

AN OPEN LETTER TO OUR COMMUNITY: A CALL TO ACTION FOR OUR SCHOOLS

“Racism is my high school experience.”

These are the shocking words of Kosi Ifeji, soon to be a junior in Bangor High School this autumn. The brave students who have come forward with their stories of harassment and bigotry—and administrative malfeasance—deserve to be heard, and to be taken seriously.

In the wake of the murder of George Floyd, there has been a clarion call in the state of Maine and the entire nation to confront deeply embedded racism. Many institutions, from corporations to school districts, are mouthing the words of inclusivity.

We are here to remind you that declarations are not deeds.

When a school district affirms its commitment to antiracism but has a uniformly poor response to reports of racist harassment within their halls, we have no choice but to greet such assurances with skepticism.

One of the most pernicious characteristics of endemic racism is the ability of institutions to convince themselves they are not racist or abetting racism.

It is clear that the Bangor School Department has antiracist policies on the books without a culture of or leadership commitment to enforcement.

It is clear that “disappointment” in faculty who failed to adequately address these concerns seems to be the upper limit of accountability.

It is clear that the Bangor School Department will hire investigators, but it is unclear whether they truly will be unbiased and independent, or what the scope and transparency of outcomes will be.

We, the undersigned, are a consortium of concerned citizens, organizations, and businesses including people of color, Wabanaki people, and members of various minority and faith communities who stand in solidarity to urge **all schools in the greater Penobscot River region** to undertake a thorough investigation into policy and procedural changes to protect and advance the safety, well-being and success of minority students in their care.

We stand with these brave students and completely support their demands for a safe and inclusive school environment.

As adults in these communities, it is the very least we can do. We understand that Bangor High School is not alone in its failure to create an antiracist climate for its students. At some level, all of us are complicit for not recognizing this. These events could have happened in any school (and probably have). Let us vow that with students, administration, teachers, and community members working together in the months and years to come, all schools in the greater Penobscot River region will become models of racial equity and inclusivity with compassionate dialogue, empathy, and opportunity for all.

We urge all school departments to immediately evaluate:

1. *How many in-service training days per year do we devote to solidifying an ongoing antiracism practice, addressing implicit bias and incorporating restorative justice practices within our educational institution at all levels of organization?*
2. *Does our school system disproportionately discipline, suspend or expel minority students?*
3. *Does our school staffing include Black, Indigenous and People of Color in positions visible to students?*
4. *Is minority achievement expected, recognized and encouraged?*
5. *What will be our disciplinary policy moving forward for faculty and administration who fail to adequately address and resolve reports of racism and bigotry?*
6. *While acknowledging constraints imposed by FERPA privacy laws, what mechanisms will we emplace so students know that their reports are yielding real consequences?*
7. *What restorative justice supports can we create within the school for teachers who may need to address instances of racism or other types of bullying within their classrooms?*
8. *What steps have we taken within our schools to empower and embolden our students to regularly and consistently take the lead in the fight against racism and bullying on any level?*

The Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. said, “In the end, we will remember not the words of our enemies, but the silence of our friends.”

William Butler Yeats said, “Teaching is not filling up a pail, it is lighting a fire.” Let us be silent no longer and pledge to light this fire for our students of color by ensuring their school experience is no longer one of racism.

The undersigned,

Jean Adamson
Doug Allen
Michael Alpert
François Amar
Cathy Anderson
Arnold and Riva Berleant
Tracy Bigney
Sidney and Martha Block
Pastor Shawn Brace
Sandy Butler
Connie Carter
Laurie Cartier
Martin Chartrand
Eleanor Chason
Dennis Chinoy and Katherine Kates
Amy Clement
Ed Clement
Alan Cobo-Lewis
Darcy Cooke
Maulian Dana
Shirley and Ronald Davis
Stefanie Egenhofer
Joan Ellis
Judson Esty-Kendall
Jonathan Falk and Laura Levenson
Aubrae Filipiak
Jennifer Goldenberg
Brett Gray
Crystal Gray
Dylan B. Gray
Katie and John Greenman
Gerry Gross

Hanna Gutow
Kimberly Hammill
Eddie and Maxine Harrow
Phyllis Havens
Liliana Herakova, PhD, Parent,
immigrant, University of Maine faculty
Benjamin Holt
Carrie Holt
Mary Holt
Karen Hover
Nancy Jacobson
Thierry Joint
Sarah M. Joughin
Barbara Kates and Sol Goldman
Nori Kazdoy
Suzanne Kelly
Penny King
Brian Kresge
Kristin M. Langellier
Al Larson
Nancy Larson
Lois Latour
Theodate Lawlor
Cindy Leiffer
Rabbi Darah R. Lerner
Don Lewis
Terri Lewis
Richard and Barbara Malm
Judy Martin
Cynthia Martinez-Edgar
Karen Marysdaughter
Stephanie Mattsen

Sarah, Mitch, and Maisie McCarthy
Steve McKay
Reverend Andrew Moeller
Clare Mundell Ph.D. and Bill Wood, M.D.
Denise Myers
Noah Nesin
Laura B. Nobel, Parent
Shiwa Noh, Business Owner
Angela Okafor, Parent, immigrant,
Business Owner
Maria Orlova, LMT, Parent, immigrant,
Business Owner
Laurie Osher, PhD
Leza Packard
Rosemary Parsons
Janice L. Pelletier, MD, FAAP
Mary Ann Perry
Ilze Petersons
Mataya Philbrick
Melissa J. Philbrick
Peter Phillips
Eden Pratt
Timothy Reagan
Carol Romeo Veits, LCSW
Michael Ross
Maryann and Mark Roth
Denise Roy-Myers
Tim Shay
Sondra Siegel
Rabbi Bill Siemers
Sarah Stevens
Becky Tapley

Lucus Temple
Inga Turner
Bev Uhlenhake
Melinda Wentworth
Francine Wickes
Clinton Williams
Dina Yacoubagha

Islamic Center of Maine
Congregation Beth Israel
Congregation Beth El Social Action
Committee
Nibezen
Ecology Learning Center
Greater Bangor Area Branch NAACP
Maine Multicultural Center
Power in Community Alliance (PICA)
Veterans for Peace, Jim Harney
Chapter
Operation Breaking Stereotypes

Maine Yoga Adventures
Katahdin Pediatric Dentistry
Osher Environmental Systems
The Common Loon Public House
Surge Electric
Mid Maine Weatherization
STAR*T Building Resilience
Wicked Brew Cafe

