In 2010, we launched a five-year project “The Fight for Knowledge: Civil Rights and Education in Richmond” at the University of Richmond. The center of this endeavor is a documentary theater course, “Civil Rights and Education in Richmond: A Documentary Theater Project,” that each year focuses on a different aspect of educational history in Richmond. The first year we researched and performed a play that offered an overview of segregation, desegregation, and resegregation in the city’s public schools. Struck by the stories of two white alums of George Wythe, a high school that had undergone major transformations in the past several decades, in the second year of our class we took a more focused approach and addressed a single year—1974-1975, the year that busing began.

We focused on George Wythe High School for several reasons: it had once been the school where the city’s middle-class white residents sent their children. Integration began very slowly in the late 1960s, and then in 1974, court-ordered busing began (although, as we quickly learned, this did not mean that school buses were involved—rather, some students had to travel two hours each way on city buses to get to their assigned schools). For a few years, the school was integrated, and then it became, as it is today, almost all African American.

Late in the fall of 2011, Salvador Barajas, a doctoral fellow who was building a digital archive for our project, came to us with a curious problem. He had been visiting Richmond institutions, such as the Library of Virginia, the public library, and Wythe High School, the subject of this year’s play, in search of old yearbooks and school newspapers that could illustrate the transition that Wythe made as it moved from being an all-white school to being integrated to being all black. Much to his dismay, he could not find anything from the sixties, seventies, or beyond: neither the libraries and museums nor the school itself kept these materials. The many phone calls he made to public school administrators and librarians went unreturned. The archival absence of Wythe’s history revealed that there was a complex and painful aspect of the city’s past that few wanted to speak about. This history continues to reverberate in the present.

Virginia has a long history of segregation in public schools. In 1954 Senator Harry Byrd, Sr. opposed the Brown v. Board of Education decision. The course was originally titled “Massive Resistance: A Documentary Theater Project.” We learned very quickly that we had wrongly assumed that students knew what the term “Massive Resistance” meant and it made us realize how far removed this era was for some of our students. Not one student in the class had heard the phrase “massive resistance” which defined Virginia’s defiant response to school integration. The state closed down public schools rather than integrate—in some communities, schools shut down for as long as five years. To better reflect the scope of this course, we have renamed it “Civil Rights and Education in Richmond: A Documentary Theater Project.”