DREAM TOWN

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SHAKER HEIGHTS AND THE QUEST FOR RACIAL EQUITY

BOOK CLUB KIT
1. The title of the book refers to Cosmopolitan’s 1963 description of Shaker Heights as a “dream town” —meaning a dream town of suburban comfort. It also references the dream articulated by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his “I Have a Dream” speech, also in 1963. Which dream has Shaker brought to life more successfully? Is there any tension between these two dreams?

2. One of the themes that runs through the book is the importance of developing a sense of belonging, in community and in schools. In what ways did you feel like you belonged in your community and your schools growing up, and in what ways did you feel like an outsider? What characters in the book experience belonging and which do not, and what are the ramifications? How can you foster a sense of belonging for others in your own community today?

3. The Ludlow Community Association—and later the city of Shaker Heights itself—used marketing and financial incentives to recruit white families, while discouraging Black families. They believed this was the only way to create and maintain racial integration, partly because white real estate agents abandoned the areas after Black families moved in. Those involved recognized they were discriminating based on race but believed the ends justified the means. Did they?

4. Over time, the Black population in Shaker Heights has grown less wealthy, while median income of the white population has grown. The result is that the white population as a group earns much more than the Black population. What challenges has this presented for Shaker Heights and in particular, for the school system? How well has Shaker done in serving high- and low-income students at the same time?
5. English teacher Jody Podl was removed from the classroom after a confrontation with a Black student in her AP English class. Was the district right to remove her while it investigated the case? Where did school leaders go wrong in their handling of the controversy? How would you have handled this case if you were in charge?

6. Three school leaders were on the stage when a community meeting about the Jody Podl case devolved into an emotional shouting match. They were unable to calm the situation. How might they have handled the situation better? Have you witnessed racially charged moments in your life or your own community? How did leaders handle them, and what did you learn from that?

7. In 2020, the Shaker schools eliminated much of the academic sorting of students, also known as tracking, and created many more mixed-ability classrooms. What are the advantages of this approach and in what ways is it risky? If you were a parent in Shaker Heights, would you want your child to be in a mixed-ability class?

8. Shaker Heights has been striving toward racial integration and equity for decades. Have its efforts succeeded? Is the story of Shaker one of good intentions falling short, or is it a story of progress and accomplishment? What lessons does the Shaker experience offer for leaders and school officials in other communities?