

February 8, 2021

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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### **SPASD Response to Open Community Letter**

Please allow this letter to serve as a response to the Open Community Letter from the Hawk & Bowie families representing other concerned Sun Prairie residents and families of SPASD.

First, we want to acknowledge with commitment and sincerity the harm the sixth-grade social studies incident at Patrick Marsh Middle School on Monday, February 1, 2021, has caused for our students, families, staff, and community. We also recognize that this incident has caused even greater pain for our students, families, staff, and community members of color. It was categorically unacceptable, and we stand in solidarity with you against systemic racism. We are deeply upset by what happened, and we acknowledge that people have every reason to be angry. We are committed to our work on racial equity, and this incident is a painful indicator of why this work is so important. It is also a reminder that our work is ongoing and that we have much to do--in collaboration with community partners--to achieve our goals.

Systemic racism cannot be addressed randomly. Our efforts must be consistent, strategic, and deliberate. We must work in partnership with one another, guided by beliefs and vision. The incident at Patrick Marsh is not indicative of the commitments of this school district or what we are passionately working to become as an organization. It was a direct result of people working outside the protocols we've established and outside our expectations of our staff.

Specific to your letter, we would like to address one of the demands, particularly your call for the immediate and permanent dismissal of the Assistant Superintendent for Teaching, Learning, and Equity.

There is no one more committed to equitable outcomes for students than Stephanie Leonard-Witte. She has been and continues to be a champion for the work of increasing racial equity and eliminating disparities for Black and Brown students. She has been a model for teacher leaders, principals, and district administrators when it comes to disrupting racism within our public education system. The following list represents some outcomes in which she has been a tireless leader in support of our students of color:

- Starting in 2015 and continuing through the present, all 4K-12 district curriculum has been revised and updated with a lens for racial equity. The curriculum renewal and

design process guides the review, adoption, and/or replacement of curriculum to be equity-centered in all content areas. The curricula across the district have not only been updated but also expanded to include social-emotional learning standards within content instruction. This process involves teachers throughout every step of curriculum review, selection, and adoption.

- In 2015, the English Language Arts steering committee worked to adopt the Reading and Writing Workshop Framework for literacy, including instructional materials from Teachers College of Columbia University in New York City, promoting social justice themes and equity as core principles.
- Beginning in 2016 and continuing annually, the district has strategically purchased student materials with a focus on diversity of races, cultures, and identities. The district has invested hundreds of thousands of dollars to update, replace, and diversify text resources to be more historically accurate and representative of our student body.
- In the spring of 2017, the Learning for Justice (formerly Teaching Tolerance) [Social Justice Standards](#) were adopted and integrated into the K-12 Social Studies curriculum. These standards provide a road map for anti-bias education in the district. The standards, which are grouped into four domains (identity, diversity, justice, and action), have helped educators at all grade levels develop a common language for equitable and accessible learning opportunities.
- Since 2018, a coordinated, robust Black History Month (BHM) commemoration has occurred districtwide. Prior to 2018, planning for BHM was site based. This coordinated effort includes engagement with the Sun Prairie African American Parent Network and professional educators to create a variety of activities to celebrate the contributions of Brown and Black people in our nation's history. The Black History Month materials make use of Black Lives Matter at School resources published by the NEA EdJustice program, and the district senior leaders have steadfast endorsement of "Black Lives Matter" posted on school signs in support of the district's equity statement.
- The district dramatically shifted course sequencing in mathematics in 2018 by implementing Algebra for all eighth-grade students and eliminating tracking in math, which had previously begun in fifth grade. Algebra for all created equal educational opportunities for all students to be prepared for, and have access to, college-level coursework.
- In 2019, the district implemented Race and Equity Teams at each building, utilizing training through the Pacific Educational Group and Glenn Singleton's *Courageous Conversations about Race* framework. Race and Equity Teams are groups of equity-focused faculty who lead staff professional development in culturally responsive

teaching practices at school sites at a minimum of once per month. Our partnership with the Pacific Educational Group started in the 2017-2018 school year.

- The district's three senior leaders engaged with student groups at each school (C-Heights, PPA, SPHS) after the student walkout in November 2019. Discussions with students have led to the development of student affinity groups at Cardinal Heights. In addition, high school students targeted revisions to the student handbook, including a culturally sensitive dress code and incorporation of racial harassment into the anti-bullying language. Students will also participate in the development of racially conscious homeroom lessons, professional development for staff, and participation on upcoming curriculum steering committees.
- During the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 school years, K-12 instructional staff have participated in training from Dr. Sharroky Hollie and The Center for Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning on culturally and linguistically responsive practices. Additionally, all staff in grades 6-12 have received training from Dr. Hollie on Culturally and Linguistically Responsive practices in remote learning. Currently, 40 staff members across grades 6-12 are undergoing three rounds of direct coaching from Dr. Hollie's coaching staff.
- In 2020, the Teaching, Learning, and Equity team addressed vendors about racist content in their curriculum and assessment materials as a protection for students and staff in Sun Prairie and to set a high bar for appropriate content in our nation.
- District leaders have immediately addressed racialized incidents, including the blackface incident at the basketball game last school year and the Confederate flag incident at SPHS earlier this school year. The district disrupted these events, investigated, followed up, and took immediate action, including restorative conversations with students who were involved and impacted.
- This year, all instructional staff in SPASD are engaged in a book study of Zaretta Hammond's *Culturally Responsive Teaching and the Brain*, and this study is led directly by Race and Equity Team members.
- All district-level cabinet members are part of the District Equity Leadership Team, a districtwide equity team. This year, an adult learning framework for Race and Equity Teams (E-teams) was created to determine the level of fidelity and impact the teams are having in each building.

We recognize and are thankful for the work done by Stephanie Leonard-Witte in service of the district's mission, vision, beliefs, and values, as well as our district equity statement. We will not be recommending any form of dismissal of the Assistant Superintendent of Teaching, Learning, and Equity for this incident. The urgency of this work requires a transformational and systemic

response. The district ardently opposes systematized and institutionalized racism that has been in place for over four hundred years. We name this not to minimize the incident that has taken place, but in service and understanding of our call to deepen and accelerate our equity work. Please accept this letter as assurance of our ongoing commitment toward racial equity with support from the highest levels of leadership in this school district.

We encourage you to watch the school board meeting on Monday, February 8, at 6:00 p.m., via [sunprairiemediacenter.com](https://sunprairiemediacenter.com), for more information about how the district is responding to this incident. As stated in our public comments earlier this week, we plan to provide an update and district statement at that time. We share with you a commitment to doing better, while both holding ourselves accountable and accepting accountability from our community.

Sincerely,

Brad Saron, Superintendent

Steve Schroeder, School Board President

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