

Good evening.

While the purpose of tonight's Board of Education meeting is the timetable for the return to in-person learning in January, I would be remiss not to address the recent IG post, and subsequent posts, and the [change.org](https://www.change.org) petition that it generated which has received over 1500 signatures.

I, like many of you, was deeply saddened to read the IG posts from students past and present that detailed a culture of hatred and bias in BHPS that targeted students for abuse because of their race, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or gender. This is against everything I believe in not only as an educator, but as a person. I sincerely apologize for the way these students were treated and felt. My mission is to make sure it will never happen to any of our students again.

For the posts that we can determine who the individual is who posted them, the building principals and I have launched investigations into the claims to determine how we can hold those involved accountable and provide support to the students. I encourage anyone who has a formal complaint to file it officially or through the anonymous reporting system so that we can investigate it accordingly. Anyone can also reach out to me, my door is open.

I do disagree with one statement in the petition that states that the district has “shown no sign of doing anything regarding the discriminations students face.” While I cannot speak to what was done in the past, I think that it is very important to set this record straight as to the actions the district has taken during my tenure over the past year and a half.

I was appointed Superintendent of Berkeley Heights Public Schools in July of 2019, and over the course of the summer and first semester began evaluating the district. As part of that process, and after meeting with parents who expressed concerns regarding the treatment of students of color at GLHS, in January of 2020 I tasked a group of administrators and teachers to start holding roundtable discussions with students hoping to begin an open conversation regarding bias, targeting, climate and culture at GL. There were two follow up roundtables in the spring with students at GL and at CMS.

In the Spring of 2020, I rebranded the district mission as Include, Inspire, Empower - with the first and most important of these being to Include - to make sure that all students felt safe and included when they came to school. These are not simple words, they strike at the heart of everything that the district does, and I have committed significant resources in a multifaceted approach to make this a reality. I have also made it one of my personal merit goals for the district, as has the administrative team.

Over the summer of 2020, a survey was provided to students and staff regarding Diversity and Social & Emotional awareness and needs. Based on the quantitative and qualitative results of both surveys, the school district initiated a world-renowned expert

in multicultural awareness and the founder of ADCOLOR, Marc Strachan <https://foundation.aaaa.org/marc-strachan.html>, who presented to the entire district staff and provided a follow-up training for administration. This specific training and survey results guided the building and district level diversity and inclusion committees.

Additionally, over the summer of 2020, as the district created an educational program for the 20-21 school year in the face of the pandemic, we also created Diversity Committees at each grade band, as well as one at the district level. Each committee is composed of teachers, parents, BOE members and students where applicable. These committees have honest and open conversations about DEI issues in the buildings, coordinate activities, discuss curriculum and instruction, and celebrate our diversity. Underneath these committees are individual action teams that are taking on special activities related to Diversity. All of these people have committed a great deal of time and energy to making our schools a more inclusive place.

Curricularly, we are adding a course on Race at GLHS; our Elementary schools are currently working on an LGBTQ+ curriculum that starts at 5th grade; and we are evaluating all curriculum so as to make diversity an integral part of all instructional areas. Finally, we are working to make our special education students feel more included in the regular school day.

The district has also committed to DEI training for the staff. At the start of the school year the teaching staff received Implicit Bias training, and Elementary Principals have attended additional bias training. At GLHS Mr. Nixon is partnering with a teacher to devote February to anti bias workshops for our staff and he has met with the Student Advisory Council to work on a Handbook for Biased incidents that will also affect those members of the staff who exhibit biased behaviors.

The Board of Education has a policy #3211 which explicitly denounces bias interactions on the part of our teaching staff, and any incidents are thoroughly investigated. As we understand that students may be reticent in coming forward, Mr. Nixon has also repeatedly distributed the anonymous reporting link to the student population so that they may report any incidents within the building without fear of repercussion.

Finally, because we know that the schools do not exist in a vacuum, we have partnered with the Berkeley Heights Township Diversity Council and participated in several listening sessions. We look forward to continuing working with them to make the town a better place. We are also partnering with them in their community Martin Luther King, Jr. Day event.

All of the above would normally take multiple years to get off the ground and in place. That it was done in the past year, with much of the time while navigating a global pandemic, is an incredible accomplishment and is a testament to the dedication and professionalism of our Administrative team and teachers, and the support and hard work of the Board of Education, the community and our students. While I am proud of what

has been accomplished, by no means am I satisfied. There is still much for us to do. To create change within a district it takes four things - 1- Change of hiring practices -2- Professional development -3- Strict accountability -4- Time. As frustrating as it might be, it takes time to change a culture that has been fostered for years - but we are committed to it, and with your help we hope to make BHPS a place that truly Includes, Inspires, and Empowers all of its students.

I want to say, open and honestly, Hate has no home here. Berkeley Heights Public Schools is a place of Inclusion.

Sincerely,

Dr. Melissa Varley