



February 28, 2019

Dear Madison Community,

I have talked with enough people in Madison to know that racism is a problem in our community and has been for a long time. We are not immune to it. It is at times intentional and unintentional. It is everywhere, every day. It is within us and surrounds us. Any school district is a microcosm of the society we live in.

The polarization in our country today puts a tremendous amount of pressure on young people and the people who work in schools to somehow get it right, while the rest of society gets it wrong.

But as a school district that exists to protect children and cultivate the beauty and full worth of every single child, we must be held to the highest possible standard.

The series of racial slur incidents that have occurred this school year and caused harm to Black students, their families, and our community are indefensible. They run counter to our core values and our commitment to serving youth and families.

The most recent incident at Whitehorse Middle School was especially horrific. No matter what comes out of the police investigation, there was a failure on our part. We will review every fact to understand what happened so that we can take aggressive action.

If we are serious about our vision -- that every school is a thriving school -- we have to disrupt racism in all of its forms. We cannot be silent. We cannot perpetuate it. We must examine everything. In no way can we, as a community of educators, accommodate or make excuses for actions that hurt the very students we have dedicated our lives to help.

As the superintendent of this school district, as a leader for racial justice, as a mother, I know I've been charged with making changes that will disrupt this pattern, and even more, uplift the students we serve. I embrace that charge and will continue to do so.

For those who are demanding meaningful change, I want you to know that there are many inside this institution who are already actively engaged in making it, including our staff of color and white co-conspirators. It is through their unwavering commitment and continual push for change that we have a clearer path forward, more momentum, and cause to move faster. There are a number of critical actions currently underway. Those include:

- A new system for staff, students, and families to report incidents of racism or discrimination that will launch this spring
- A full review of investigation and critical response protocols to ensure they are culturally responsive, grounded in restoration, and more transparent



- Revision and consistent application of the MMSD equity tool to ensure current and future HR policy and practice, as well as Board policy recommendations, are developed through a racial equity lens
- A refresh of the School Improvement Planning process to ensure that race, rigor and relationships are central to school based decision making
- A new required professional development series for all staff on racial identity, implicit bias, and racial inequity in the United States, along with a refined support and accountability system to monitor progress

We are also committed to working alongside our community and will hold several facilitated community meetings in the next two months dedicated to building trust and ensuring our collective actions support the students and families we serve.

Last fall, we reaffirmed, more strongly than ever before, our belief in the inherent brilliance, creativity and excellence of Black youth, families, and staff. We know that requires an equal commitment to confront the practices, policies, and people that stand in the way of Black Excellence shining through.

I promise this community that we are going to work hard to get it right. I know we will continue to be challenged. More issues will likely surface. And we will be relentless in our efforts. This is the work we signed up for. Most important, we will listen and learn in a way that models the best instincts of this community that we love.

In partnership,

Jennifer Cheatham  
Superintendent