

STAND UP FOR JUSTICE Sponsored by the Jewish Community Relations Council of the Jewish Federation of Greater Naples Application deadline: February 2, 2026

**Applicant's name:** Kelly Joy Onanian

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**Number of years in education:**16

**Grade or subject taught:** Middle School English (Currently Grades 6 & 7 ELA, Grade 6 Writer's Workshop, and Grade 6 Advisor)

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\*Currently we have two Co-Heads of School

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**1. Describe the precipitating events that motivated you to initiate these lessons or activities.**

I have always been intentional about creating a classroom culture that promotes respect and honors diversity across religion, race, culture, and individual differences—both within our school community and in the broader world. During my first two years at Seacrest (this is now my third), I began to reflect more critically on the depth of my curriculum and recognized a need for more intentional, impactful instruction around social justice. I realized that many students simply are not regularly exposed to these issues, and the texts we had been using did not provide sufficient opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with themes of equity, injustice, and human rights.

This realization became the precipitating event that motivated me to redesign my curriculum. I wanted students not only to understand these issues intellectually, but also to internalize them—to develop empathy, awareness, and a sense of responsibility toward others. It was time to embed social justice more authentically and consistently into our studies.

As a result, I established the guiding question for my seventh-grade curriculum: *"How do we take responsibility for ourselves and others?"* This question serves as a unifying theme throughout the year. Through a close examination of literature and collaboration with administration, we adopted the Amplify curriculum as our anchor, as it offers rich, text-based

explorations of social justice, power, and voice. Using Amplify as a foundation, I then designed and implemented additional lessons that deepened students' engagement with these critical themes.

The two works highlighted in this application, *Red Scarf Girl* and *A Raisin in the Sun*, present challenging and often painful social justice issues. However, these texts had a profound impact on my students. They rose to the challenge with compassion, empathy, and a genuine desire to learn from history rather than repeat it. Through these experiences, students developed not only a stronger understanding of economic, political, and social inequities, but also a growing commitment to taking responsibility for their own actions and for their role in creating a more just and equitable world.

**2. Describe the lessons or activities; and if adapted from another source please reference.**

***Red Scarf Girl***

*Red Scarf Girl* is a memoir by Ji-li Jiang, whose life was turned upside down when Chairman Mao launched his Cultural Revolution during the 1960s and 70s. Jian's family was labeled "Black" status by the Chinese government because of her grandfather's past as a landlord, turning friends and neighbors against her. Ji-li is torn between her belief in Mao's Party, and her love for her family, facing the impossible choice of denouncing them to save herself or staying loyal and risking everything. My students ages 12-13 are the same age that Ji-Li was in the memoir. Our discussions were very rich as the details were so sad, almost unbelievable to students. We read most of the memoir together as a class while students built reading comprehension, analysis, and discussion skills.

The unit culminated in a diary project in which students had to "step in the shoes" of one of the characters: one of Ji-Li's family members, a friend, or teacher. (They could not write from Ji-Li's perspective since she wrote the memoir). They selected someone that they empathized with and understood well enough to write from that character's perspective. In the required five entries, they showed emotions, thoughts, reactions, personality, and the correct tone for that character and what that character experienced through their writing. Each diary entry reflected a key moment, something important that happened in the story and showed *how* the character felt about what happened and why it mattered to them. Students included thoughts or moments not directly described in the book, but stayed true to what they knew about the character and the story. Each entry included a date based on the timeline of the story (1966-76) and a title, (e.g., "*The Secret Thoughts of Ji-Yun*"). They could also add drawings and had creative freedom. Some students wrote entries in an actual journal, while others wrote on vintage paper or used technology to type and create their entries. **\*Students' diary entries are included in this application.**

***A Raisin in the Sun***

Our "Character and Conflict" unit included an in depth study of *A Raisin in the Sun*, the famous play written by Lorraine Hansberry. It explores the struggles, dreams, and hopes of an African American family, the Youngers, living in Chicago during the 1950s. Through these characters,

students examined themes such as racial discrimination, class, family struggle, bigotry and bullying as they pursued the Youngers idea of the American Dream. Students examined the play's title, which comes from a poem by Langston Hughes that symbolizes what happens to dreams that are delayed or denied because of social injustice. Along with reading the play, students also watched the 1961 original movie version of *A Raisin in the Sun* which was very powerful, as they saw the dramatic performances by Sidney Poitier, Ruby Dee, and Claudia McNeil. Similar to *Red Scarf Girl*, this unit was very discussion based. Students reflected on several questions including:

- How does the Younger family's attempt to move into a new neighborhood reveal the effects of racial segregation in the 1950s?
- Why does Karl Lindner believe he is being "reasonable"? What does his visit reveal about racism that is hidden behind polite language?
- How does the play challenge the idea of the "American Dream" being equal for everyone?
- How does Ruth's role in the family show the challenges faced by working women? In what ways is her struggle a form of social injustice?

The unit culminated with a 5 paragraph essay in which students chose from a variety of prompts. The most difficult for this grade level was:

**The Impact of Oppression on Walter's Identity** - Explain how racism, poverty, and limited opportunities shape Walter's choices and growth.

**\*The most organized student essays for this prompt are included in this application.**

### **3. Explain how the lessons or activities teach students the importance of respecting others no matter what religious, racial, cultural, or other differences exist.**

By writing from the perspectives of Ji-Li's family members, friends, and teachers in *Red Scarf Girl*, students were challenged to see how individuals were judged, punished, or silenced based on their family background, beliefs, or perceived loyalties—often through no fault of their own. This activity helped students understand the importance of respecting others across religious, racial, cultural, and ideological differences by requiring them to step into the lived experiences of people affected by the Cultural Revolution. Through this perspective-taking, students developed empathy for characters whose lives, values, and choices were shaped by a cultural and political context very different from their own. They learned that assumptions, labels, and collective blame can have devastating effects on individuals and families.

These lessons were reinforced through our study of *A Raisin in the Sun*, where students examined how the Younger family experiences discrimination and limited opportunities because of their race, economic status, and dreams that do not align with societal expectations. Much like Ji-Li's family, the Youngers are judged not for who they are as individuals, but for what others assume about them. By analyzing each family member's motivations—Walter's desire for dignity, Beneatha's search for identity, and Mama's commitment to faith and family—students saw how cultural values, generational perspectives, and experiences shape people's choices. This comparison helped students recognize that oppression and injustice transcend time and place, appearing in different forms across cultures and historical contexts.

Writing diary entries in *Red Scarf Girl* and engaging in close character analysis in *A Raisin in the Sun* pushed students to reflect on how fear, hope, loyalty, pride, and moral conflict can exist simultaneously. Students learned that people respond to injustice in complex and deeply human ways. The projects also reinforced the idea that understanding someone's background is essential before passing judgment.

Ultimately, these lessons taught students that respect begins with listening, empathy, and a willingness to understand perspectives beyond their own. By engaging deeply with the experiences of characters from different racial, cultural, and historical backgrounds, students learned that differences should never be a reason for exclusion or mistreatment, but rather an opportunity for understanding, dignity, and compassion.

Together, these texts and activities empowered students to recognize injustice, challenge stereotypes, and practice respect by understanding the humanity and dignity of others, regardless of cultural, racial, or ideological differences. **\*Students' personal reflections are included in this application.**

**4. Explain how it helped them counter bigotry and bullying and prepared them to stand up for Justice • PROVIDE EVIDENCE/PROOF OF EFFECTIVENESS SUCH AS, BUT NOT LIMITED TO: A QUESTIONNAIRE, INTERVIEWS, DOCUMENTED ANECDOTAL CONVERSATIONS, AND STUDENT WRITINGS, VIDEO, ETC.**

As students wrote from the perspectives of characters targeted during the Cultural Revolution in *Red Scarf Girl*, they confronted how labeling, public shaming, and exclusion—key tools of bullying—were used to control and silence people. They examined moments when characters were forced to choose between personal integrity and social pressure, helping them understand how bullying and discrimination persist when bystanders remain silent. This understanding deepened through *A Raisin in the Sun*, where students analyzed how the Younger family faces racism, intimidation, and economic exclusion while pursuing dignity and opportunity. In both texts, characters are pressured to conform, stay quiet, or accept injustice to avoid conflict.

By writing about moments of resistance, internal conflict, and quiet strength in *Red Scarf Girl*, and by analyzing acts of courage in *A Raisin in the Sun*—such as Walter's decision to reject Mr. Lindner's offer—students explored what standing up for justice looks like in both small, everyday choices and more visible acts of defiance. They learned that justice often begins with empathy, refusing to participate in harm, and challenging unfair narratives, even when it feels uncomfortable.

These lessons translated directly into classroom practice. Students applied this understanding through respectful discussions, peer advocacy, and reflection on their own roles as bystanders or upstanders. Ultimately, the unit prepared students to recognize bigotry and bullying across contexts and empowered them to take responsibility for creating a classroom community, and a community in general, rooted in respect, courage, and justice. **\*Students' personal reflections are included in this application.**