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Statement Concerning Board Member Stephanie Lawson-Muhammad

May 17, 2018

The incident of July 5, 2016 involving the Maplewood Police Department and African-American youth, and the incident of April 27, 2018 involving School Board Member Stephanie Lawson-Muhammad and a South Orange Police officer, both hinge on videotape that many in our two communities seemed determined to cover-up and ignore. In both instances the videotape revealed the truth. It was only upon the disclosure of the video in 2016 that residents expressed shock over the treatment of African-American youth, despite the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education having been informed of the gravity of the situation almost a year earlier and doing nothing. The Black Parents Workshop, and others, rightfully expressed outrage and called for the resignation of the Maplewood police chief and captain. They both resigned. Yet, many in our two communities now seem intent on defending the indefensible and proffering excuses concerning Board Member Lawson-Muhammad.

This isn't rocket science. It's about **right v. wrong. Period.**

The very essence of what the African-American community nationwide has been demanding in police officers was embodied by the conduct of the South Orange Police officer on April 27, 2018. The officer in question is the type of officer one would hope to encounter if stopped. In a time when we have witnessed acts of violence and the shooting of unarmed African-Americans

by police, we lose all credibility when we condone their abuse by someone from our own community.

If Board Member Stephanie Lawson-Muhammad refuses to resign, the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education will set a new standard for **student conduct** and a new permissiveness for student misbehavior. If a Board of Education member, a public official who is a steward for the children of our school district, can use profanity against a public employee, use a racially derogatory word to describe a public official, and then attempt to use her standing to evade a legal summons and court appearance – the South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education has surrendered **all** moral authority. You will no longer have the right to dictate rules to our children.

What lessons are we teaching our children? Do we really want our children to, on the one hand demand respect, but then on the other behave as if common laws do not apply to them? Do we really want them to view an appearance in court as a nuisance, while trying to convince them of the legitimacy of our justice system? Is our message that adults in positions of authority are not beholden to the same code of conduct we impose upon children? For two communities that engage in endless social media exchanges concerning the ethics and morality of our national leaders, we seem particularly blinded when our local leaders fall short.

In a district where African-American students have been punished, suspended and expelled for far less than the behavior of Ms. Lawson-Muhammad, and where data confirms the degree to which African-American students have been disproportionately punished; there is no circumstance in which an elected School Board member should not be held accountable for their transgressions. If not, the South Orange-Maplewood School District must immediately suspend all disciplinary action against African-American students and failing to do so, this organization will be prepared to file individual complaints against the school district on behalf of aggrieved students. **If adults will not be held accountable, children should not be held to a higher standard.**

Can leaders make mistakes? Absolutely. Where leaders fail is when they coverup their wrongdoing, fail to be transparent and then only take responsibility when they have been caught. This incident occurred on April 27. **Why did it take three weeks for an apology?** Had the video not come to light, we have no doubt that this incident would have been concealed, swept under the rug and the public would have never known. We make no apologies for bringing this matter to light and challenge our two towns to not just ‘talk the talk’ but to ‘walk the walk.’ What example are we setting for our children when adults in leadership roles are given a pass. On the videotape Ms. Lawson-Muhammad is heard telling the police officer, “I am a leading member of the community.” If that is the case, then show leadership. **Resign.**

It is our intention to file a formal ethics complaint against Ms. Lawson-Muhammad and pending our review of information related to Board President Elizabeth Baker, stand prepared to do likewise against the Board president as well. In the short-term Ms. Baker should step down from her role as president until it can be determined what she knew and when she knew it.

For further information, contact Walter Fields, Chairman, @ (973) 738-7876.

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