



District
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INTERVIEW

Confronting Discomfort

An Interview with Tre Johnson

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*We are a place of tremendous abundance.
And what we have to figure out how to do
is to fill everyone's cup in the same way.*

Confronting Discomfort

An Interview with Tre Johnson

Tre Johnson is a freelance writer and career educator focused on race, class, and culture. His articles have been published in *Rolling Stone*, *Vox*, the *New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, and *Slate*, to name a few publications, and he has appeared on CNN, *CBS This Morning*, *PBS NewsHour*, NPR's *Morning Edition*, and a variety of podcasts. His recent op-ed in the *Washington Post* entitled "When Black People Are in Pain, White People Just Join Book Clubs" has sparked much discussion about race relations, how to respond to Black pain, and how to move society forward.

In addition to his writings and appearances, Tre, a former educator, continues to work in the sector. He is currently the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) partner for Catalyst: Ed where he connects DEI practitioners to organizations and leaders seeking to improve their practice and capacity around DEI. He began his career as an English teacher in Houston, Texas, via Teach For America, and later served as executive director of Teach For America's Greater Philadelphia region. He has done college access and development work in Washington, D.C., and Philadelphia; he also served as the senior manager of the District Advisory Board and Strategic Partnerships in Camden City School District (NJ) and as deputy director for Jersey CAN, focusing on education policy advocacy, community engagement, and community leaders.

Tre grew up in Trenton, New Jersey. A graduate of the University of Maryland, he went on to be a Pahara-NextGen Fellow and a Jack Jones "Culture, Too" Writing Fellow.



In this edited interview, Tre shares his thoughts with DMGroup CEO John Kim and DMGroup Director of Operations and Strategic Initiatives Kristen Schnibbe Cervantes, who worked with Tre at Teach For America, where she was a senior managing director.

John: Tre, thank you for joining us. Just to frame our discussion, we are talking with you today in the midst of an unprecedented health crisis and economic crisis. It has become evident that these crises are not affecting people equally; Black and Brown communities are being hurt far more than others.

And education has been central to the discussions of these crises. On the one hand, the broader public is more aware than ever before of the incredible importance of schools to the literal and figurative health of our communities and our economy. On the other hand, the opportunity gap in education is viewed as a root cause of the disparities we are seeing.

Perhaps not surprisingly, we simultaneously are having a national reckoning with race and social justice issues. You have been thinking, writing, and speaking about racial and social justice issues and you also have been in the education sector in a variety of roles, so we are very grateful and excited to have you share your perspectives with us.

To get started, I'd love to hear a little bit of your story. How did you get here? How did you become a thought leader around these big issues?

Tre: One quick caveat — I will just say that I have a strong aversion to the term “thought leader.” I consider myself just like everyone else — a constant student and learner. So it's really important for me how I've gotten here. I'm constantly grounded in that.

I grew up in Trenton, New Jersey; my mom, who was a single parent, raised my sister and me. When I was in middle school, we were forced through life circumstances to move out of Trenton, and my mom rooted out a better landing for us in the suburbs in Ewing Township. I became one of the few in my family to make it off to college. Even though I graduated high in my high school class and went off to college with merit-based confidence, college tossed me on my butt hard, and I struggled for probably the first year. And on top of that, as a very early college-going family, we were constantly flummoxed by all the financial needs and requirements around the college-going process. It took me four and a half years to finish, and I remember feeling like my pathway was so broken and so uninformed; it felt three times as hard to get this far.

Tre Johnson

Freelance writer and career educator focused on race, class, and culture.



Articles

“When Black People Are in Pain, White People Just Join Book Clubs”

The Washington Post

“When You Sneer at the Protests, You Sneer at Black Lives”

“Donald Glover’s ‘This Is America’ Is a Nightmare We Can’t Afford to Look Away From”

Rolling Stone

“‘Black Panther’ Is a Gorgeous, Groundbreaking Celebration of Black Culture”



“Heard but Not Seen: Black Music in White Spaces”

SLATE

“Tressie McMillan Cottom’s ‘Thick’ Reminds Us of the Magic of Black Women”

San Francisco Chronicle

“Michael Bloomberg Can Keep His Apology”



Appearances

An interview with NPR *Morning Edition*’s David Greene about Marvel’s *Black Panther* movie

An interview with PBS *NewsHour*’s Jeff Brown about the importance of Childish Gambino’s “This Is America” music video

Current Education Work

Tre Johnson currently works as the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) partner for Catalyst: Ed.





a cultural observer that despite the persistent story around meritocracy, there are larger prevailing systems that stymie marginalized peoples' progress all the time, every day, explicitly and implicitly.

John: Was there a catalyzing event that prompted you to leave teaching to start writing?

Tre: A strong pivot point for me was wading deeper and deeper into my career as a professional in education and feeling that some of what I was seeing at scale just

wasn't holding a lot of water for me. We were glossing over the many ways that the system is intentionally broken for people. I was most drawn to the arbitrariness about how much race was applied both towards me as a professional and in service to many of the communities that I was working with.

Education reform, at one point in my career, really just kind of broke my heart and broke my spirit. I decided to take a step away from the work for about two years. And that's when I thought, you know what? There's so much happening in the world: we were at the tail end of Obama's time, and it was also at the onset of a much larger conversation that turned into Black Lives Matter — all these stories and images around police brutality and around a lot of inequalities in the country. I started seeing the need to lean into my own values and let the articulation and belief of my values actually dictate my course — not just in my personal life but also in my professional life. And all those things together told me I need to come back to writing and I need to write in a way that feels nuanced and true to the world as I see it.

John: What specifically about the ed reform movement broke your heart?

When I graduated from the University of Maryland as an English lit and creative writing major, I wasn't really sure what else to do with my life, so I joined Teach For America. I am very plain about the fact that I had no big heartstrings or social justice calling to join something like Teach For America. I largely did so because I just felt like it was something worthwhile to do. But it fundamentally changed my life. I've been in education almost 20 years now. And I've had the privilege of working in Houston, Texas, where I was a teacher; I did college access work in D.C. and Philadelphia; I joined the regional Teach For America staff and feel like I did every role possible there — executive director, teacher, teacher placement, partnerships, alumni affairs, etc.

In these various roles, I kept seeing the importance of talking between the lines of greyness. We still typically talk about life in America existing on a fixed kind of conveyor belt — you come out of the womb, you go to school, you go to college, you get a job, you start a family, and boom, there's happiness! And I think that that pathway is consistently much more hiccupy and more frayed for a lot of people in the country. When I look at the throughline from my college-going experience to the very, very many roles I've had in education, it's given me a line of sight both as an individual and as

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There are larger prevailing systems that stymie marginalized peoples' progress all the time, every day, explicitly and implicitly.

Tre: A couple of things. There are some soft issues and some hard issues. I would say the soft issues related to the embedded nepotism that I experienced inside of collegial networks. That — sometimes more than other [things] — dictated everything from opportunity to access to promotion to communication. There was also the issue of integrity as applied to the communities that I was working with. I was sometimes attached to situations or institutions that I felt weren't above the table in how we were engaging with the community — like soliciting the support and understanding and oftentimes patience from a lot of Black and Brown communities that I was leaning into between Philly, Camden, and other places.

What I'm trying to get across to people in much of my writing is the constant need for getting proximate to a lot of these issues. I think for me as a Black American, and in particular, as a Black American intimately familiar with the northeastern quarter, it presented an additional challenge and discomfort for me to feel like there were times that I wasn't fully engaging honestly and authentically with the community. If you choose to lean into the power politics and let the contours of those things shape your actions, it can have you doing and saying and being complicit in a lot of things that I felt just didn't pass muster for who I believed I needed to be.

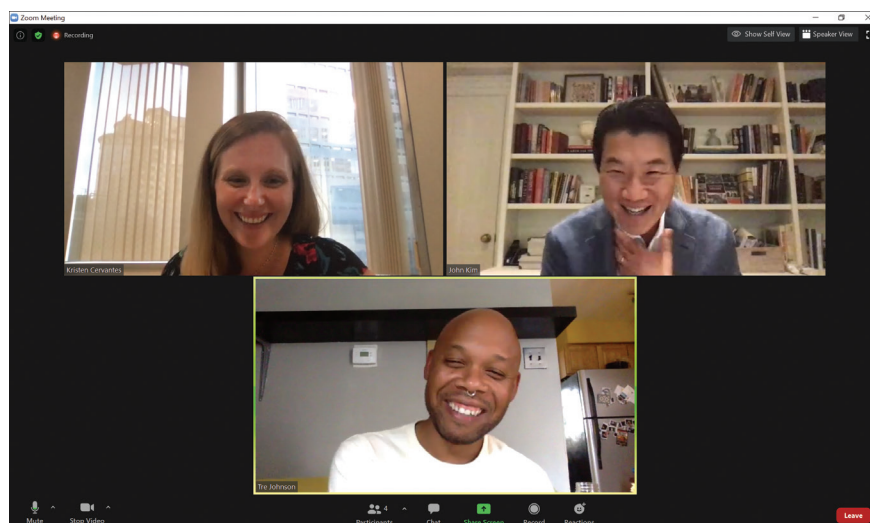
One of the constant grounding experiences I have is Thanksgiving, where I sit around the table with my family and there are so many different types of Black experiences, identities, and politics. I know what it means not to do right by people because I can see it around my family's Thanksgiving table every damn year. And so, not being able to be in a position to make good on my values and make good on my observations, I had to wave a flag and step out for a bit.



Kristen: Tre, I have heard you use the term — in fact, I think you may be the one who coined the term — “Negro Whisperer,” referring to being in this type of uncomfortable role vis-à-vis the community.

Tre: I am not saying that it is explicitly wrong to hire into those roles people who might be proximate to the communities that they're serving. We should be doing that. We should value people who are going to have a high touch and high sensitivity to certain types of cultural communities. We want to put them in positions to directly engage with that community so that there is an ease of partnership, relationship, and engagement.

What I'm also saying, though, is that as we put those people in those vital roles in organizations and institutions, we need to respect the feedback loop that they're



able to provide. It's fundamentally important to be able to staff people in positions where they're not just sent out to be a mouthpiece of the administration when non-identity-aligned leaders are perhaps too tentative to go out into the community. The people in these roles need to be positioned to absorb and receive the perspective of a litany of voices. They need to be able to come back into the room — literally and figuratively — and say, "I know we were thinking about doing X, Y, and Z, but we should actually be doing A, B, and C now."

I think that is the broken part of it. We're really good at hiring people who are explicitly outward facing. But then we don't allow people to have inward-facing influence. And I think that's where we lose a lot of credibility, not just with the person in that spot, but also with the community. The community is not stupid; they know, "Oh, you're sending the Black or Latinx guy to come out and talk to me who actually can't do any shit differently."

They are asking individuals like me to hold a series of tense wires at the same time. There is what the formal leadership wants and there is what the community is asking you to be accountable to. And there is the waxing and waning of your own ability to sustain your identity, your values, your fidelity, and your sociopolitical knowledge about what the wider society tells you about our communities all at once. If you're gonna put someone in the middle of that — that set of tension wires — and not allow them to turn around and have significant influence in how we think and change course, then you're once again telling everyone involved what value you have for that person and for the community.

Kristen: I think we all can understand the types of situations you're talking about. I want to go back to what you said about the Thanksgiving table. I've heard you say we have to go to a place of discomfort to really be proximate to our communities and figure out how to move towards racial equity. What advice do you have for our readers who are district and school leaders?

Tre: One of the biggest pieces of advice I would give is actually to take that systems-leader hat off. I think there's so much about embedded, implicit bias and power that can easily seduce people to be condescending or patronizing about what the needs of the community are. I think you literally and figuratively need to step out of your role and actually just move through our communities.

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We are a place of tremendous abundance. And what we have to figure out how to do is to fill everyone's cup in the same way.

One of the things I'm constantly hammering home to people is that you can't — particularly when we're talking about Black and Brown families — just kind of paint them with wide brushes. We have to work through the process of constantly lifting up what different families' perspectives and experiences and reflections are. Just as there are multitudes in white and other communities, there are multitudes inside of Black and Brown communities. And so I'm constantly grounding people on the "some" and the "some" and the "some" and the "some." Like, some Black people sometimes want some of these things in some ways. But not all of us want everything all the time in the same type of way. We talk about rural whites, we talk about progressive whites, we talk about affluent whites. But then we talk about low-income Black and Brown families in a monolithic, default language that I find wildly unacceptable. Part of my writing is about pulling up and removing the artificial barriers that compartmentalize our way of perceiving the world.

Kristen: I love that push. I'm constantly being pushed on my own white socialization around the binary way of thinking, so I appreciate "the 'some' and the 'some' and the 'some' and the 'some.'" I think that is a really helpful strategy. You also recommend an equity journey as an important way of moving forward.

Tre: One important thing a systems leader can do is to bring in someone who can actually lead your team through an equity journey. Sometimes we are so passionate to figure it all out ourselves and don't like to humble ourselves to admit that someone else should be taking our hand and helping lead us through this.



I don't want to live a life where I am both trying to identify my problems and trying to figure them out all on my own. And I think school systems and school system leaders need to be grounded in that same thing. It's time to say let's do an audit of what is no longer serving us. Particularly now that the pandemic has unmasked a lot of things that have always been there, what do we do about it? It's okay to be stuck and ask for help. What is not okay is to start tossing out random strategies and approaches and priorities that aren't grounded in some type of alignment. What I've seen in my work at Catalyst:Ed being inside of district central offices is that when people actually press Pause to first do an equity audit of where they are as an institution and then also work towards alignment, that's when the magic starts to happen. And the big thing I ask people to think about all the time — whether we're talking about systems, whether we're talking about relationships, whether we're talking about communities — is not to think about the action that gets you to tomorrow but to think about actions sustainable for you to take no matter what is happening tomorrow, the day after, five years down the line. Justice is being able to say that ten years from now, this will still be true about what we believe needs to be done differently.

John: Tre, I want to touch on a sensitive topic. When talking about race and class, but specifically about race, in education, there is a tendency to think that it's a zero-sum game. A classic example is what is happening in New York City right now with the specialized high schools.

Tre: If someone was ever foolhardy enough to make me the superintendent, one of my first moves would be to get rid of specialized schools. There's a lot of rhetoric around why they are justified, but I think the ingrained, consistent experience is that they tend to serve as enclaves for people and communities that cities

are trying to retain. Implied in that is an additional set of political soft or hard power that those schools and those communities bring with them.

System leaders need to lean in with partnerships with universities and the philanthropic world to think about how you fundamentally disrupt that type of inequality barrier. And I think, quite frankly, the pandemic is an unintended gift to think more creatively. If things are locked behind the four walls of a particularly gilded institution or school, we now don't have those walls anymore. We need to start figuring out how to virtually import the magic from inside those walls into all the places where our students are learning.

John: The counter argument I hear all the time is, "Yes, we should have opportunities that are equitable, but students perform at different levels for a variety of reasons. So, shouldn't we have schools that provide those opportunities for students who can actually meet those high standards? Why is that such a bad thing? It feels like you're taking something away as opposed to being additive."

Tre: Yeah, I mean, it's a great push-back. And I would say a couple of things. One of the things that constantly hampers the American experience is the notion of a scarcity mindset. We are quite literally one of the richest nations in the world. We only have scarcity because we choose to contort our resources that way. And so I would push back on anyone who would articulate anything from a place of loss. We are a place of tremendous abundance. And what we have to figure out how to do is to fill everyone's cup in the same way so that there is not the sense of loss.

Frankly, people are losing every day. It's just that they — the people who are concerned about "losing something" — have not had to experience the discomfort of loss.



I want all doors opened. I mean, hell, it's great that I've written for the *Washington Post*, for *Rolling Stone*, for the *New York Times*, I've been on TV a bunch of times, but I serendipitously lucked into having a kick-ass mom who believed in my exploring every corner of my brain possible. And I also had — inconsistently — but still I did have a lot of teachers who saw me for who I was and helped me dig in deep to develop the imagination and skills that I needed. That should be something that's fundamentally true no matter what school somebody is in.

When we start saying, "Jamal isn't quite ready for this type of school. It's maybe a little too rigorous for him," what we're really saying is, "Jamal's not worth as much as other students to us." We are saying we don't need to expend the support, capital, love, and consideration for Jamal and will defer to other students who we think arbitrarily meet the grade.

John: Tre, that's a great segue to what I was going to ask you. What do you think prevents school districts from engaging in this work in a more authentic way? I mean, you wrote that op-ed, "When Black People Are in Pain, White People Just Join Book Clubs." When I unpack that title and what you wrote, you are basically

unmasking that everyone says they want to do something, but really only want to do so much.

Tre: They want to do what's comfortable.

John: So, what prevents educators who really want to make a difference in children's lives from really doing the work?

Tre: I'll answer that and then I'll add my editorialized thought on this. Dominant groups have to confront their explicit or implicit guilt in situations. And that can be something fundamentally hard for any human being to do. I think the vast majority of us walk in the world believing that we are good and do good. And so, any time you're confronted with something that says that you are aligned with or intentionally driving things that are causing harm to other people, I think that is very hard — in particular, when we talk about race relations between Black and white communities.

We have to help unlace people's fingers from around the idea that they are innocent and good. It is really hard for them to hear any type of narrative that takes them off the perch. What I try to get across is that this is not an invitation for you to come to the witness stand and defend yourself; this is an invitation for you to think

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I actually don't believe that everyone who does this work is a good person. And I don't believe that everyone who does this work wants to do good by many communities. It's just a hard truth about our society. Noble professions don't always have noble people.

about how you can become an activated person for creating change. You need to start with the demons in your own closet that you've either intentionally or unintentionally put there about things that you've done in the past. What we have to help people understand is that as we have hard conversations about leadership, systems, and the application of power, this is not just about telling you whether you are innocent or good or not. This is about how we serve and do right by the people who are fundamentally being harmed every day.

John: And your editorialized thoughts?

Tre: My editorialized comment — that I feel very comfortable saying but will perhaps cause some discomfort for people who are reading — is that I actually don't believe that everyone who does this work is a good person. And I don't believe that everyone who does this work wants to do good by many communities. It's just a hard truth about our society. Noble professions don't always have noble people. And that is fundamentally true. I mean, that's what we're seeing in some of the tense conversations around the police force. And that same type of scrutiny should be held around people in education.

I have run into bad apples in both of those parties, and we have to be able to say that not everyone who is walking with us is walking with us. Some people are actually trying to trip us and know that they are trying to trip us. And that's some bullshit we have to call out when we are aware of that. You might be technically good at your job, but as a human being, you are not somebody who should be doing this work.

John: I don't want to be glib.

Tre: Be glib.

John: Well, I want to be careful about this, but, you know, you're touching on something that I've always wondered about. You know, educators talk a lot about changing mindsets. But that's really hard to do, and there's a practical side of me that says, "Look, I may not be able to change your mindset, but I at least want to change your behavior." What's your reaction to this more practical approach? Let's just have better rules, and let's make sure people just follow those rules. And if people don't believe in those rules but they follow the rules, that's pretty good.

Tre: I'm smirking and looking at Kristen. I think both of us are familiar with places that have doggedly put in place rigorous rules.

Kristen: Yes, true.

Tre: As a person who is intimately familiar with different types of biases and oppression, I don't want it to be an either-or argument. It's not actions or mindset; it needs to be both. I want you to act right and I want you to think right.

John: You're saying it's a false dichotomy.

Tre: Duress situations are fraught with a lot of tensions, and one of the tensions that we have to hold about what it means to move forward is that we have to actually rehabilitate both people's actions and people's mindsets. We've seen this around the advocacy for police cameras, right? That is a changed behavior that has not changed the mindset in some people's situation.

Because they don't have a changed mindset, they will find a way to turn off that camera. And so we can't just focus on changing behavior: we have to be able to do both. And again, when people aren't willing to do both, you've got to

get them the hell out of the way. I talk to a lot of leaders and, having been one myself, I understand how hard this stuff is. I think a big part of it is, again, it's easy to fall into that false binary.

And it's also easy to let behaviors and attitudes and climates slide and shift all over the place if you do not have that fortitude and clarity around what your own values and purpose are. And if you are too tentative about showing up and holding people accountable, first and foremost yourself, then, yeah, shit's gonna go sideways all the time, all the time.

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We should be talking clear-eyed about what is happening in terms of demographic shifts inside of our schools, who that is impacting, who that is hurting.

Look, it's hard to change mindsets and behavior when you have a country and society that is explicitly constructed to keep people apart, right? You could be a middle-class white teacher who goes and teaches in a lower-income, predominantly Black community, but if at the end of the day you retreat back into your white, middle-class enclave, I think it takes a sturdy mind and a sturdy amount of vulnerability to be able to hold both of those worlds together and see them as having equal value. Sure, you can tell your teachers to clap three times before moving on. You can tell them about the best classroom management practices. But at the end of the day, if every other action that they take in life outside of that classroom reinforces a totally different narrative about people's mobility, access, humanity, it's gonna take an awful lot to convince them that as they trip into one universe from the other that there is an equal footing of humanity in the other place.

Kristen: Tre, I believe that we as a society, and particularly within education, need to bring discussions of race into everyday conversation. I've heard you say similar things, but what does that really look like? How do you actually do that?

Tre: That's such a great question. I think there are a couple of things. I think professional development has to be a significant component. I don't care what your district's makeup is. You need to be talking about race inside of professional development.

It's also thinking about the undergirding of what you are implementing in terms of curriculum and stories — what you value. I think so much of the space inside of schools can be race “lite” or explicitly race avoidant. I think it is about continually holding the ground of introducing new versions of stories and new voices and identities into the everyday canon of what teachers and students value. We've got to disavow ourselves of saying that there is a fixed canon that everyone should know. What we should do is let in a variety of stories and perspectives and experiences that help people critically engage not just with themselves but also with how to move out in the world.

I think race needs to be part of everything — even board meetings. We should be talking clear-eyed about what is happening in terms of demographic shifts inside of our schools, who that is impacting, who that is hurting. I think we need to also stop soft-toeing around the language. When people talk about needing a more “diverse” team, I am thinking, “Do you need more Black people or not? Just tell me what you're looking for!” You have to name the thing; otherwise you will always be incremental in your approach. I believe in grounded, explicit language. And that's why I write the way that I do.

John: Tre, thank you for bringing your whole self to this conversation. We really appreciate your having this wide-ranging, insightful conversation with us.

Kristen: Yes, thank you so much, Tre. It was great to see an old friend and colleague, and to talk candidly about such important topics. ♦