



SANTA MONICA - MALIBU UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

July 23, 2020

## **Superintendent's Message: Commitment to Anti-Racism**

Dear Parents, Guardians and Staff,

While the recent social unrest has occurred in response to police violence against African-Americans/Black people, the impacts of racism -- conscious and unconscious, systemic and incidental -- raise concerns for schools throughout the nation. I know that many of you are grappling with concerns over this issue. As superintendent, I want to share my thoughts with you and reaffirm SMMUSD's commitment to thoughtfully, urgently and persistently address the impacts of racism and discrimination against African-Americans/Black people. These commitments extend to all who have experienced discrimination due to race, ethnicity, religion, gender or sexual identity. SMMUSD's diversity is a great strength. We can build on that strength by recognizing our challenges.

We bear a great responsibility as educators for shaping society, as we have the unique privilege of educating our youth as they are forming their values and worldview. We have a responsibility to ensure equity and opportunity for all students, while at the same time working to create a better and more just world for our students to inherit. With renewed attention on systemic and institutionalized racism in our country, we want to let you know that we stand with our communities in supporting anti-racism policies and reforms that will provide equity, diversity, and inclusion. We are leading by example with compassion, courage and conviction, as we all witness and participate in history in real-time. We embrace the opportunity to learn, grow, and act together in ways that shape our future toward justice for everyone.

We are cognizant that in order to take on this important role of shaping our society in an effective way, we will have to understand the depth and insidious nature of racism and how it is reflected in our society. Former basketball great Kareem Abdul Jabbar recently stated, "Racism is like breathing in dust particles in a dark room. Even if you are choking on it, you wouldn't know what it is until you shed light on it. And, then you will see that it is everywhere."

We are also aware that to truly address racism, we must expose it through authentic education about issues and circumstances that have plagued the disenfranchised. The work of educators will require us to delve into the complex history of our nation as never before. We need to equip students with the ability and the information to understand the United States' underlying culture of white supremacy and slavery, and its relationship as an institution to the economic, political, and global power the United States has achieved. The current reality of race relations and its implications for the future can only be understood through an honest reckoning with our history.

The work will require authentic analysis of the legal, political, and psychological barriers that have plagued African American/Black people and other marginalized groups then and now and why this relationship is ultimately harmful to all citizens including those who have historically benefited from the system. We understand that while learning discrete academic skills such as literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking, our students can unpack and understand the hidden inequities in our democratic systems such as healthcare, education, economic, legal, and social structures.



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We have and continue to work toward establishing an educational environment that will allow for the opportunity to shape the education of our students so that they can carry on the fight against racism and injustice in all forms in a truthful, effective, and authentic way well after they leave the school district and become the leaders of our world.

Here are some specific examples of what we are doing to take on the challenge of educating our youth in this endeavor:

- District staff has created an [anti-racism resources page](#) on our website, where parents and community members can find resources on talking about race with children, teaching tolerance, and restorative practices. We will continue to add resources as we find materials of interest for our families and staff. In addition, district staff developed a webpage with resources to support the development and implementation of an anti-racism curriculum for our educators.
- For the second year, the school board passed a Juneteenth [resolution](#) at our June 18, 2020, special board meeting to recognize and celebrate this important day of independence.
- The school board unanimously adopted a resolution at its July 16, 2020, regular school board meeting recognizing the first week of February as Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action. The resolution is available [here](#).
- Our school board supported the implementation of a family engagement framework in 2018. The framework establishes an intentional process that targets the involvement of parents as partners in recognizing and addressing systemic barriers to opportunity for all students. The framework is informed by research on Culturally Responsive Teaching (CRT). The five key culturally responsive practices are foundational to the SMMUSD Family Engagement Framework. They are as follows:
  1. Building relationships and being present
  2. Recognizing, honoring and promoting existing knowledge
  3. Identifying and using what works for our families
  4. Promoting a culture of awareness, learning and sharing
  5. Fostering community by building social capital
  - The specific focus of the framework addresses:
    - Parents learning about child development and home conditions that support learning development, and teachers and administrators gaining a better understanding and insight into home environments to better support families
    - Establishing effective school to home and home to school communications
    - Focus on recruiting, training, and schedules to involve parents as volunteers and audiences for schools and other locations that support students and school programs
    - Focus on family involvement in school decision making, governance and advocacy through committees and parent organizations
    - Coordination of school, family, and student needs for resources and services with business, agencies, and other organizations that may address various needs
    - Our parent engagement framework is [online](#).



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- Our school board contracted with Dr. Pedro Noguera during the 2015-16 school year and conducted an equity audit of the district. This was hard to hear, but a necessary and humbling review of issues of inequity in SMMUSD. We continue to look to this document as a touchpoint in our work. You can find the report and information about this audit [online](#).
- Our school board voted to approve the American Cultures / Ethnic Studies (ACES) graduation requirement starting with the 2024 graduating class. To support the district staff's actions to meet the ACES graduation requirement and the work towards educating all students to acquire the skills, knowledge, and wisdom to be socially just, the school board adopted the integration of social justice standards starting the 2018-19 school year as a part of the district curriculum, grades PK-12 and supported the [Social Justice Framework and Action plan](#) that outlined a multi-faceted approach to the work. The standards are available [online](#).
  - In the last three years, our district staff has invested heavily in the professional development of staff and the development of curriculum to support the integration of social justice standards in PK-12 curriculum and the development of American Cultures and Ethnic Studies courses in high school. Cohorts of teachers from Santa Monica and Malibu continue their work to integrate social justice standards and culturally relevant teaching practices into their curriculum. Examples of their work can be found on the district's [Social Justice Standards page](#) for educators.
  - Last year, the district's 11<sup>th</sup> grade United States history teachers completed a revision of the course, recently approved by the school board as meeting the new graduation requirement. These revisions included: the integration of all 20 social justice standards, the incorporation of five different perspectives and a capstone project. The curriculum guide can be found on the district's [History Curriculum](#) page.
- The district has invested in the professional development and strategic implementation of restorative justice practices. This restorative justice process and philosophy is grounded in individuals finding restitution and reconciliation when harm and/or perceived harm is caused between two or more individuals. It is a powerful and research-based approach for individuals to develop empathy. A restorative practice booklet is [online](#).
- Several years ago, the district embarked on a practice to encourage underrepresented students to aspire toward taking honors and Advanced Placement (AP) courses. In high school, administrators and counselors review student data and meet with students who are good candidates for success in AP classes and have not registered for these offerings. These students have the opportunity to participate in a summer AP boot camp to build relationships with their teacher and support their success in course completion and passing the test. SMMUSD pays for all AP exams, eliminating the financial burden for all students who aspire to take AP exams.
- For our classified, certificated and management units, we strive to create workplaces that reflect the communities we serve and where everyone feels empowered to bring their full, authentic selves to work. We continue to approach recruitment through with this goal in mind.



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- Our management team, many teachers, and classified staff, have attended anti-bias training, organized by the Santa Monica-Malibu Classroom Teachers Association. This is a multi-day training to better understand systemic racism and other “isms” in America and how one can either willingly or unwillingly support such systems.
- The district will build on the foundational work it has laid and the social justice framework by deliberately working on being anti-racist in its approaches and practices as an organization. This work will be grounded in three pillars that will give shape to personal and professional growth opportunities:
  - Intra-personal/self-awareness (self-awareness and bias work)
  - Climate, culture and connection (restorative justice)
  - Anti-racist pedagogy and resources (social justice standards and instructional design across all content areas)
- Our school board unanimously supported and directed staff to develop and implement a plan for encouraging project-based learning (PBL) throughout the district along with an incubator high school pathway dedicated to personalized project-based learning. Project-based learning:
  - Increases self and others’ expectations for more learning and achievement by providing a process
  - Increases student engagement in the learning through personalization and ownership
  - Connects students to the “real world,” which is often more reflective of their own reality and cultural identity, which can be particularly important for students from other cultures
  - Resonates with spiritual values that link to vast numbers of the population, whether secular or religious
  - Builds skills, knowledge, self-confidence, and self-efficacy through inquiry
  - Builds new relationships with and between the learner, their family, their communities, and their teacher
  - Deepens human desire to connect with others to do good

We recognize there is still much work to be done to fully implement all that has been described above and effectively become the district we aspire to be. We are moving in the right direction. We have a planned school board retreat for August 25, 2020 with social justice on the agenda. The discussion will include the work referenced in this letter and tangible next steps to enhance this education and further address these issues. We believe it is through education that our citizens and youth will acquire the knowledge, attitudes, and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic democratic society and to interact, negotiate and communicate with people from diverse groups to create a civic and moral community that works for the common good.

The efforts described above are building blocks needed for the district to do its part to engage in long-term and necessary change regarding discrimination and racism that has plagued our country since its inception.

We are committed to these ongoing initiatives.

Sincerely,

Dr. Ben Drati, Superintendent