's story in the [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#).



Jerry Ellis, right, head technician at Missouri Central Bus Company, and Adolphus Pruitt, president of St. Louis City NAACP, speak at a news conference. (Photo by Christian Gooden for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch)

4. The Wheels on the Bus Lack Effective Brakes

What's New: Critics of the Missouri Central Bus Company, which transports St. Louis Public School students, say the company is failing to flag faulty brakes and a racist culture. Jerry Ellis, lead mechanic for the company, and Adolphus Pruitt, president of St. Louis City NAACP held a press conference on March 5, 2024, to address the issues.

Why It Matters: The St. Louis Post-Dispatch noted that the Missouri Highway Patrol's annual report of school-bus inspections for 2023 showed that just 50% of the 235 buses it inspected from St. Louis Public Schools were rated "approved," 36% were deemed defective, and 14% were out of service.

"In contrast, a Post-Dispatch analysis of the data shows 95% of buses inspected by the patrol from St. Louis County schools and districts were rated 'approved.'"

Background: A diesel mechanic found a noose a day after he called attention to a cracked piston on a bus, which jeopardized the braking system. He said a white supervisor told him to ignore it. The Post-Dispatch spoke to multiple drivers who said they feared for the safety of both students and drivers while on the job.

Go Deeper: Read Monica Obradovic's story in the [St. Louis Post-Dispatch](#).

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5. Speaker Series Illuminates Paths to an Equitable STL

What's New: Once and For All, a speaker series aimed at addressing the region's challenges, will hold a forum Thursday, March 14, at the Donald Danforth Plant Science Center. The effort is led by Beyond Housing, a community-development organization that has developed an innovative model for transforming communities, notably in the Normandy School District area in North St. Louis County.

Why It Matters: The series, according to organizers, brings together subject-matter experts that address topics ranging from "failing schools to high crime rates, slow economic growth, and our region's steady decline in prosperity as well as national prominence and influence."

"A wealth of research published by Washington University in St. Louis, University of Missouri–St. Louis, Forward Through Ferguson, Greater St. Louis Inc., and others shows how our high concentrations of poverty and communities in decline don't just harm those most directly impacted."

What's Up in Normandy: Beyond Housing has spearheaded an effort to transform what's known as the 24:1 Community, an area comprising multiple municipalities within the Normandy School

District footprint in North St. Louis County. As Chris Krehmeyer, president and CEO of Beyond Housing, notes:

"Since launching a comprehensive community-development initiative in 2010, Beyond Housing and our partners have raised and invested more than \$175 million in the 24:1 Community. In Pagedale alone, 100 new affordable homes have been built, hundreds more have been rehabbed, and, thanks to BJC HealthCare and others, we recently broke ground on 36 additional new homes near The Page town center."

Go Deeper:

- Read [Krehmeyer's 2023 report](#) on the 24:1 Community.
- [Register for the Once and For All Speaker Series](#) on Thursday, March 14.



At left, author Laura Meckler outside the home where she grew up in Shaker Heights. At right, Meckler with Sarah Fenske (middle) and Christi Griffin at RCJF's inaugural salon. (Photo of Meckler at left by Maddie McGarvey for the Washington Post.)

6. Washington Post Education Writer Featured at RCJF's Inaugural Salon

What's New: Laura Meckler, Washington Post education writer and author of *Dream Town*, a critically acclaimed book on desegregation efforts in the Cleveland suburb of Shaker Heights, was the featured guest at a salon sponsored by the River City Journalism Fund.

Why It Matters: RCJF is hosting a series of salons in 2024 as a means of connecting more closely to community stakeholders. A group of educators and those engaged civically with education attended the session. RCJF plans salons on a variety of social-justice issues, including public health, crime and punishment, environmental racism, and amplifying voices of marginalized citizens,

RCJF's Work: Guests were also provided with recent stories that RCJF has shared with local media without charge thanks to the generosity of our donors, including:

- Lindbergh's Troubled Legacy, which appeared in both the [Riverfront Times](#) and [St. Louis Jewish Light](#).
- Money for Nothing, about Missouri landlords cashing in on Covid-19 relief funds, which appeared in the [Riverfront Times](#) and [St. Louis Public Radio](#).
- Commentary pieces in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch from [Precious Barry](#) and [Bella Nguyen](#). Precious, a freshman at Washington University, and Bella, a senior at Nerinx Hall in Webster Groves, are part of RCJF's Commentariat, an effort on our part to amplify the voices of young writers from marginalized communities.

Go Deeper:

- If you would like to participate in or host a salon, e-mail RCJF chair [Richard Weiss](#).
- More about [Laura Meckler](#) and her book.
- Read an excerpt from Meckler's book in the [Washington Post](#).



From left, Lana Pepper, Jocelyn Barnes, and Sarah Holahan join in the discussion.



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