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Some Parents: Schools Need to Teach Kids More About Bigotry — Officials: We Agree

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Categories : [Education](#)

Tagged as : [Darien Public Schools 2020-2021](#), [Holmes School 2020-2021](#)

Date : April 28, 2021

Several parents of students, backed up by support from school parent-teacher organizations, have told the Board of Education that the school district needs more extensive efforts to teach kids about making schools more welcoming to minorities and teachers need to know how to handle cases of bigotry.

"Look back at all of the awful, hurtful and despicable instances of racism that have occurred in our schools and act forward in ensuring that our teachers are equipped and have the resources and training in knowing how to have these difficult conversations with our children in the classroom," Belinda Fang of Beach Drive said.

Some of the parents indicated the recent vandalism at Holmes School, where a swastika was found, alarmed them. Others brought up recent violence against Asian Americans around the country.

"Not enough of us know what to say or even what to do, but we know that silence cannot be the solution," Fang said. "Please do not shy away from having talks about racism, unconscious bias or injustices because you want to spare my children anxiety. Clearly, this silence comes at the expense of them inevitably growing up to be ignorant or, worse yet, indifferent adults."

Roisin Veckerelli of Bailey Avenue said she agreed with everything Fang said, adding: "We are pleased to have seen the strategic plan goal to support and encourage all shareholders to embrace diversity, equity and inclusion, and from our standpoint, we're looking to understand what is going to be done about that next."

Michelle Lee said of her kids, who have Chinese and Korean ancestry: "I can assure you that my children ask me about diversity issues, the way they look, why they look different, why people make certain comments, why things are happening — all the time. Not my 4-year-old, but certainly my 6- and 8-year-olds."

Jennifer Sheerman of Sylvan Road said: "A swastika found scratched on a wall at a Darien school: What happened last week cannot happen again. And if it does, we need to be better prepared to inform and support our children and equip our parents and teachers to lead our students through an uncomfortable but important topic the right way."

Editor's note: *Full statements of each of the parents can be read below.*

The parents and officials spoke at the Wednesday, April 7 meeting of the Board of Education. Schools Superintendent Alan Addley said he takes the swastika vandalism at Holmes School very seriously and the district is reacting to it in several ways.

He said Holmes' Principal, Paula Beakley, has found "instructional and educational experiences" that students can take part in, that the school district wants to work more with national organizations that work against bigotry, and that the district administration wants to work with Darien's parent teacher organizations to combat bigotry.

Addley also pointed out, as others did, that the district's recently approved statement of mission and goals includes promoting among "stakeholders" (everyone involved in the school district) "the practice of diversity, equity and inclusion."

Addley's Statement

Here's most of Addley's statement:

"We do know from our past experiences that the district and community are not immune to cases of prejudice or discrimination — sadly, even at the elementary school level.

Incidents of this nature always require immediate and ongoing opportunities to educate, particularly, our younger students and to send an unequivocal message that such [*acts? — the recording was unclear*] are

wrong and hurtful.

"I'm proud to say that the board's recently adopted "Vision Mission Values and Goals," specifically identified the importance of fostering a school culture that promotes integrity, diversity, inclusion and respect. This will be an ongoing challenge and focus for the schools.

"For the curriculum office and the principal of the elementary school, Paula Bleakley — she actually has followed up with instructional and educational experiences for the students with the use of our school psychologist.

"We will continue to do so — looking at opportunities again to work with the NCCJ [National Council of Christians and Jews] and also the ADL organization [Anti-Defamation League].

"This also serves as a reminder for all of us as adults, as educators, community members, that we must be the role models for all our children, providing guidance and education on such difficult bases of diversity, prejudice [recording unintelligible]. We will continue to partner with our PTOs and the community at large in addressing these important issues with our children and to ensure that our schools are places where our students are free to learn in a safe and welcoming environment."

Addley said that as part of the already adopted strategic plan for Darien Public Schools, the district has plans to set up "equity committees to initiate and continue to work on training for our staff in that capacity and other actions."

He also said: "I want to reassure our community that this is a priority. The board has identified that as a priority and we're going to work on it conscientiously, and in the best manner we can to present the right role model for our kids.

Addley noted that recent Darien High School graduates, who are regularly asked by the district about their impressions of the school system, had brought up matters of equity and diversity, although he didn't describe what they said.

Further Discussion

Later in the meeting, board member Tara Ochman asked Christopher Tranberg, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, what stage the district is at in developing ways teachers and staff could handle subjects involving diversity, equity and inclusion.

Tranberg said any practices that the district adopts would need to have broad community support in order to work:

"We started looking at different models, and we'll definitely look into implementing that as we go into curriculum writing this summer. A big piece is how we talk as a community. When it comes to equity work,

it's really important that a district develops their language as a community, as to how they're going to talk about equity, because there are many different ways and approaches, and there's a foundation and a common understanding that we have to build [...]

It was unclear in Tranberg's comments whether he was discussing in-classroom curriculum or teachers addressing problems with student behavior when it comes to incidents involving bigotry, or whether he was talking about student programs to educate students about the harms of bigotry, or some combination of all three, or something else.

"There's a foundation and a common understanding that we have to build, and we have to measure where people are coming into the conversation, and have a plan for not only educating our students, but educating our staff so they're comfortable talking to students and developing a level of readiness within the community, as well.

"So it's very complicated. It's, I would say, my greatest area of passion. I've done the work before, but it takes a lot of thoughtful planning to make it happen, and I love hearing the level of readiness that we heard tonight. But that doesn't negate the heavy lift that it actually is."

Ochman said she agreed with one of the parents who spoke that while some may worry that the schools teaching about equity and diversity could create anxiety in children, teaching in those areas is necessary, because without it, even more harm is done to those students as they grow up.

"So it's difficult work, but I think at this point, I'd be very proud of this district to really dig into that, and roll up our sleeves, and I think it goes hand in hand with our SEL [Social Emotional Learning] making all learners feel welcome," she said.

Board Chairman David Dineen praised the Parent Teacher Organizations for stepping up in offering to help out said he wants the board to hear more about the diversity and equity curriculum plans as they develop.

"I very much appreciate the board's advocacy and support for the issue that we're talking about. Thank you," Addley said.

From the "DPS Strategic Plan" [Web page](#) on the district website:

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During the public comment part of the board's meeting, these parents spoke. Here are their full statements (a few words or phrases couldn't be heard during the meeting, which was broadcast on Zoom and recorded; the video recording can be found [here](#)).

Belinda Fang of Beach Drive

(She spoke starting from the 5:59 to 8:22 marks on the video.)

I'm coming to you tonight as a parent who acknowledges that in this pandemic school year we have already asked you to do the impossible. However, if I may make one more plea with you, it is that you will please dedicate the time to look back and act forward.

Look back at all of the awful, hurtful and despicable instances of racism that have occurred in our schools and act forward in ensuring that our teachers are equipped and have the resources and training in knowing how to have these difficult conversations with our children in the classroom.

Our students need to understand why racism has no place in our schools, our town, in our nation and in our lives.

There have been innumerable hate crimes that have occurred in our country. The videos are extremely difficult to watch. But I hope that you will notice that many times there are silent bystanders who do nothing to help and do nothing to stop the cycle.

The media is silent, the leadership is silent, and there's just painful silence all around.

I don't point this out to shame anyone, but I hope that this stands out to you. Silent grownups don't come out of nowhere: we raise them. It starts in our homes, and it starts in our schools.

Please do not be silent with my children. Please do not be afraid. Please work with us as parents. Not enough of us know what to say or even what to do, but we know that silence cannot be the solution. Please do not shy away from having talks about racism, unconscious bias or injustices because you want to spare my children anxiety.

Clearly, this silence comes at the expense of them inevitably growing up to be ignorant or, worse yet, indifferent adults. Will you please do this hard work with us? Will you please elaborate on what the district will do to ensure that diversity, equity and inclusion are at the forefront of our children's education?

Please help us to take on this responsibility together.

Roisin Veckerelli of Bailey Avenue

(She spoke from the 8:51 to 11:07 on the video.)

My husband, Joe, and I are here. We would like to amplify the perfect articulation that Mrs. Fang just provided. We support every word that she just shared, and along with her and a number of other parents, we are connecting the dots on the parents' side as it relates to diversity, equity and inclusion and figuring out together how we can find each other and determine what needs to be done, and of course provide a mass to the school and the district [...] to support you.

We are pleased to have seen the strategic plan goal to support and encourage all shareholders to embrace diversity, equity and inclusion, and from our standpoint, we're looking to understand what is going to be done about that next — that, Mrs. Fang asked as well, how are we going to establish a baseline, and what is the plan going to look like? What are we going to measure?

There's a huge amount of pent-up — "demand" I guess I could say — from the parents' side. Again, as we recently connected the dots on this, and we'd love to understand from the district how you propose to move this forward, and what can we do to help with that?

We're behind you. We understand that in our community it is not an easy process, and we understand that there's the potential for a lot of backlash, but we're here, and the best way forward in our view is to, again, band together and continue to make progress over time by finding a way forward.

So, we're here if there's anything else you have in the way of questions, but on the parents' side we will continue to push forward and provide suggestions and recommendations, and we encourage you to come to us and partner with us as well in doing that, so we can support each other.

Jennifer Sheerman of Sylvan Road

(She spoke from the 11:24 to 12:31 marks.)

A swastika found scratched on a wall at a Darien school: What happened last week cannot happen again. And if it does, we need to be better prepared to inform and support our children and equip our parents and teachers to lead our students through an uncomfortable but important topic the right way.

After thinking about how diversity and inclusion fit into our Darien community — a community that I cherish and that I am very proud to be a part of, I was elated to meet with one of the most inspired, respectful and enlightened group of Darien parents recently, all of whom raised their hands to lead our elementary school PTOs diversity and inclusion efforts.

We have no agenda other than to make our schools a better and safer place to educate and prepare our students to understand and embrace the reality of diversity.

We are encouraged by the administration's commitment to foster a culture that promotes wellness, diversity and inclusion, and we look forward to working with you on this. Thank you.

(She spoke from 12:45 to 15:21 on the video)

I have three boys — well, will soon have three boys — in Tokeneke School, and as many of you know, the elementary schools PTOs have established committees devoted to promoting diversity, equity and inclusion among our school community.

While each school is developing initiatives unique to their school, we aim to provide a space to support, connect and engage on these topics. We're aligned on a vision for districtwide collaboration and communication.

Evens nationally and locally continue to illuminate the fact that silence will not achieve the change and progress we all hope to see for our community and beyond. As these committees have connected over the last month to discuss ways that we can work together around this opportunity, we'd like to express our hope that the Board of Ed will work with us in furthering these conversations and keeping it a priority.

I also just want to add that my three boys — they're third-generation Chinese-Korean-Americans — they have never been to China or Korea. They only speak English. They haven't had a chance to learn Chinese or Korean. This is the only home they know.

They were born in Stamford, and we moved to Darien two years ago, and it saddens me that despite America truly being their home, that because of the way they look, there are many people in this country, and certainly I hope not in this community — but unless we discuss these issues, I would want my kids to feel always welcome and know this is their home, and that they belong here, regardless of how they look.

And I can assure you that my children ask me about diversity issues, the way they look, why they look different, why people make certain comments, why things are happening — all the time. Not my 4-year-old, but certainly my 6- and 8-year-olds, and I do hope that the Board of Ed will work with us on furthering these efforts. Thank you very much.