

Open Letter to the Burlington Community

9/18/20

The Burlington Area School District Superintendent and Board along with the Chief of Police reject all forms of racism, discrimination and harassment of students, families, staff members, and / or visitors in school or within the community. Such behaviors will be treated as being destructive to the District's and Police Department's mission, vision, values, and goals. The District pledges and is committed to providing a physically and psychologically safe, secure and respectful environment, free from discrimination and harassment on the basis of race, color and national origin.

In recent weeks, we, the Burlington Area School District (BASD), the Chief of Police, the Burlington Coalition for Dismantling Racism (BCDR) and the National Equity Project (NEP), have taken the initiative to meet, reflect and share perspectives about the polarized community response surrounding the recent use of Black Lives Matter curricular resources. We'd like to take this opportunity to share our respective views on this issue.

As superintendent, I would like to begin by apologizing to families of color who were negatively impacted by my previous statement in regards to the Black Lives Matter curriculum and my perspective concerning "neutrality". Upon significant reflection, I see how my perspective was offensive and understand that there is no neutrality when pursuing equity. According to the human rights activist, Archbishop Desmond Tutu, "If you are neutral in situations of injustice, you have chosen the side of the oppressor. If an elephant has its foot on the tail of a mouse and you say that you are neutral, the mouse will not appreciate your neutrality." In a collaborative effort, BASD, BCDR and NEP are attempting to address systemic racism in ways that haven't been done in the BASD before. Because we are in uncharted territory, and the path is unclear, we will make mistakes along the way. However, we want you to know that we are committed to the process of pursuing equity in a way that's beneficial to all of the families we serve.

Black and Brown Lives Matter to the Burlington Area School District, the Chief of Police, the Burlington Coalition For Dismantling Racism and the National Equity Project. Valuing the lives of people of color is a basic human right and should not be treated as political or religious, just as valuing the lives of white people isn't treated as being political or religious. The fact that we even need to specifically say that Black Lives Matter to affirm the importance of human beings is to say that we as a nation have not done a good job of regarding black and brown people as valuable members of our society historically or currently. Writer, professor, political activist, Nobel laureate, and Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel said, "We must take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men and women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must - at that moment - become the center of the universe."

Within this context, we must speak out on behalf of our students, especially our students of color who have been put in the undesirable spot of having to navigate this most uncertain of times. Since the resource materials in question were used, we have all received a wave of polarized feedback, some of it espousing racist, hateful, and threatening sentiments. No doubt, these comments give valuable insight into our community's opinions, perspectives and frustrations with how best to move forward. However, we are certain of this: The threats of violence and racist attacks against BASD staff and community members must stop. Such behaviors will not be tolerated. We value our staff and feel honored to have people on our team who understand the importance of teaching a diverse education that invites broad student perspectives.

Now is the time for us to come together. We must rise up for our children and community. The BASD is proud to uphold our mission of being compassionate, comprehensive, and committed. The vision and purpose of a public education within the BASD is to provide a quality education for each and every student. To that end, the District is committed to a continual process of curriculum review and improvement. Teaching and learning are never static, and must continually evolve to align with current understandings. Our graduates will need the knowledge and skills to be critical thinkers, problem solvers, innovators and effective communicators.

We live in a world that is multicultural and as such, have an obligation to educate our students in a way that's unbiased and inclusive. We as educators play a vital role in eradicating racism by acknowledging it, creating culturally inclusive learning and working environments, and dismantling systems that perpetuate it through teaching, policies, and practice. Our curriculum should not exclude Black and Brown history, life and culture as they are all a part of American history.

It is often said that in every crisis is an opportunity. In this crisis, let us seek to understand. Let us be a community of learners that support one another, thoughtful, just, and informed.

Burlington Area School District Superintendent and Board of Education
Burlington Police Chief and Department
Burlington Coalition for Dismantling Racism
National Equity Project