

The Public Schools of Brookline
School Committee Meeting of Thursday, December 7, 2017
Superintendent Report
Andrew J. Bott
Superintendent of Schools

Our Commitment: Responding to Recent BHS Events

Since our meeting last Thursday we have been focused on the district's response to the videos in which current and former Brookline students used racist language. More than just the written responses - the letters, the emails, the announcements - we have been thinking deeply about the concrete steps we can take as a school district to structurally address these complicated issues and concerns.

My most recent correspondence to families and staff is attached. It outlines our commitment to addressing these issues in a comprehensive manner. We have much work to do, we are confident of our capacity for this work, and we look forward to the support of students, families, staff, allies and town leaders as we commit to these efforts in the years ahead.

These videos caused harm to our school community, most especially to our African American students at Brookline High School. An important part of the reconciliation process started today with a restorative practice circle. Attached to this report is a document shared by today's facilitators which broadly describes the Restorative Circle. Today's circle was an important first step.

Asking for Courage Day at Brookline High School

The annual BHS Asking for Courage Day happened on Tuesday December 5. The timing was fortuitous. Organized by the Courageous Conversations group at the high school, Asking for Courage Day is one of several Days of Awareness and Action held at BHS every year. Through a series of assemblies, classroom breakout sessions, performances and discussion groups scheduled over the course of the day, students and faculty explore issues of race, identity, racism and privilege. The goals of the day are to build community, educate students and staff around issues of racism, awaken our minds, and encourage members of our community to take action or continue working toward racial justice.

The Asking for Courage Day is the culmination of months of planning work by dozens of BHS staff to create a provocative and engaging day, with over 40 students sharing their personal stories and experiences. The day was a tremendous success.

I was also able to attend the Race Reels Film Series movie on Tuesday evening. Coordinated with the Asking for Courage Day program, the featured movie was *Far From Home*, a documentary following the daily life of former Weston METCO student, Kandice Summers. Ms. Summers joined us for this event and helped to lead a dynamic and timely discussion following the documentary.

Anti-Defamation League (ADL) Peer Training for Middle School Students

The first of four ADL Peer Leader training sessions for 7th and 8th students from Heath, Lawrence, Lincoln and Pierce Schools was held on Wednesday, December 6 at Wheelock College. Sixty students participated, led by trainers from ADL and the teacher leaders from each school: Kellee Terkla at

Heath, Zoe Kern at Lawrence, Corey Clifford at Lincoln, and Kate Sullivan at Pierce. The training is off to an incredibly successful start.

I visited the training session, joined by Lincoln principal Brian Denitzio and Pierce principal Lesley Ryan Miller, to talk with the students and observe some of their work. They are excited about completing their training and being leaders and upstanders in their respective schools.

Scholars Sagamore Pilot Project at Driscoll School

Last year, a group of BHS students made a proposal aimed at increasing the interest of underrepresented groups in journalism and related fields. The proposal called for them to develop curriculum units and work with 7th and 8th grade students to teach them how to write newspaper articles and develop a student newspaper.

This year, after meeting with me, a group of Sagamore student staff and the newspaper's teacher advisor moved ahead with a pilot program at Driscoll School: Scholars Sagamore.

Dr. Talukdar is happy to report that the Scholars Sagamore Project at Driscoll is off to a very strong start! So far, 11 students have participated in the meetings held at 7:30 on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday morning. The lessons prepared by the BHS Sagamore students were outstanding and engaging, led with professionalism and maturity. We want to thank the Driscoll faculty advisors, Courtney Hart and Courtney Pelletier, Sagamore Advisor and BHS teacher Lindsay Wise, and METCO Director Dr. Keith Lezama for their work shepherding this project along.

The students will also be participating in field trips to the local NECN and CBS television studios to be introduced to people of color who work in the journalism industry.

The Scholars Sagamore students have developed a fantastic website for this work that I encourage you to visit: <https://sagamorepassion.wixsite.com/scholarssag>

School Visits

Since our meeting last week, I had the opportunity to visit two schools:

- Lawrence School Monday, December 4
- Pierce School Wednesday, December 6



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Andrew J. Bott
Superintendent

December 6, 2017

Dear Families,

The recent videos in which current and former Brookline students use racist language cause unquestionable harm to our school community and to the individuals that make up our community. This kind of language and behavior is unacceptable and has no place in our schools.

The content and nature of these videos, along with the recent graffiti at the school, remind us of the urgency required to maintain focus on our district's core values of respect for human differences, educational equity and high achievement for all. During the past two school years, each of our schools has been doing work to understand structural racism and bias and how it impacts students in our schools. I am proud of the work that our educators and administrators have done in this area. I have attached an overview of our work to date that I reported publicly to the School Committee on November 9th. I urge you to read this report because it shows our schools' ongoing commitment to addressing one of the most intractable issues in our society.

And, sadly, our efforts have not yet been enough. Senseless and thoughtless interactions still take place between students and between adults and students. We need to do better in creating school communities where every student and every adult exhibits and experiences kindness, respect, and compassion.

My bottom line is that our schools need to work for all students. All students must see themselves as full members of our school community. And all must mean all.

We need to be open and honest about where our schools are today. We send dozens of students to the country's most prestigious private universities every year and also have one or two dozen dropouts every year. Our only district literacy assessment shows discrepancies in all elementary grades in reading between African American, white, Asian, and Latino students. We recommend 70% of white students to honors and advanced courses at BHS and only 30% of African American and Latino students. We refer African American, Latino, and low income students for special education services at a higher rate than we recommend Asian or white students. We have a 10 year record of gaps in academic performance between White, Asian, African-American, and Latino students. Instead of blaming students for a lack of achievement, we must identify school and district level barriers to student achievement and ensure all have equitable opportunities to learn and to achieve equitable outcomes.

So what will it take to ensure that our schools work for all students? We must continue and we must deepen our anti-racism and anti-bias work. Our schools, along with the offices of Teaching and Learning, Student Services, and Finance and Administration will place antiracism at the center of their thinking, work products, and decision making. This work will be included in all goals related to academic, social, and emotional learning. This priority is non-negotiable.

Students' physical, social, and emotional safety must be a top priority. I am working with our Office of Student Services to mobilize our guidance staff to prioritize their time in order to dedicate specific attention to supporting students of color through their experiences in our schools. Counselors will deepen their understanding of how racism impacts children of all ages and of ways to create safe spaces. Our students need to be explicitly aware of the supports available to them and every adult needs to be equipped to support the unique needs of young people of color living in a racist society.

We will continue the support of our building principals as they have an overarching responsibility to create an affirming school environment. This work is already in progress with Graig Meyer and Jamie Almanzán from The Equity Collaborative who led our November 10th Professional Development Day. They are meeting monthly

with principals to provide coaching and guidance, fully equipping our school leaders to dive deeply into difficult situations and handle them with courage, compassion and seriousness.

We will expand our current professional learning opportunities with explicit attention to establishing stronger relationships across racial, ethnic, and cultural lines. It is critically important that our educators establish trusting relationships with all students so that potential issues can be addressed early. Beyond relationships we will create opportunities for our educators to deepen their understanding of structural racism and how their own biases impact the experiences of our students in our classrooms and schools. These opportunities will be facilitated by current Brookline educators along with external experts in the area. We will also create a task force made up of parents, students, and staff that will help to support district and school efforts if and when incidents like these occur again.

While I am optimistic that these interventions will improve the student experience at all of our schools I know that these are only first steps. I recognize that we are a work in progress and that we won't solve this problem by ourselves. There is room for everyone in this work. I urge students, families, allies, staff, and town leadership to partner thoughtfully so that we can all acquire the tools to interrupt and confront racism and inequity in Brookline.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A. Bott', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Andrew J. Bott
Superintendent

Why Circle?

We use Restorative Circles after a harm has been done to a community to allow those most affected to share, without interruption, the impact that the harm has had on them. Those harmed reflect on what they need now from the harmer and the community in order to best repair the damage that was done and to move forward.

The circle requires the “harmer” to sit with those s/he has harmed and listen to the true impact of his/her actions. The person who has done the harm is called upon to share what his/her thinking and feeling was when s/he did this harm, and how his/her thinking and feeling has changed since the incident.

Then, together, all members of the circle craft an action plan to further heal the harm and hopefully prevent it from happening in the future.

A Restorative Circle is a guided conversation between those affected by a harm which invites and gives sacred space for everyone’s authentic participation in the conversation and the solution. This transformational process is in contrast to a mediation or just an apology which can be more scripted and transactional.

What is Circle?

Circle comes from indigenous peoples around the world as a way for members of a community to connect, listen to one another and build empathy with each other. It is used as when a harm has been done to allow members of a community to work through a crisis and try to repair the harm.

In “circle”, participants predictably sit in a circle, preferably with no furniture in the middle. A centerpiece is placed in the middle as a central focus for the participants. All participants commit to being present for the entirety of the circle.

An opening ceremony marks the beginning of the circle and the “Keeper of the Circle” invites the participants to spell out the values and guidelines that they can agree to. In any discussion, an object, called a talking piece, is passed around from person to person. Only the person who is holding the talking piece may speak. People in the circle can choose to “pass” when the talking piece is handed to them. The Circle Keeper makes sure that the group adheres to their guidelines so the circle is safe. The Keeper also leads the group in “rounds” of questions to surface whatever issue needs to be discussed and to aid members to co-create a plan to repair the harm done. A closing ceremony signals the end of the circle. All along, the Keeper of the Circle participates in the circle, like everyone else, and does not have any more power or authority than anyone else in the circle.