



PATERSON PUBLIC SCHOOLS



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Ms. Eileen F. Shafer
Superintendent of Schools

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Dear Parents/Guardians:

The death of George Floyd has sparked a social justice movement around the world. Paterson Public Schools takes the stand that we unequivocally condemn racism, bigotry and violence that is prevalent in our society and recognizes that silence is not an option. We stand against all forms of racism and social injustice.

This is a time of great pain and emotional trauma in America. The images of George Floyd in the final moments of his life while in police custody are branded into our memories. The sound of George Floyd's voice begging to breathe, begging for life echoes in our minds. We cannot and should not turn our thoughts away from what we have seen and heard. Above all, we cannot remain silent in the face of racism. As a white woman, I can tell you that after seeing George Floyd die the way he did, I will not remain silent. I detest the racist violence that ended George Floyd's life as well as the racism and violence that has persisted in America and it must stop.

It was not just one police officer's actions that killed George Floyd, but the inactions of those who were standing around him. In the eight minutes and 46 seconds that passed while George Floyd was pinned down, the other officers should have stopped what was happening. None of them did, and now a man is dead and the world is dealing with the aftermath.

It's time for police brutality to be addressed through the law. Those who fail to intercede to save a life, and prevent others from interceding, have committed a crime as much as the person inflicting the lethal brutality. There ought to be law against this kind of inaction. Our police must truly serve and protect the people, all of the people, in the communities where they work.

We must assume that even our youngest learners have seen the tragedy that has taken place in Minneapolis and the reaction to it around the world. What are our children supposed to think when they see a white police officer pressing his knee into the neck of a black man until he dies? What are they supposed to think when they learn this is not the first time, and that tragedies like this have happened many times before?

Young people know the realities that surround them. It's not enough to observe Black History Month. It's not enough for us to say we celebrate diversity.

As educators, our job is to empower our students, to help them discover what is already there inside them, and to enhance their growth and strength. To this end, our academic services team and counseling team has curated educational resources for every grade level that promote acceptance and tolerance. This is part of our overall effort to update our guidance curriculum. These resources will be made available on the district's website.

*Paterson – A Promising Tomorrow
Together We Can*

Our students need to know that their thoughts and feelings matter and that their voices must be heard. That is why we are launching resources to allow young people to talk and express their feelings about social injustice. The “Talk To My Counselor” link that has been posted to the home page of the district’s website will be expanded to connect students who want to talk with their counselors about the recent tragedy and the events that followed. We will also expand our grief counseling line as a HELP (Hope, Encouragement Listening Platform) line as an additional resource for students who are grappling with the many emotions they may be feeling during this painful time.

A public school district is in a very unique position to address the realities of racism. Twelve years is a long time to raise the level of understanding a person has about themselves and the world. But first, a child must know that he or she is endowed with the dignity that is inherent in every human being, and is loved by their parents, families, and teachers. A child who knows this will be better able to recognize the humanity that exists in everyone.

Our children are surely seeing the protests that have been happening in communities throughout the nation. We cannot allow young people to believe that anger at the injustice of institutionalized racism is a license to break the law, commit acts of violence, loot, and burn buildings and police cars. At the same time, we must talk to young people about the lawful protests and the long train of abuses that led to them.

And let our young people see the example set by the more than 500 protestors who took to Paterson’s streets last week. They marched, sang, chanted, gave speeches and expressed their anger about the unjust death of George Floyd and police brutality. It was an event where the protest organizers proactively discouraged and prevented people from becoming violent and destructive. The organizers kept the demonstration focused on the injustice they want to rid our nation of, and it was an event where leaders of the city’s police department took a knee.

This gives me hope. The people of Paterson give me hope.

Let us all remember the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., who led demonstrations that upheld the ideals of nonviolence, civil disobedience and equality for all. Most of all, King called people to action.

Let us act together to honor and respect the dignity of every child, and their unique heritage and history, to equip them to advocate for a more just society.

And let us begin by saying, Black Lives Matter.

Sincerely,



Eileen F. Shafer, M.Ed.
Superintendent of Schools