

THE ASPEN TIMES

Social justice in social studies

By [John Colson](#)

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Tomorrow's Voices wants to raise the level of "social justice content" in area public schools, and is seeking local teachers to join the effort through its Master Teachers Network.

According to Piper Foster, spokeswoman for the local nonprofit organization, the network is "a consortium of teachers enlisted to enrich social justice content in social studies classes." Teachers are paid for their participation, which is being offered to working and retired teachers in the Aspen and Roaring Fork school districts.

Foster described "social justice content" as philosophical concepts and issues dealing with "human dignity, equality, fairness" and other aspects of human relations, from social compacts to the political interactions among states and individuals.

The idea, she said, is to introduce into the classroom "the tools students would use to think for themselves" in assessing and defining social justice.

The goal of the program is to find teachers in area schools who are interested in lecturing outside their own classrooms. The subject matter might come from the teacher's school-based curriculum or relate to some area of interest that is outside the scope of what that teacher deals with in everyday classes.

Currently there are six teachers on the Master Teachers roster, including program founders and teachers A.O. Forbes and Willard Clapper. The two founded the program, then called "The Holden Center," six years ago at the private Colorado Rocky Mountain School in Carbondale.

Since then, the program has evolved into Tomorrow's Voices, which has a \$70,000 annual budget funded by the valley's two school districts, the Spring Board subsidiary of the Aspen Community Foundation, and a number of individuals and private foundations.

Other teachers involved in the program include Aspen High School's Chris Wheatley, who lectures on speech and debating skills and other topics; Adriana Ayala, a Roaring Fork School District precollegiate administrator who specializes in immigration and Latino issues; and Jim Hontz, a retired RFSD teacher and member of Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University in Rhode Island.

Teachers who apply to become Master Teachers are assessed by Forbes and Clapper, in consultation with board members. Foster said the two founding teachers believe that "the valley is small enough that reputations and caliber can be judged" quickly, but carefully enough "to be sure that the quality [of the Master Teachers roster] is high."

A teacher, once accepted, will act as coach to a host teacher at a local school. The coach offers guidance and help both in terms of course planning and lecturing in the classroom, and is paid through a stipend that is funded by the school and by Tomorrow's Voices.

"We're hoping to deepen the bench of what we can offer," Foster said of her recruitment effort, noting that for now the program focuses on three main areas - civics, ethics and citizenship.

The Roaring Fork School District has been working with Forbes and Clapper for about four years, both generating subjects for lectures and classroom projects and bringing in teachers to help conduct those lectures and projects.

"It's worked out great," Superintendent Judy Haptonstall said of the district's alliance with Tomorrow's Voices, which began after she talked with Forbes and Clapper about "not letting all that experience, especially with retired teachers, go to waste."

She said the RFSD has spent between \$6,000 and \$10,000 per year on Tomorrow's Voices' programs. Other programs offered by Tomorrow's Voices include consulting for the Aspen School District on improvements to a "Base Camp" class program at Aspen Middle School; a "Literature of Place" course involving reading and discussion of a wide range of authors; a geopolitical studies course at Aspen High School that brings in speakers to address topics ranging from Arab-Israeli relations to the role of the media as outlined in the U.S. Constitution; and the Master Teachers program.

Work with the Aspen schools began more recently. Foster said that between the Base Camp program and the geopolitical studies class the relationship seems to be off to a good start. Aspen Superintendent Diana Sirko could not be reached for comment on Monday.

"Our whole thing is hoping that students can lose themselves in something greater ... than learning or memorizing by rote in classes," and can begin to broaden the applicability of what they learn in school, Piper said.

Teachers and school administrators interested in learning more about the Master Teachers program can contact Foster at piper@tomorrowsvoices.org or 925-2521.

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[BACK](#) 