

# Superintendent's Message to Staff

May 2015

Impact of Race on Public Education

In recent months, we have all cringed when watching news reports of racial tensions in Ferguson, Staten Island, and North Charleston. In fact, even today a funeral is taking place in Baltimore that has once again drawn the attention of our nation to this very important topic.

We would be naive to think our community is immune to racial, or any other kind of, discrimination. Our principals would be the first to tell you that they deal with race-related issues every year.

In my four years with Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools, I have participated in more professional discussions about the impact of race than in my previous (nearly) forty years of public school service combined. This school community – including our staff, students, parents and support groups – continually demonstrates a willingness to have those difficult, and sometimes uncomfortable, conversations about race.

All of the talk is certainly beneficial and I greatly appreciate everyone's willingness to engage. After all, it is a necessary step in harvesting both the attention and the energy required to make a real difference.

However, at the end of the day, mere talk will not be a satisfactory measure of our progress. It is the actions we take that will determine our success. More specifically, we must take action to ensure every child succeeds in our schools, and that race will not serve as an inhibiting factor – not academically, not socially, not in any way.

That is not to say our conversations have not resulted in some very significant actions. The formation of our Blue Ribbon Mentor-Advocates, Parent University, district and building equity teams, required equity training, Minority Achievement Network Schools, Staff-of-Color Support Group and Equal Opportunity Schools are a few of the many examples that began with a conversation.

Even with all that we have in place, it is clearly evident that we have much still to do. In fact, there is no point in time when we will ever be able to kick back and proclaim, "We have arrived."

As issues do unfortunately arise, I urge you to go to your building administrator or district staff to ensure accurate information.

Now, if we are completely honest, we must admit that difficult issues involving race occur all too often in our school halls, cafeterias and athletic fields. They also occur outside our schools...in our stores, restaurants, offices and parks. Social media sites contain some of the worst examples. This should never be an excuse for not addressing incidents that occur in our schools.

How can we use recent local issues that have occurred in our schools, along with state and national incidents, as an impetus to change the way we do business? What are the next natural steps? In terms of racial impact on public education, how will CHCCS look different in two, three or four years?

First and foremost, our entire staff must take responsibility for addressing issues that seem unfair to any individual or sub-group. As a school district, we take these matters seriously and apply appropriate consequences – always with a focus on understanding, learning and restorative options.

It is also important to know that specific student issues cannot be discussed in a public forum as confidentiality is required by law. Second-hand information obtained from a series of social media posts should not be the sole source of information. A more full investigation is often required.

In the meantime, I believe there is an instructional component that is currently not addressed in a strong enough manner. Though our schools tend to produce some of the state's highest test scores, there is a big difference in student learning that is represented by a test or grade versus learning in a way that allows life-skill applications.

We need to really look at our instruction to make sure it is readily applicable. We need to ensure that an understanding of race and discrimination, and their still-existing impact, is integrated into our curriculum and not taught as isolated topics. We cannot teach a race unit and simply check it off the list. We must be sure our students understand how race impacts our lives, and how that impact can, and should be, both significant and positive. The future of our community, state and nation depends on it.

Finally, I urge you to view this letter as it is simply intended – to once again gather us together as a learning community with a common vision that desires positive learning cultures for adults and students in all of our schools regardless of our race, religion, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, identity, sexual orientation or disability.

Thank you for your willingness to continue the work in this important area. Your current efforts to reach all children are very much appreciated and I look forward to the next page of our growth as an organization.