



June 11, 2020

Dear South Whidbey Community

I have received some emails asking vital questions about equity. It is clear that our community is feeling how urgent the needs are and how we must be there for our students. The short answer is yes, South Whidbey School District is passionately committed to inclusion, diversity and equity. The long answer is we have much work to do.

As we prepare to celebrate the accomplishments of our seniors and attend their graduation ceremony this weekend, I carry a heavy heart. The world they are embarking upon has so many needs. This young generation will be the ones helping us to build a more equitable world as we are called together globally, nationally, locally to address injustice hundreds of years in the making.

The current events unfolding on our national and global stage are stunning. Together, our nation is fighting for all people to be heard and valued. Its scale is unprecedented. Watching the video of George Floyd's murder was shocking. Moving us beyond passive existence into one where we must do something to make this stop. The spark heard around the world. The stories of other Black Americans who've lost their lives in the weeks preceding were equally impactful: Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, Tamir Rice and so many hundreds of others whose stories will never finish. Things cannot continue the way they are, we must sit in this discomfort and look at our own role and place in this movement. On June 1st, I sent a letter to all of our staff, students, families and community members ([linked here](#)). This will not be our only statement. This is just our initial reflection on the events of our nation in this moment.

Black Lives Matter. The voices and experiences of our students and families matter. Reducing harm delivered through ignorance or intent matters. Over the last four years, I have pressed our administration to review practices and implement professional development for staff around issues of equity, racism, micro-aggression and more. I have pushed for staff to address issues as they arise in classrooms, hallways, gyms, and recess. We must be vigilant in this work. We cannot be everywhere as adults to protect our children so we must work with them to address the injustice they see as well. We want our students to know, through our actions and our words, that we stand against racism and it will not be tolerated.

Last summer, we sent twelve of our administration and staff members to thirty-six hours of training to build equity in our schools. This past year, we utilized that training to challenge our staff to identify their own biases, challenge mis-information, and bring action. On the last day of school in June 2019 we had representatives from one of the best training organizations on race and equity issues, Cultures Connecting, to train all of our staff. In August 2019, we kicked off our year with an all staff meeting that was led by Partners for Youth Empowerment, a local organization that does training all over the world. They helped build us into a stronger team and lead us through several equity discussions. We utilized

our half days once a month to provide mandatory training to staff on different equity issues. This August, we plan to have Erin Jones, Ted Talk Speaker and Obama White House Champion for Change, to engage our staff on racial equity. This is a marathon, not a sprint. These professional development opportunities will continue, these discussions will continue, this work will continue as it is vital to our work as educators. Our staff will work in teams at each school to build on what has been started.

We have been asked:

“Do we have any black or brown teachers, coaches or counselors in our district?”

We do have a few staff that fall into that category, however, not nearly enough and we are striving to diversify to a larger degree. Our application process includes a question around race and equity that outlines its importance in our district and the content applicants provide in that box help us to find staff who will join on this equity journey with us. Due to the distance and lack of housing on the south end of Whidbey Island, we struggle to receive applications from a diverse population. We are continually trying to find new ways to reach prospective applicants of color. Our human resources specialist provides notice of our job opportunities to Indeed, WWU, LinkedIn, Facebook, Whidbey Island full/part time on Facebook, Drews List, and the Office of Student Diversity and Inclusion at the University of Washington College of Education. Applications have demographic information removed when screeners view them to account for unintended bias in decision making. We will continue to build skills in this area to address this need. We know our students of color need to see teachers of color as well.

“What is taught about black history?”

South Whidbey Elementary School 2018-2019 (in addition to Martin Luther King Jr. projects and celebrations):

- Developed Black History Month Program in collaboration with R.A.C.E. group of Readiness to learn. This included professional development for staff. This training focused on lesson plan development for all content areas that brought forward the contributions of Black Americans since the inception of the United States. Teachers integrated these lessons into the month of February.
- Students presented the work they engaged in (including poetry, social justice presentations, art, music and more) at an all school assembly.
- A large visual timeline - outlining key moments in the civil rights, justice and equity movement in the United States in the 5-6 Cougar Den for the entire month of February, along with artwork celebrating people of color and their contributions to our society and culture.
- Speakers who were involved in the civil rights movement presented to 6th grade social studies classes.

South Whidbey Elementary School 2019-2020:

- Student presentations in every K-4 classroom by Kenesha Lewin and Jolene Westphal (from R.A.C.E.) that included storytelling and powerful conversations with K-4 students (at their appropriate development level) on equity and justice.

- Work with R.A.C.E. on development of lists of books and resources for purchase for our school library and classroom libraries to enhance books that included children / people of color and other children's books on equity and justice.
- Professional development for the entire K-4 staff presented by R.A.C.E. team, focused on how teachers can open up conversations in their classroom around race and equity.
- Engaged in K-4 staff discussions focused on race and equity during our staff meetings. Engaged in challenging yet critical conversations around our work in this area.

South Whidbey Middle School 2019-2020:

- We have implemented (and are modifying this next year) to include material on topics of inclusion, acceptance, and perseverance. Next year's Social/Emotional Learning (SEL) curriculum will house more robust discussions on race and our nation. We recognize the importance and also understand that our teachers need continued training in best practices for holding these types of discussions. We intend to provide that training.
- In our Social Studies and English/Language Arts (ELA) courses, we use age-appropriate material from Newsela. They provide articles based on equal rights including discussion guides to help students delve deeper into content.
- Our SEL classes have started a dialogue with students about what is taking place in the nation currently. We have started by asking the simple question; "So we are going to take a little break from our regularly scheduled program, this is not an assignment but more of a discussion piece. *The question I have for you is, as a middle school student in 2020 when you look forward to, let's say 25 years from now, what will you remember? I want to let you all know that you can express good or bad memories, and all feelings are valid. Please support each other and be respectful of each other's posts.*" The goal is to start getting students to recognize what is taking place in our nation and go further in discussion and material about equality and race. The next question will be: "*What do you know about the protests taking place around our country and the world?*" "*What is the reason for the protests?*" (This is still a work in progress as we learn) We will offer material for students to read as well.

South Whidbey High School 2019-2020:

- The S.W.H.S. staff began equity training this school year as directed by Dr. Caprice Hollins to address race relations in the 21st century. Some topics covered included the history of racism in our country, white privilege and systemic racism. This training will continue into the next school year. The goal is to promote institutional change with our school to better serve our students and community. <https://www.culturesconnecting.com/about-us>
- For our students, we have continued with equity education as part of our Social Emotional Learning in our weekly Falcon Advisories. A few examples include:

Danger of Silence Video

https://www.ted.com/talks/clint_smith_the_danger_of_silence?language=en#t-240131

Ten Things I've been Meaning to Say to You

<https://www.powells.com/post/lists/ten-things-ive-been-meaning-to-say-to-you>

- Within our classrooms, our teachers have been diligently reviewing their curriculum using the lens of equity. This includes instructional methodology and materials. For example, our American Literature course discusses Thoreau's concept of Civil Disobedience and Martin Luther King Jr.'s letter from the Birmingham jail.
- Our Humanities courses focus on local/national/global issues including equity. We cover equity, diverse voice, and civil conversation throughout articles weekly, independent choice books and podcasts. We start with rhetoric to evaluate the news organization, writer, and perspective, whose voice is amplified/who is not. Also finding articles on the same topic from a different organization or country to see the difference in the portrayal.

How diverse are the books available to our students?

Over the past three years our two librarians intentionally focused on diversity and equity in our collection development as well as tolerance and acceptance. They have written grants to specifically fund these targeted areas and have done a comprehensive collection analysis to guide the work of adding books and other resources to our collections. They have also done extensive weeding to delete any materials that do not reflect the core values and vision of the district.

Our librarians have provided staff and students with curated electronic resources and subscriptions that provide content and lessons that promote discussion and engage students and staff on issues of race and equity. Newsela, Brainpop, Pebblego, News2you, Seesaw, Flipgrid etc.. BrainPOP has multiple videos to help with teaching black history. These videos are available on our website [linked here](#).

Additionally, our librarians have made displays that promote and highlight books about Black history during February. Throughout the school year, they also had several prominent displays of books by authors of color and books that featured diverse characters. Their goal is to go "beyond heroes and holidays" so they constantly make an effort to maintain diverse representation at all times.

The work is ongoing and they will continue to be judicious and intentional in our collection development as staff are requesting more books and electronic resources dealing with race and equity that support classroom lessons and curriculum.

Some of the books students have read in the classroom include:

- High School - [Born a Crime](#) by Trevor Noah, [Part Time Indian](#) by Sherman Alexi
- Middle School - [The Marrow Thieves](#) by Cherie Dimaline

Is there a committee focusing on these issues?

Yes, South Whidbey School District has an Equity Committee made up of administration, teachers and other staff leaders to help bring equity resources to the district, to teach and provide professional development to create a more equitable community. This team meets each month. Each building will have their own equity team whose job it is to delve into curriculum and see if it needs changes through

the equity lens. In addressing our own inequities and biases, can we help to teach others to be equitable. We have an equity resource list available on our website ([linked here for your convenience](#))

District Wide - Moving Forward:

- We are listening. One of our district partners is the Readiness To Learn Foundation's group R.A.C.E. Their knowledge is a valuable asset as we do this work in our schools. Moving forward we will be inviting them for more input to help guide us on this journey. Click here to learn more about R.A.C.E.: <https://www.readinesstolearn.org/race>
- We applied for and received a grant from OSPI to support Inclusive Practices as a pilot district. A team of district teachers, administrators, and staff, have been working with OSPI to plan and implement UDL (Universally Designed for Learning) instructional practices in all classrooms. Teams have been formed with members from all levels of the organization. Professional development in 20-21 is planned to expand the scope of this project.
- We applied for and received a grant from WASA (Washington Association of School Administrators) to advance inclusive practices in the district. A team has been meeting, planning, and implementing practices designed to increase equity for all students.
- We are building lists of materials to update our libraries and classrooms. We want to provide students with texts—poetry and fiction, and nonfiction as well—written by people of color. Several teachers have taken the initiative to build these works into the classroom already. Teachers have been able to review books K-12 that are appropriate for students at each level.
- Examples of our inclusive thinking included simple and complex plans such as referring students to famous black scientists and mathematicians throughout their courses like Mae Carol Jemison of NASA. We hope to secure funding to put posters on our walls showing the diverse people who have contributed to our nation. In social studies, we will work to incorporate primary and secondary source documents by or about black people into student reading lists and encourage assignments where students will research and discuss the black experience in America, and current events. When the history of slavery is taught these topics will be included: the economics of slavery, and acts of resistance and rebellion by black people. There were heroes during that time that overcame enormous obstacles to fight for freedom and that must be included. For our school farm (a great idea suggested by a parent) we can explore scientists like George Washington Carver, who developed methods to prevent soil depletion. Elementary level teaching can include how to tell time, introducing students to Benjamin Banneker, who created the first American clock. In high school English classes we have tripled our class and department library of novels, short stories, poetry selections by women, African American, Native American and multicultural authors and poets. We continue to build a library of articles, poetry and resources for addressing equity through focus on point of view/perspective and historical components such: Race riots, Jim Crow and Green Book awareness. We have tripled our library of Literature Circles sets to address differently abled individuals from autism, sight impairment, bi-polar, etc. Work with current events with medis like: [Trevor Noah on George Floyd](#)

- We will discuss micro-aggression and bias with our students and give them the tools to speak up and then have them practice because without practice it is hard to implement those tools when needed.
- This list is by no means exhaustive. There will be more added continually as we seek to improve.

One parent stated: “One task of teachers in the classroom is to acknowledge and honor students’ humanity—and that means acknowledging and honoring black humanity. That starts with acknowledging the good, the bad, and the ugly of our history as a nation.”

This work is difficult, worthy and imperative. We will stumble as we learn and grow. Through our mistakes, we will become better at advocating for change with our goal of ending racism and improving equity. We hope our community will support us as we move through this important work.

Tomorrow, Friday, June 12, members of our equity team and others will take personal time to be at Windjammer Park in Oak Harbor at 1 PM for “The Silent March”. There are also events in our neighboring communities, and Seattle. Our efforts to end racism in our schools for all of our students is a core issue and consistent with our mission and vision.

Respectfully,

Dr. Jo Moccia
 Mr. Dan Poolman
 Mr. John Patton
 Mr. Paul Lagerstadt
 Mr. James Swanson
 Dr. Jeff Fankhauser
 Mrs. Susie Richards

