

June 2022

Greetings Beloved Tacoma Pierce County Community,

When I have discussions with police officers, I frequently hear about their encounters with a fraction of the people in a given community, all having their worst day. In my years of advocating with people that have complained of discrimination at school, work, in their apartments and even in their homes, I get a perception that my sample represents the entire community. In both instances, we must put our limited sample in to context, lest we wrongfully judge an entire community. In May, I met with a group of parents in one of our suburbs that love their children and want them to have the best educational experience possible, as we all do. If you have read my previous letters you are aware that I have discussed the impact of elevated stress on virtually all of us. However, I'm convinced that the "normal world" many long for, may offer an escape— but with over scheduling of time and no time for self-reflection—is where we can believe our experience is universal for everyone in the community. Where we can remain voluntarily ignorant of the self-centered harm one's adolescent thinking continues to dispense. Thus, living and experiencing life in their personal island of reality, thinking only they and their group matters. Our kids are watching and when their trusted adults appear to approve mob violent behavior, perhaps they are also approving future violent behavior. Unless the pledge of Allegiance is an outdated marketing tool, I believe there is value in reflecting on the content of such a declaration.

I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, indivisible with liberty and justice for all.

Excerpt of Meeting Summary:

This meeting summary is from a group of parents of various ethnic and cultural groups from the Sumner Bonnie Lake School District Friday May 13, 2022. Unfortunately, given the state of post 2021 election discourse, I believe, similar concerns could be expressed in communities throughout our nation. I was invited to attend due to a rise of egregious behavior parents report their students are experiencing. I asked the participants to tell their personal family stories to get a sense of what students of color in this suburban school district are experiencing. I have summarized their comments below to provide a flavor of their experiences while preserving their privacy.

The group consisted of 10 mostly white parents however, most had children of other ethnic groups or multi-ethnic children. All but three attending had heart breaking accounts of how their children have experienced rude, biased, and often trauma producing racist behaviors from students, teachers, parents, and administrators in the Sumner District. One parent recounted how school officials were eager to implement "consequences" when her black child was accused of an infraction that frequently are ignored when white children are accused of similar infractions. We heard accounts of how other white parents react when they hear concepts that culturally competent professional educators should use to provide a safe learning environment for all students. We heard about the kerfuffle many white district parents raised when they heard a "black speaker", Dr. Erin Jones, had been invited to speak at an annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. assembly. Many expressed how unprepared educators are to address bias and hate speech by students in the classroom. Particularly disheartening, was the story of parents

of a former student. They shared that their daughter will not discuss her school experience as it distresses and depresses her to this day. She is not interested in ever returning to her high school reunion. Many described how certain words, equity, inclusion, and critical race theory trigger abrasive responses by many white parents.

After hearing their emotional descriptions of spirit crushing behaviors which appear to be deeply rooted in the culture of the schools they support with taxes, I felt they all deserve a total refund. Nonetheless, I expressed my concern for what their students have and continue to experience in this suburban school district. I further expressed the fact that Tacoma Branch NAACP has been receiving dozens of similar complaints throughout Pierce County. In addition, we are aware that some political and religious groups organizing around hate speech which is evident in their descriptions of how their students have and continue to be treated. From my military experience, I am well aware of such divisive tactics used by foreign adversaries to undermine legitimate democracies. Unfortunately, in my opinion, such tactics are now being employed within our community with harmful consequences for our schools, students of color and all that do not conform to a monochromatic definition of American. Let me be clear, the NAACP is a non-partisan organization that focuses on issues that have a direct impact on the human rights and liberty for people of color in our nation. However, the descriptions provided by concerned parents fall directly in our area of interest. Although the root causes of abridging the civil rights of children, appears the result of political talking points and extremist indoctrination, we offer a multi-level strategy to address the near and longer term problem.

First, we offer NAACP volunteers to advocate for students and families, most effectively for recent complaints of discrimination. However, with the recent spike in complaints, we need more volunteers. To that comment, several meeting participants expressed interest in volunteering.

Second, I recommended efforts to build community with likeminded individuals and groups forming a fact based movement focused on education [in the context of Community, Civility & Connections. This is the focus of a Convening event the League of Women Voters, Vibrant Schools of Puget Sound, and the Tacoma Branch NAACP are organizing for July 16, 2022, at Evergreen State College Tacoma].

The actions described are preliminary, will take time, extra ordinary interpersonal organizing skills, and personal discipline to model our preferred relationship as citizens of a multicultural multiethnic society. This approach is diametrically opposed to what we have seen modeled for dramatic dysfunctional effect. Our focus is on positively influencing education in the spaces and places where All children are welcome to learn and thrive. The first phase, reimagining, will act as conversation starters as we build membership and coalitions. There is no better time than the immediacy of now.

END of Meeting Summary

The behaviors described in the Sumner Bonnie Lake School District represent a fraction of the community, however, silence endorses such behavior.

Jonathan Johnson
Tacoma Branch NAACP
President