



Acton-Boxborough Regional School District

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Superintendent of Schools

January 21, 2021 - Statement read at the meeting of the Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee

Good evening everyone. Last week at the public meeting of the Acton Leadership Group, the chair of the Selectboard called on me during the public comment period to issue clarification to the community about the racist attacks on our school committee and to “make this right” with the community. In addition the chair also stated that I “must rectify the rush to judgment and the impact it has had on those members of the community falsely linked to the Zoom bombing and start our community on a path of healing.” The Committee and I have also received several emails demanding an apology for comments made or perceived that racism exists in Acton and Boxborough. I have been thinking about this quite a bit over the last week and want to offer a few thoughts. Because in the absence of what some in our community hope for in the form of an apology, I believe an explanation is deserved, so our community understands why I am so committed to our work.

To be clear, neither I nor my leadership indicated that we believed any individual in our community was responsible for the attacks. We did express disappointment that some in our community took the opportunity to criticize the targets of the attack for their reactions.

My mind has continued to come back to the same series of questions over the last few weeks:

Why aren't we hearing calls from the black and brown members of our community to retract statements, clarify details and rectify the rush to judgement?

Similarly, when we have had anti-semitic incidents in our district, why have we not heard members of our jewish community come forward with statements such as “this is not us” and “anti-semitism doesn't exist in our schools and community?”

Who owns the decision to determine if something is biased, racist or hateful or to make declarations that racism doesn't exist in our community and dismiss those who say it does? What does it mean if only the white voices hold this view?

And as we start our community on a path of healing, whose healing are we speaking of?

As a community, we are struggling to understand and hear each other on these important issues and we are confusing important concepts such as hate, racism and bias. They are close relatives, but they are not the same. I know we are proud of our history. Through comments shared in the retirement of the mascot, we heard that Acton was home to one of the first free black men to fight in the revolutionary war. This is something to be proud of, but why did it take nearly 250 years for a black person to be elected to a position within our government? More importantly, why would asking a question such as this offend some, while affirming the views of others? We all have different backgrounds and experiences that color the lenses with

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which we see the world. If we cannot recognize our own lens and its limitations, we will likely miss the opportunity to learn about how our neighbors' and friends' experiences may differ from our own.

The incidents at our school committee meetings may have been isolated in that they came from afar, but we have heard time and time again that bias and racism can and do exist everywhere, even here. As individuals, we did not create racism or the first racist ideas in our nation's history. It existed in our country from its founding. That someone is the target of racism *should* offend us, but we *should not* be offended by the person who shares that experience. And we don't need to recoil at the notion that racism and bias exist in our schools and communities.

What we own is our response to racism and the opportunity to become more inclusive schools and communities. Let's not misplace our time and energy trying to prove we are not racist, when we can instead focus on making our schools and communities better for those who are impacted by racism and other forms of bias.

For the first several hundred years of our existence, our communities were predominantly white and centered in the European experience, so our traditions and cultural norms naturally centered around these experiences. But we have changed rapidly and our incoming Kindergarten class is now a majority non-white. As a school system, we need to rethink our existing norms and traditions and ensure that moving forward, they reflect the community who we are, as in the past we needed to reflect the community who we were. What would it mean if the traditions and norms better embraced and centered around the experiences of the members of our very diverse community?

This doesn't mean that we abandon everything and start over, but it does mean that we need to listen to new voices, in particular those voices that haven't been heard before, and make sure that our schools reflect them all. I understand that for some of us, this means we will feel some loss that our community reflects *us* to a lesser degree, especially when we lose symbols that we hold dear. But we also need to remember the voices of those people who have not been able to feel an equal part of our community or who have not had an opportunity to have their symbols represented in our community, as has been our experience.

Superintendents and school leaders are taught to be keenly aware of the dangers around us. This is what is often referred to as "political awareness." In fact, the title of one of the most well-read and talked about books in leadership programs by authors Heifetz and Linsky speaks right to this bluntly: "Leadership on the Line: Staying Alive through the Dangers of Leading" I will come back to this in a moment.

To speak to the mascot: I recognize the decision has disappointed some and angered others. I understand and recognize that some felt the process was not open or one they felt a part of. While I may disagree, I will not argue this point. But this decision has now been made.

Since this decision was made, our staff have spent hundreds of hours this year responding to records requests, open meeting law complaints, and ongoing calls for a return of the mascot and a new start to these discussions. Today, we received another records request that will likely take our staff dozens of hours of time to compile. We cannot continue to prioritize this distraction over our need to focus on other important

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issues, like our students, their educational needs, and our planning for them to return to our schools and classrooms. We understand our legal requirements to respond to these requests but out of respect for everyone's time and energy, and regardless of continued pressure for a different outcome, we consider this issue resolved and are not engaging in further dialog.

We will begin moving forward to work with the high school to outline a process for determining a new mascot. The process will be led by the high school and its students. The process will be inclusive of all members of our community in an appropriate way, to be determined by our students. This includes those members of the community who believe we should not have retired the mascot to begin with. I understand some may still be angry enough about the choice to retire the mascot that you do not want to be engaged, but please know the offer will be extended.

I feel badly that there are members of our community who have been off put and offended by statements we have released and in some of the work in which we are engaged, but I cannot offer an apology. After much soul searching over the year, and at times, a degree of self-doubt, I have become comfortable with the idea that I wasn't hired to "stay alive" through the dangers that come my way, I was hired to do the right thing.

Right now, at this time, and in this community, for our students and their families, the right thing is to continue to listen to them, value and honor their experiences, and make sure that we continue to work toward more inclusive schools. And if that means that as a white person, I need to learn to share more of the discomfort that individuals in our community of color and from different backgrounds have long felt, that is OK. And it is OK for us all.

I am pleased to announce that we have been in discussions with Visions-Inc., an organization with a long history of helping organizations, schools and communities successfully navigate work around Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. The town managers have been working with Dawn Bentley and I in partnership to plan an initial meeting of town and community leaders with this organization with the goal of quickly expanding this work to have a deep community-wide impact. I am also in discussions to have Visions-Inc. work directly with our schools and district to help focus and expand our leadership and implementation of initiatives that can make our schools more equitable and inclusive. I invite all of our community members to come along on this journey toward more just, equitable and inclusive communities, regardless of your own starting places.

I was interviewed by Channel 7 news about two weeks ago as they considered airing a piece about the recent incidents here. A question they asked took me by surprise: "Is this community broken?" After a pause, my answer was something to the effect of "No, but we would all do well to better listen to each other, particularly the voices of those who have not historically been heard." I left the interview feeling like my answer was incomplete and lacking. Yesterday, I heard my thoughts completed, albeit more eloquently, in a line from Youth Poet Laureate Amanda Gorman's inaugural poem: "We've weathered and witnessed a nation that isn't broken, but simply unfinished."

We, our schools and our community are not broken, but simply unfinished.

Peter Light, Superintendent of Schools

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