



ANDOVER PUBLIC SCHOOLS

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SCHOOL COMMITTEE

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Anti-Racist Activism within the Andover Public Schools

Recent episodes of racial violence—particularly those committed by persons in authority—have left us shaken to the core and searching for meaningful ways to confront racism and foster social justice to make our world a better place for all.

In the Andover Public Schools, our teachers, students, staff, administrators, and School Committee members are not immune to the trauma that is unfolding around us. Even as we strive to focus on our primary responsibilities of teaching and learning, we are discussing the painful implications of these shocking events—and we are pondering the conversations we need to have within our own community.

As a district, we must acknowledge that the racism and prejudice that often occur in subtle and institutional forms are now exposed and explicit. The recent deaths of multiple Black and Brown people at the hands of police and vigilantes are a stark reminder that America's long history of racism and intolerance still bears fruit today and must be confronted and addressed.

This concern is not a new one for the Andover Public Schools. Recognizing the impact that racism has on all students and staff, we have taken a number of steps over the past five years to broaden our professional development, our curriculum, and our school culture in ways that highlight the value of diversity. Now is an appropriate time to reiterate how the district steadfastly works to ensure identity-safe schools for all students and staff.

In the area of curriculum:

- Core to our elementary literacy program, every classroom in grades K-8 has its own carefully selected library of fiction and non-fiction books whose content takes place in different countries, is written by authors from different cultures, and features characters with diverse backgrounds. This curricular strategy provides students with a window that looks out on a broader world as well as a mirror that reflects back on themselves. The stories prompt students to engage in meaningful discussions about multiple backgrounds and how differences and similarities play a role in their everyday lives. At the middle and secondary levels, we have implemented a new curriculum in English Language Arts that places multiculturalism, perspective-taking, and empathy as core tenets.
- We are developing and piloting a new elementary social studies program—*One Community, One Nation*—that promotes understanding of world cultures and civil rights. For example, students in second grade explore cultures from four parts of the world—Kenya, India, China, and Mexico—and then honor the heritage of all members of the student body. Third graders study civics and learn how individuals and organizations make a difference in our communities. Fourth and fifth graders study US history through the lens of the evolution of civil and human rights, including the abolition of slavery, the civil rights movement of the 1960s, and the women's suffrage movement.

About APS: The mission of the Andover Public Schools, in partnership with the entire Andover community, is to educate by engaging and inspiring students to develop as self-reliant, responsible citizens who are thinkers, problem solvers, and contributors prepared to participate in an evolving global society.

- Andover High School offers classes in Race and Membership, Latin American Studies for Social Justice, and Democracy and Media Literacy, and both required and elective courses, across disciplines, explore issues of race, diversity, and equity.
- More than 200 high school students are now engaged in our high school's global network, exploring how they can address United Nations sustainability goals and how to understand and work with other countries and cultures as we all strive to become global citizens.

In the area of co-curricular activities:

- Across the district, students implement service-learning projects to honor the memory of Martin Luther King Jr. They carry on his work in our day of service and in numerous other service projects throughout the year.
- The district has secured from the Cummings Foundation a \$100,000 three-year grant that focuses on cultural awareness. One aspect of the grant will bring to all of our elementary schools the poet/songwriter/performer/educator Regie Gibson, who has the unique ability to engage children in frank conversations about their cultural diversity and other aspects of their backgrounds. Through a program we've entitled "*Many Cultures, One Community*," he weaves this information into music and poetry that he performs for the students to show how their lives can be positively acknowledged and celebrated.
- Our elementary schools organize international nights in which students and parents share cultural customs and traditions.
- The high school has supported its students need for identity-safe spaces with clubs such as *Amigos Unidos* and the *Asian-American Club*. Also, high school students have led the formation of issue-driven clubs to serve as social justice allies, including the *Be the Change Club*, the *Gender and Sexuality Alliance*, and the *Diversity Club*. The high school's *Diversity Club* inspired students from Doherty Middle School to start their own *Diversity Club* in 2019.

In the area of professional development:

- In 2016, the district formed a Cultural Climate Committee (C3) that continues to guide our work in this area. Each school has also formed its own Cultural Climate Committee to address incidents and offer professional growth opportunities and support within the building.
- To launch our professional development initiative in race and identity, four years ago all administrators and many teachers read Claude Steele's book *Whistling Vivaldi* and engaged in discussion groups to promote a conversation about our privilege and biases. In 2019, a faculty book group at Andover High School read and discussed the book *White Fragility*.
- In 2018, our professional development at the secondary level focused on cultural competence, using consultants from *Facing History and Ourselves* to help us uncover and confront implicit bias and micro-aggressions. These sessions laid the groundwork for our step-by-step response to incidents of racism. We also examined ways to honor diversity and help students feel included and comfortable at school, secure in the knowledge that their identities are respected.
- Teachers receive ongoing professional development in cultural proficiency. Each year, numerous faculty members attend professional activities focused on diversity, such as the Building Bridges conference.
- In 2019-20, district administrators and some school faculties undertook work around data-driven approaches toward improving outcomes for historically marginalized subgroups. This is an important

step in challenging the status quo of our systems in order to help our students of color achieve at higher levels.

- Beginning in 2020, students at Andover High School will have an opportunity to receive training and assume a lead role in cultural responsiveness, including conversations on how to address racism and bigotry within the school and community.

In the area of policy:

- The district's mission statement and [Theory of Action](#) place inclusivity and cultural proficiency at the center of our strategic plan.
- In February 2020, the School Committee approved the formation of Andover's new English Learner Parent Advisory Council (ELPAC), whose intent is to support parents who have come to Andover from all over the world.
- Over time, the School Committee has established numerous policies¹ that prohibit discrimination in any form and aim to make the Andover Public Schools a welcoming place for all. For example, Policy AB states that we will, "Formally and unequivocally oppose bigotry, racism, violence, and hate, wherever such may occur and in whatever form such may take. We will remain steadfast in our defense of tolerance and our commitment to the values of respect, inclusion and empathy. We strive to be a place of welcome to all races, religions, creeds, genders, and orientations."
- As of June 2020, the School Committee is developing a bold policy on educational equity to be included in the district policy manual. The goal of the policy is to eliminate practices, attitudes, and cultural messages that reinforce differential outcomes based on a student's identity and simultaneously to include methods, practices, and approaches that support identity-safe classrooms and schools.

These steps are some of the many that we have taken and continue to take to ensure that all students and staff know that they have many allies within the Andover Public Schools. Our work will never be finished. The roots of racism and prejudice spring from the depths of America's history and its tentacles have spread throughout our society.

We acknowledge, with profound regret, that several incidents of overt racism and prejudice have occurred within our district in the past few years. In each case, we have acted swiftly and decisively to ensure that appropriate disciplinary actions were taken. However, disciplining those who violate the basic tenet of respect for others is by itself insufficient; we must seize these incidents as opportunities to audit the behavior and our response to it and then to initiate difficult and productive conversations with all in our community. We must continue to be vigilant and to address even the most subtle words or gestures that could make a student or staff member feel unwelcome or threatened.

Will these actions be enough? By themselves, no, because racism and prejudice are insidious and will continue to seek ways to invade the spaces where we live and learn. But together, our collective actions can stand up to the evils of racism and prejudice and can stamp them out wherever and whenever they make an appearance.

There is much work to be done. It will require having the courage to look below the surface and expose the drivers of institutional racism within our own system. Those drivers include curricula that are not accessible and representative, along with disproportionality rates and opportunity gaps that persist despite our past and present efforts and resources. The ways in which we use the current situation as an

opportunity to uncover the biases within ourselves and each other that allow these institutional prejudices to operate will define us in the future.

We appreciate the support of all parents and community members as the Andover Public Schools takes a strong public stand against systemic racism and prejudice in all of its ugly forms. Together, we—along with our students who are learning these life lessons—can be the change.



Sheldon Berman
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ENDNOTES

School Committee Policies

AB – The People and Their School District: <https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/browse/andoverset/andover/AB>

AC – Nondiscrimination and Harassment Prevention:
<https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/andoverset/andover/AC>

AC-R – Nondiscrimination and Harassment Prevention;
<https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/andoverset/andover/AC-R>

ACA – Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Sex:
<https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/andoverset/andover/ACA>

ACAB – Sexual Harassment: <https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/andoverset/andover/ACAB>

ACE – Nondiscrimination on the Basis of Disability:
<https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/andoverset/andover/ACE>

GBA – Equal Employment Opportunity: <https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/andoverset/andover/GBA>

JB – Equal Educational Opportunities: <https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/andoverset/andover/JB>

JICFB – Bullying Prevention: <https://z2policy.ctspublish.com/masc/browse/andoverset/andover/JICFB>