

The Public Schools of Brookline
School Committee Meeting of Thursday, November 30, 2017
Superintendent Report
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Superintendent of Schools

Update on Racist Videos and Today's Student Walkout at Brookline High School

I will give you a full update on what has transpired regarding the racist videos created by a small number of BHS students, but first I want to share a few personal thoughts.

As I said in my letter to families and staff, I am deeply disturbed by the two videos. I am terribly disappointed that students in our schools continue to feel that this type of behavior is acceptable in any way. I believe that everyone in our community needs to know that these actions degrade, dehumanize, and diminish our community. More importantly, they make many students feel unsafe and unsure of their standing in the BHS community. I want to be clear - these types of videos and behavior are unacceptable and have no place in our community.

As an update to the Committee on what happened, on Wednesday November 22, high school administrators became aware of an offensive and racist video that included one current Brookline High School student and two former students that was directed at a single BHS student. At that time Anthony Meyer and other administrators began a thorough investigation of the video resulting in consequences for the BHS student and support for the targeted student. Between the time they found out about the video and this Tuesday they focused exclusively on addressing the incident as a serious offense involving two current BHS students. Yesterday, other students posted the video online and it spread very quickly among the student body and into the broader community. Later in the day, another offensive and racist video, unrelated to the first one, was posted. At this point my office was contacted and, with support from me, Mr. Meyer and his high school administrative team acted quickly to reach out to students, families and PSB staff to let them know of these videos, our reaction to them and how they have no place in our high school or any of our schools. We released the statement you have already seen last night to families, staff, and media outlets who had reached out to us.

Today, the high school team focused on listening to and supporting students and helping them process the videos and their messages.

The high school team organized meetings of affinity groups so students could have safe spaces to talk amongst themselves and with teachers and administrators. These gatherings allowed students to process their thoughts and feelings, share them out loud, tell administrators and teachers about their experiences, and ask questions.

There were affinity group meetings during E and F block and lunches for students of color and students who participate in the African American and Latino Scholars Program, METCO, and Steps to Success. There was also an affinity group meeting for white students.

In classes, curriculum coordinators directed teachers to provide time for students to discuss the videos as well.

Several hundred students also participated in two student walkouts - one in the morning and one in the afternoon. During these walkouts, students spoke, read poetry and called for action. In the morning, students asked Headmaster Meyer to speak to them.

I was there during the morning walkout and had a chance to listen to and speak with many students. Students shared with me their hurt and their anger. They also shared their impatience with progress and their hope that BHS and the entire community of Brookline could get better.

In speaking with the high school team at the end of the day, they conveyed that these opportunities were powerful for students. Students were able to be honest and open and share what is in their hearts. They felt heard, and by the end of the day, the students were feeling supported and had more confidence that the high school team cares for and is concerned about their well-being.

As I reported to you earlier this month, there has been a great deal of work over the past year and a half at BHS to address and tackle issues of racism, inequity, bias, homophobia, anti-Semitism, Islamophobia, and the many other forms of discrimination long present in our society. Yet these incidents are another reminder to us of the moral imperative to both accelerate and deepen the work we do to ensure that students and adults recognize and value the individual integrity and dignity of ALL members of our community.

PSB Educators and Staff share in Professional Development Day

More than 1,200 PSB educators and staff gathered in the Brookline High School auditorium on Friday, November 10 to participate in the district's annual Professional Development Day. Spearheaded by Gabe McCormick, Director of Professional Development, the day brought educators from throughout the district together to engage in dialogue surrounding implicit bias and racial equity.

The morning keynote from Jamie Almanzan of the Equity Collaborative addressed identity, the practice of listening, and what gets in the way of creating equitable outcomes for students. Almanzan connected with the audience through personal storytelling and by posing thought-provoking questions that laid the groundwork for breakout sessions to follow.

In addressing the opportunity gap versus the achievement gap, Almanzan spoke to how much easier it is to focus on students than it is to focus on ourselves as educators. "What gets in the way? How do well-intentioned people get in the way of creating equitable outcomes? It is not a question of whether or not your classroom is culturally responsive, but who it responds to." Almanzan encouraged participants to not just consider *what* we are doing, but rather the *why* of what we are doing.

Following Almanzan's keynote address, educators participated in small group breakout sessions to reflect on themes and ideas. Using a facilitated activity, participants focused on aspects of listening that challenged the norms of traditional conversation. They also had an opportunity to share thoughts with their breakout group and get to know colleagues from across the district.

The afternoon keynote address from Professor Philip Lee, an associate professor of law at the UDC David A. Clarke School of Law in Washington, D.C., focused on the historical road to educational inequity, providing a crash-course in educational law. Opening his keynote with the concept that, "law is social construction that has real world effects," Lee brought the audience through various Supreme Court cases that have challenged equity.

The activities of Professional Development Day could not be more timely. The district's work around issues of educational equity continues to be of the utmost importance and requires us to be resolute in our unwavering persistence.

School Visits

Since the last School Committee meeting I have been able to visit several schools, including:

- Baker School on November 15
- Lincoln School on November 15
- Lawrence School on November 17
- Brookline High School on November 20
- Heath School on November 30

Brookline-Newton Gridiron Thanksgiving Lunch

I had the pleasure of attending the annual Brookline-Newton Gridiron Thanksgiving Lunch on Tuesday, November 21. Anthony Meyer and Ben Lummis joined me. Sponsored by the Brookline and Newton Rotary Clubs, and organized by Brookline Rotary President and Brookline Adult and Community Educator Director Claudia Dell'Anno, the lunch is always a wonderful way to start the Thanksgiving holiday. Coaches and captains of the Brookline football and cheerleading teams attended and shared inspiring words with the crowd.

Lincoln School Faculty Meeting on November 28

As part of my regular participation in faculty meetings at every school, I joined the Lincoln School faculty at their meeting this week. Lincoln educators had just finished reading "Teaching with Poverty in Mind" by Eric Jensen, and the goal of the meeting was for educators to identify one specific strategy from the book that could be implemented with their students or in their classroom.

In small group discussions, facilitated by members of the Lincoln Child Study Teams, educators discussed the strategies outlined in the book, talked through those they found most promising and applicable to their classrooms, and discussed ways that the strategy could be effective. We were fortunate that Jamie Almanzan and Graig Meyer of The Equity Collaborative who, following the Professional Development Day are continuing their work with district leaders on issues of educational equity, were able to participate in the Lincoln faculty meeting to help guide educators through this important process.

METCO Director's Association 33rd Annual Educators Conference

Tomorrow is the annual METCO Director's Association Educators Conference. The theme of this year's conference is *Beyond Proficiency: Educating Students of Color with Excellence*. The keynote speaker is Dr. David Johns, former Executive Director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African Americans in the Obama Administration. Once again, a full complement of Brookline staff will be participating including many principals, and the PSB Steps to Success coordinator and advisors.