

All Together Now / Speaking Out Against Racism and Hate
Superintendent Dr. Monifa B. McKnight / April 27, 2023

Thank you, Ms. Pyles.

Good afternoon everyone.

Inscribed atop Montgomery County Public Schools' official documents, letters, and parchment, our community encounters a reminder of our system's core values: excellence, equity, respect, learning and relationships.

All of us in this room and across our world-class school system reach for those values every day...We move towards them...But we rarely, if ever, fully achieve them. What we seek to do is close the gap...between who we profess to be – who we want to be – and who we really are.

In 2020, as America found itself amid a national racial reckoning in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, it was not enough for Montgomery County Public Schools to merely take a stance against racism and bigotry and hate. Or to just condemn these forces. Or to simply state our raw shock... and disbelief...and horror. With our students and staff grieving...taking to our streets in agony...and calling on US to do better...it would fall flat to stand idly and OBSERVE our nation's problems with race and their manifestations in our own community.

Floating in that sea of anguish, was an opportunity RIGHT HERE, in Montgomery County Public Schools ... an opportunity to examine HOW CLOSE we truly are to who we hope to be.

That's why we commissioned the antiracist audit – because beneath every stone we turned over...on every indicator of student opportunity...we found undeniable racial disparities that have existed for decades....Disparities that carry with them the weight of shortchanged student potential and unrealized student dreams.

At the heart of WHY we launched the antiracist audit was a commitment to uncover how our school system's policies, practices, and structures must CHANGE...how WE must change...so that ALL 162,601 of our students are

wrapped in BELONGING from the very moment they walk through our schools' doors.

BELONGING requires that our schools and classrooms and offices are ALL places where our values of excellence AND equity AND respect AND learning AND relationships ALL come alive. Then and now, the vast majority of our students and staff embody these tenets every day.

Over the last few months, we've been reminded of why our school system launched the audit...Of why we committed ourselves to BELONGING.

Because the recent actions of a few have shaken us. We've woken up to headlines about heartbreaking incidents in our schools and community: students SPEWING bigoted language degrading the color of their peers' skin, ethnic heritage, gender identity or faith; DRAWING symbols of hate that leave their peers shocked, startled, and hurting. And POSTING profane, homophobic...and outright mean, disrespectful, and ignorant content on social media.

Let me be clear: these unacceptable actions have NO place in MCPS. They MUST be called out and not allowed.

We're called together today because the unfortunate reality is that these sorts of actions have become more and more common. This year alone...our schools are home to over one incident a day on average – a rate that triples what we have seen in past years, even before COVID-19.

My friends, in 2023, the reality is that race matters. Religion matters. Disability matters. Gender identity and sexual orientation matter. They matter at a time when forces of hate and bias continue to test us, tear us apart, and pull at the very fabric of our communities.

At any particular moment, headlines and newscasts detailing the killing of a Black man, the assault of an Asian-American, the crude mocking of an individual with a disability, or the defamation of property with messages promoting the exclusion of Jews...can bring a particular form of hate to the FOREFRONT of our national discourse. Because events bring with them a real emotional salience.

Yet concentrating at any given point on a particular form of hate does not eliminate the unjust presence of its other forms. Let me say that one more time... concentrating at any given point on a particular form of hate DOES NOT eliminate the unjust presence of its other forms.

In our own community, some have suggested that our recent focus on combating antisemitism comes at the cost of attention to anti-Black racism, anti-LGBTQ discrimination, anti-Asian American Pacific Islander hate, anti-disability hate, and the other slew of maladies that we have yet to put to rest in our schools and communities and offices. I come before you to assure you that is NOT the case.

How did we get here? For starters, we must acknowledge that the erosion of positive and civil discourse has had real consequences. Our words matter. At their best, what we say and how we say it breathes signs of welcome and affirmation. At their worst, our words can demean, degrade, and divide. Now...schools alone cannot repair the permission our culture grants words to be weaponized for harm. But we also can't throw our hands up.

Walking hand-in-hand with our families, parents, community and partner groups, we CAN STAND UP AND ACT.

STARTING AT THE VERY TOP ... with our district leaders, school leaders, and me.

STAND UP AND ACT in our condemnation of these attitudes and actions.

STAND UP AND ACT in rejection of complacency ... and in refusal to turn our backs to injustice, in any form.

STAND UP AND ACT ... with the help of strong systems that alert us when our values have been compromised.

We can STAND UP AND ACT by doing what we do best: EDUCATING. We can and must EDUCATE one another about the value of our diversity, the importance of inclusivity, and what it takes to bring to our students the sense of belonging that I've PERSONALLY searched for and fought for MY whole life.

Allow me to speak to you for a moment not as an educator, nor as your superintendent, but as Monifa McKnight. I am a daughter of the South, hailing from Orangeburg, South Carolina.

In the Orangeburg I grew up in, there was Black... and there was white. There was the Black side of town and the white side of town. There was the Black church and the White church. And on any given Sunday morning, you could find most of the town in one or the other...but not together.

Growing up in Orangeburg, there was plenty of room for racial ignorance and difference to cloud my potential. But as with so many sons and daughters of the African American community, I grew up with a strong, fierce mother – who was herself one of 11 children. Coming from very little, she went on to cook on the line for students at South Carolina State University...the small, local HBCU that I would later attend.

In Orangeburg, it was my family and my faith that taught me that hard work was just how you get through the day. But pair hard work with a servant's heart, and lofty ambitions were truly possible.

22 years ago, I took MY lofty ambitions right here, to Montgomery County, to teach AT what is now Parkland Magnet Middle School for Aerospace Technology. It is in this region that I married a young man from Harlem, New York and became the mother of a now 11-year-old son...who reminds me every day that I owe all children the same promise I make to him... to help them live up to their boundless potential.

Living up to our potential ... that is the human project. And, as educators, that is the project of our schools and our school system...That's OUR project.

For MCPS, our project began 163 years ago, in a school system that – like many others in the United States – was exclusively built for white students. In 1872, the state established a separate public school system for Black students, with our first high school for Black students opening in 1927, a full 35 years after the first high school for White students opened.

It wasn't until 1961, a full six years after Brown versus the Board of Education, that our school system would declare integration complete. And as many would argue... complete in name only.

As the school system was desegregating, it was also growing. Between 1950 and 1972, enrollment more than quadrupled from 27,000 students to 127,000 students.

But, as the school system was growing larger... it was not necessarily growing more diverse. When our enrollment peaked in the 1970s, MCPS was still 91% white.

That began to change in the 1980s. It was then that immigration began to account for a significant amount of the County's growth, and the school system also began to become more diverse, as we welcomed more Hispanic and Asian families, while also increasing the share of the African-American population.

We became more diverse not only in color, but also in the countries our residents came from, the churches and synagogues and mosques they attended, whom they loved, and the size of our residents' wallets. Here, in one of the richest countries in the world, in one of the richest states in the country, in one of the richest counties in the state—poverty started to climb.

Montgomery County's embrace of families from across the country and the globe in recent decades has made us one of the most beautifully diverse school systems in the United States.

As we have grown in difference, we have so often SAID the right thing—proclaiming our affinity for diversity; codifying policies and regulations of non-discrimination, equity, and cultural proficiency; condemning acts of hate and bias; staging town halls that bring our communities together to bask in our sense of shared PRIDE for our LGBTQ+ community.

And in many, many ways we have DONE the right thing. As a district, we were early adopters and champions of equity. We've given more resources to our students with more need. Our students have led in affinity groups—as members of the Minority Scholars program, Black student unions, and leadership

organizations like MoCo Pride for our LGBTQ+ students and EmPOW-HER for emerging female leaders.

And while all of us – as students, staff members, and community members – have so often done the right thing, we are currently reminded of how far we have to go.

Because we have NOT always done the right thing by how we have treated one another on the basis of religion, race, disability, sexual orientation, or gender identity.

Incidents of antisemitic actions against our Jewish students have arisen almost daily in our schools. Students have arrived at school to find Nazi symbols scribbled on their desks; graffiti declaring that Jews are not welcome on their school's marquee; and imitations of the Nazi regime spread across their social media platforms.

These incidents mirror what we are seeing across the state and nation: According to the Anti Defamation League, the nation saw a 36% rise in antisemitic incidents, including a 98% increase in Maryland – and a 261% spike right here in Montgomery County.

In light of the very real trends we are experiencing, I have gone out to the Jewish community to listen... *really* listen. I've heard our Jewish students and families open up about the real fear that has overwhelmed them in the face of hate and feelings of dread. Some students have had their kippahs (kee-pahs) taken off their heads. Other Jewish students shared stories of their peers' taking stereotypes of Jewish people so far as to throw pennies at them.

Even the casual mimicking of the same images, words, and symbols that were weaponized for the genocide of Jewish people less than a century ago demonstrates a gross ignorance of history, and for many of our Jewish students issues painful reminders of personal and family connections to that horrific atrocity.

Is it any wonder, then, that some of our Jewish students and staff are genuinely afraid to come to class or go to work?

And they are not alone. We can't ignore that our staff and students who practice Islam harbour similar worries. Many are concerned that they will be targeted when they put on their hijab or head covering. And they fear that their participation in academic and extracurricular activities will be compromised as they fast during the month of Ramadan.

Just as our Jewish community has called on us to incorporate more Holocaust studies into our curriculum, our friends in the Islamic community, the Buddhist community, the Hindu community, and across denominations of the Christian community rely on our schools to provide secular lessons about the virtues, teachings, and ethics of their creed.

And indeed, we ARE responsible for teaching students about the history of various faith traditions. In part, so that students can understand the deep pain that disrespect and teasing can inflict. And also so that they understand why disrespect and teasing contradict the mutual respect and tolerance that so many of those faiths teach.

We are painfully aware that prejudice continues to be directed at students in our lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer communities.

In 2016, when Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School decided to shift away from a homecoming king and queen and towards a homecoming "court" that removed gender and sexual orientation from the selection criteria, it was such a big deal that People Magazine showcased it – as part of their barometer of popular culture. Today, that is the norm. And I am proud that Montgomery County helped rewrite that norm.

While that may not be the way that MY homecoming was set up – or how my mother's was – I have to ask, why shouldn't it be more inclusive?

For some, fear of this sort of difference has created a hostility towards our students in the LGBTQ+ community – making them feel unwelcome or as if they cannot bring their authentic selves into their schools and classrooms.... As if they have to "come out" and announce their gender or sexual preference because the

world silently nags at anyone who differs from a single type of gender expression or love.

Recently, some in the media have gone so far as to ask, "Why does MCPS include texts by LGBTQ+ authors and with LGBTQ+ characters in our curriculum?" Yet the question should be, "Why are we just now including these texts in our curriculum? Why has it taken so long?"

The inclusion of texts from a wide variety of authors and with a wide variety of characters is an essential element of ANY world-class library, classroom, or curriculum. Not only for creating a sense of belonging for LGBTQ+ students but also for promoting understanding and acceptance among all students.

As one student wrote to me, "if a young me had been able to read any book, with LGBTQ+ characters, I would have accepted who I am sooner and felt less ashamed, less confused." Indeed, let us be a school system in which students are exposed to materials that allow them to feel less shame and less doubt in favor of more pride and more confidence in who they are and what they can achieve.

Our students deserve to be filled with that pride and confidence—REGARDLESS of gender and sexuality, REGARDLESS of religion...and, REGARDLESS of RACE.

We have inherited a system that was designed for White students, who lived in white neighborhoods and were taught by white teachers ... only later to be opened for all other students. History matters in how we treat students for whom the system was not originally built.

Just as we have inherited those systems, WE will now pass down the system and culture and values that our children and grandchildren will inherit. Their future lies in OUR hands. And so we must ask: What will OUR legacy be?

In crafting that legacy, our affirmation of Black, Hispanic, Asian and multiracial students' full humanity must be overcome in the face of serious social inequities. Our schools' role in doing so demands that our adults show our students respect and positive regard so that our students, in turn, may cultivate positive SELF -

respect and POSITIVE SELF - regard. Both of these are undermined when institutionalized forces give rise to interpersonal behavior directed towards students as hatred and bias.

Epithets (eh-pah-thets) and slurs are obvious examples of the wrongful treatment of students of diverse backgrounds in our schools. For too long, African American students have been confronted with the “n-word” while walking innocently to class. For too long, Asian American Pacific Islander students have dealt with simmering racism that boiled over during the pandemic. For too long, Hispanic students have had to answer unfair questions about places they come from or do not come from. For too long, multiracial students have been told that by not fitting squarely in one category or the other, they lack a place in our schools. And for too long, our students of color have questioned whether our valued police partners were a presence not only to keep them safe ... but also to keep them “in check.”

Let me repeat what I said earlier: these unacceptable actions have NO place in MCPS. They must be called out and not allowed.

Because only then can we begin to disrupt the cycle of pain that compounded generation over generation, so often stacking hurt upon hurt and trauma upon trauma.

As just one example of this hurt and trauma...Black and Hispanic students are time and again subjected to what is sometimes called the soft bigotry of low expectations, but what I consider—more accurately—to be the PIERCING bigotry of low expectations.

And stemming from that piercing bigotry, some have accused our school system of being in a decadent decline, with our demographic breakdowns as the only evidence they have to point to. What these skeptics see as a source of our DECLINE, I see as a source of our INCLINE—and my challenge to us today is to not just hold that commitment but to ACT ON that commitment. And ACT ON it while holding OURSELVES to the same high expectations that our students so desperately deserve.

Now, I am not so naïve to think that I can snap my fingers and get rid of hate and bias—nor am I so naïve as to think that those efforts will be straightforward or somehow less complicated under the leadership of an African-American superintendent.

But I also refuse to concede to the cynics who claim that the sort of hate and bias we are seeing is an inevitable, irreparable byproduct of embracing the pluralistic and multicultural and multiethnic project that democracy demands of our schools.

I know we can DO this. We can DO better, because I have SEEN better, time and again, in the 21 years I have devoted to this school system. I have SEEN better in the determined faces of our students who have organized walk outs to say that antisemitism and hate have no place in our schools. I've HEARD better in the affirmation that our LGBTQ+ students and their peers have offered one another. I have FELT better in the energy that our students bring to the Minority Scholars Program, who so rightfully declared at their recent retreat...we are the blueprint for the future.

And the BLUEPRINT is in the room today. Please stand so we can all see you.

Thank you!

I've gotten to know better in students like Isabella Andrade (Ahn-draw-day), a senior at Quince Orchard High School whose parents immigrated to the United States as children from Honduras and Ecuador and enrolled in MCPS schools upon their arrival. Their experience inspired Isabella to, in her words, "fight to create a school system that was better than the one her parents experienced." 14 Advanced Placement classes later and with leadership positions in nearly every major student organization, Isabella has an acceptance letter from Harvard under her belt and leaves behind an indelible legacy stretched across MCPS.

Isabella has joined us this afternoon. Isabella, could you please stand?

Thank you!

And I've witnessed better in students like Grant Scott, a graduating senior at Wheaton High School who spends his mornings as an apprentice at our MCPS

print and graphics shop. Grant recently used the career training he received in print operations from our Thomas Edison High School of Technology to produce stunning banners that adorned our County's historic celebration of the Divine Nine Council Of Black Greek Organizations. When he graduates this spring, Grant plans to continue working full time in our print shop while he pursues higher education.

Unfortunately, Grant is recovering from an operation and cannot join us this afternoon, but he IS watching, and we are so proud of him.

Time and again, our students and staff offer us irrefutable evidence that the sparks of innovation, care and compassion for fellow students, and exhibits of consummate excellence are alive in our school system every day.

We know our students are capable of becoming outstanding, compassionate citizens. And we also recognize that misguided actions and attitudes that stand in their way are not intractable. Young people DO make mistakes; that's part of growing up. All of the adults in this room can likely look back on something disappointing that you did as a child.

But I believe that students can change. I HAVE to believe that; ALL of the adults who work with our students HAVE to believe that. Because otherwise, education would be a futile enterprise...What is important is not who a student is at a given point in time but who they BECOME when they leave us. Now, let me be clear: I am not excusing behaviors or actions nor dismissing the need for consequences and discipline; in fact, FAIR AND APPROPRIATE DISCIPLINE plays an important role in how students will become better versions of themselves.

FAIR AND APPROPRIATE means that parents are a presence in our schools in confronting issues together with their child in a conversation with school administrators. But it does NOT mean publicly shaming our students or conveniently convincing ourselves that we can suspend our way out of this.

At the same time, we have to stop just reacting...stop addressing these incidents one at a time. This is one reason why we commissioned the COMPREHENSIVE antiracist audit in the first place. And that's why we are ACTING on the audit findings on the basis of our theory of action – a strategy for change that proposes

that: If we differentiate resources to meet specific needs of schools and communities, build staff capacity to create anti racist learning environments in which all students can learn and thrive, and consistently utilize structures of accountability, then the expectations for what students and adults should know and be able to do will be clear, adult expertise will increase, and student outcomes will improve.

In line with that strategy, MCPS is embarking upon a series of critical actions that we are undertaking in response to ALL hate, bias, and discrimination along the lines of race, religion, gender expression, sexual orientation, or any other personal characteristic.

Some of this work is well underway, some is in development, and some will be launched in the near future. Moving forward, we will do more in our continued fight against all hate...

- First, we will be tightly coordinated to prevent and respond to incidents of hate and bias...diluting responsibility leaves too much to chance. We will identify key experts in equity, cultural proficiency, and nondiscrimination to respond to incidents and strictly scrutinize our system's decisions for evidence of equity.
- Second, we will continue to deepen our leaders' expertise in antiracist leadership, through training for ALL central office employees. This is underway RIGHT NOW. And it will continue.
- Third, we will help ALL the adults in our school system recognize and respond to hate and bias through training on hate and bias that all staff will engage in for next school year and repeat this every year.
- Fourth, we have to bring our community to the table. Our whole community. Schools cannot do this alone and should not do this alone. That's why we will put a Multicultural Advisory Group in place to monitor the Antiracist System Action Plan, model positive public discourse, and partner with our school system to educate families on how hatred is spread through forces like social media, popular culture, and gaming.

- Fifth, we will do what we do best: TEACH. TEACH our students about the role that hate and bias has played across history. We are currently revising our fourth and fifth grade curriculum to align with social justice standards and teach students about the role that upstanders and bystanders have played throughout history. ALL fourth and fifth grade teachers will be trained in how to teach the sort of lessons that will marry historical context and character building. So that we can make the NEXT chapter of our history one of upstanders.
- Sixth, we will establish opportunities throughout our students' school days to learn about these issues— in assemblies, through student advisory boards, and in class.

So there is more to come on the steps we will be taking as a school system. More to come in the comprehensive antiracist system action plan that will be presented in front of our Board of Education and to the community on May 11th.

But for now I want to remind us of two thoughts that Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. left us with. First, in the title of his final book, King posed a question that we once again confront at this very moment: “Where do we go from here: chaos or community?”

Today, I am calling on us to opt for community. And to opt for a community that holds sacred a public discourse that our young people can listen closely to and absorb lessons in how to: build understanding upon encountering differences; shed toxicity in favor of affirmation; and call out, isolate, and remedy sparks of prejudice before they erupt. Because how we talk to one another holds reverberating implications on the future of our democracy - especially how we talk about race, religion, creed, gender and sexuality.

And second, in 1968, on that famous evening in Memphis, Tennessee before he was killed, Dr. King further envisioned what COMMUNITY looks like in professing that: “we, as a people, will get to the promised land.” To Dr. King, the promised land is a community where we no longer need to beg for dignity or justice or belonging... where dignity and justice and belonging are a right, not a privilege. I believe that we CAN reach the promised land, and I believe that its laboratory is

the American schoolhouse – where we work to cultivate the hearts and minds of our young people.

As we have seen over the history of our school system, and especially in recent months, there are many negative forces competing for those young hearts and minds, namely the forces of prejudice and self-doubt. Yet we must never tire of fighting TO INCH EVER closer to our values – to instill excellence, respect, and compassion in the citizens of tomorrow.

As a school system, that is our common goal, our common destiny, and it is by having that goal – the central focus of our wonder of what a better future looks like, and the hard work to make it a reality – that we define who we are.

Thank you.