

October 24, 2020

Dear Parents and Staff,

Last week, members of the Class of 2024 were assembled virtually to meet with their freshman class advisors. Typically, class meetings are marked by enthusiasm and a respectful dialogue, promoting a spirit of inclusion within the school community. During this meeting, however, the group was infiltrated by an anonymous individual who repeatedly used the “N” word and other racial slurs. This is not one isolated situation in our district as other concerns have been brought forward in recent weeks. Incidents like these are not only disruptive but highly offensive to students and staff, becoming the topic of discussion on social media.

As you know, an incident occurred when U.S. Representative Jahana Hayes held a virtual town meeting with invited guests from our community. The Newtown Nonprofit Council was also interrupted last week in a similar fashion. These unfortunate acts are simply not acceptable and do not represent the many students, staff, and community members who believe in respect, tolerance, inclusion, and caring about others.

School leaders, in conjunction with local authorities, are investigating the recent incident that shut down the class meeting. However, equally important are the ongoing investments we are making in our district to stand up to racism, harassment, and bullying. We take these incidents seriously and condemn these acts as counter to our beliefs and values as a school community.

A recent Diversity and Equity Resolution approved by the Board of Education, includes some important commitments that will guide our actions:

- Establish a clear protocol that records and reports incidents of racism occurring within the schools and holds all staff and students accountable for their actions.
- Review and employ mechanisms (e.g., anonymous tips, trusted adults) to allow students and staff to share sensitive or confidential information that will help in the investigation of acts of bullying, harassment, and racism.
- Continue to support best practices and social/emotional programs and resources to ensure that every student feels safe in a supportive environment.
- Provide training for all staff aimed at maintaining a safe, inclusive, and equitable learning environment for all students, including students of color.

On November 3rd, our entire Newtown faculty will engage in a full professional development day focused on Diversity and Equity. Dr. Derrick Gay, our keynote speaker, is a graduate of Oberlin College, Columbia University, and the University of Pennsylvania. He has developed two

TEDx Talks that explore diversity and the nature of racial discourse, speaking to organizations across the country on diversity and inclusion. Virtual workshops on similar topics of race and equity will also be offered by the Center for School Change. A new PEAC (Parent Educator Advisory Council) subcommittee will begin outlining plans to shape our work in this area next week, which will ultimately support our students and impact positive change to school climate.

Our goal is to make certain our schools are safe, equitable, and inclusive places of learning for all students and staff. The words of Mahatma Gandhi are relevant and timely, “Our ability to reach unity in diversity will be the beauty and the test of our civilization.”

Stay well.

Dr. Lorrie Rodrigue
Superintendent