

Comments to MMSD Board of Education on Qualifications Needed for Next Superintendent

by Peter Anderson

One of the District's more serious problems – as in every other diverse metropolitan school district – has been its chronic inability to reduce the achievement gap for black youth from generations of fractured families in impoverished neighborhoods and subjected to racism.

As BWP Associates correctly recommends, the next superintendent does need to continue to prioritize closing the [black achievement gap](#), of which Wisconsin shows the largest gap among the states, and, in Wisconsin, Madison has the worst (although, like other college towns with [higher income/education demographics](#) that skews the distribution's right tail, such that the magnitude of the gap [appear larger](#) than that comparison suggests).

However, that goal can never be achieved if those efforts to close the gap are not *balanced* when conflicts arise with the concomitant need to minimize disruptions so the schools can also educate everyone else. Otherwise, middle class flight will leave the most troubled African-American students, who cannot flee, trapped in failing schools, with the larger community alienated from its responsibilities to help right past wrongs by supporting funding referenda to exceed state revenue limits.

The problem with former Superintendent Cheatham's leadership was not that she was focused on attempting to remedy injustice. That had to be a priority. Instead, her fatal problem was the complete absence of any balance in her approach with the many other moving parts involved in running a school system, her inability to reduce the achievement gap, her manipulation of the data to hide this fact, and her failure to look outside the box for solutions and to constructively engage the wider community.

The obvious real reason that she abruptly decamped for academia, just months after publicly committing to remain to complete her strategic plan, was not because the District had passed through a ["healthy disequilibrium" to an imminent "inflection point"](#), as she embellished to the *Capital Times*. Rather, it was because Madison's schools were contending with increasing disarray [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#).

The consequential mistakes Dr. Cheatham made are an object lesson of why, to save our schools, the search must deliberately seek someone who understands the need for balance, and who has a proven record of finding solutions, not obfuscating failure with irrelevant diversions.

❶ Schools without discipline will fail

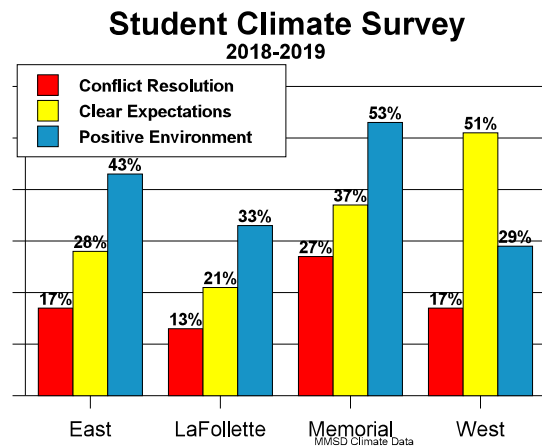
Dr. Cheatham’s tenure, to a not insignificant extent, became increasingly defined by her efforts to deflect vocal pressure from Freedom Inc., by how those efforts affected her determination to convince opinion leaders of her commitment to racial justice, and by her inability to actually reduce the black achievement gap.

To reinvigorate her bona fides, she caved in to unsubstantiated claims of racism and sacrificed teachers with no record of bias. But that undermined teachers’ ability to discipline disruptive students who are African-American, and, in consequence, significantly contributed to schools becoming increasingly dysfunctional, which leads to middle class flight. Then, because her efforts also proved misdirected to reduce the black achievement gap, Dr. Cheatham misrepresented performance data by lowering expectations in order to artificially inflate the reputation she cultivated.¹

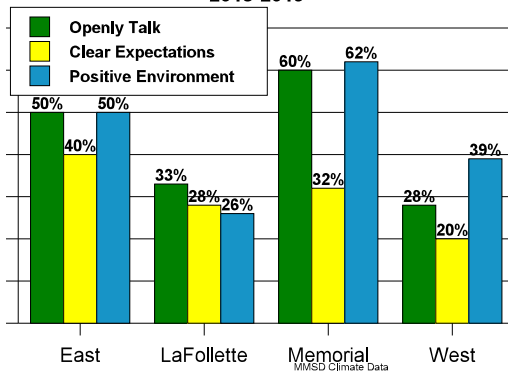
Behavior Education Plan. The debilitating problems began with the roll out of Dr. Cheatham’s [Behavior Education Plan](#) in 2014. The plan itself was a well-intentioned replacement of the earlier zero tolerance policy, which had a disparate impact on black students from troubled homes. The Plan provided for a progressive approach to discipline, and restorative justice in lieu of punishment, that was intended to keep misbehaving students in classrooms. Problems arose in the Plan’s implementation that led students to conclude that there no longer any consequences for bad behavior.

No consequences for misbehavior. For the Plan’s positive approach to work, it was critical that students continued to believe that there were real consequences for bad behaviors, which meant they had to see positive reinforcements and restorative practices as something serious, and not as a free pass to continue misbehaving. Otherwise, discipline will break down and the other students will increasingly be unable to learn, and will convey that fact to their parents.

The District’s School [Climate Survey](#) for students in the 2018-2019 school year shows the toll Dr. Cheatham’s policies have taken. In response to the question of whether conflicts between students are resolved constructively, only 13% agreed at LaFollette H.S., 17% at East and at West, and 27% at Memorial. Whether there are clear expectations for student behavior, the students’ responses ranged from 21% to 51%, and whether there was a positive environment for learning, from 29% to 53%.



Teacher Climate Survey
2018-2019



For the teachers, the results were also disturbing. Only 28% of the teachers at West felt that they can openly talk of their concerns without putting their position at risk, 33% at LaFollette, 50% at East and 60% at Memorial. Whether there are clear expectations for behavior, only 20% of the teachers said there are at East, 28% at LaFollette, 32% at Memorial and 40% at East. And as for a positive learning environment, only 26% of the teachers at LaFollette said yes, 39% at West, but 50% at East and 62% at Memorial.

The survey also compiled a representative sampling of [anecdotal responses](#) that helps explain the basis for the mounting frustration about students no

longer believing there were any consequences for disruptions. In addition to the lack of adequate resources, teachers reported:

“Participants wonder[ed] how ‘kids seem to feel they can do anything, and there’s nothing teachers can do.’ Some staff were concerned about ‘no consequences,’ as participants expressed concern around the idea that ‘If we give kids zero consequences, they think they can behave that way in public.’ ... ‘If there’s no consequence then kids feel empowered to do anything.’ ... ‘We’re losing staff, we’re losing families. Teachers seem to feel they can’t do anything about it.’ ... ‘My experience has been that students have gotten the impression that they can do whatever they want and there’s not going to be any consequence.’ ... ‘Teachers are unable to do anything to students that misbehave and disrupt the class,’ and ‘students need concrete consequences, and this seems to be lacking in the current behavior plan.’”

Among the parents responding, again “[t]here was a general perception of a lack of consequences, with one participant questioning, ‘...can there be quick changes to put more consequences back in place? I’m seeing bad habits developed in my son’s kindergarten class. ... Teachers seem to feel they can’t do anything about it.’ Another discussed hearing about this perception of no consequences: ‘My experience has been that students have gotten the impression that they can do whatever they want and there’s not going to be any consequence.’”

Teachers disempowered. [News analysis](#) in *Isthmus* last May of the rapid deterioration of order in our schools revealed an even more devastating level of frustration among teachers. Most disturbing, even though the reporter focused on those teachers with a demonstrable concern for racial justice, they, too, found themselves overwhelmed by the rising tide of disrespect by students emboldened by Dr. Cheatham’s practices that disconnected consequences from disruptive behaviors.

Again, the teachers' distress with the Plan was not with its intent, but with the way Dr. Cheatham applied it that made it nearly impossible to discipline misbehavior by black students for fear of being fired as racist. She seemed, as one teacher noted, to believe "she can close these achievement gaps by just loving and hugging them all" without first having their respect:

"A lot people in Madison are wondering what the hell is happening in our schools. ...Jim Lister, a science teacher at Hamilton [said] 'What's new this year is that there's a feeling of walking around on pins and needles for many teachers. You don't know how an interaction with a kid is going to go or that the district will support you after the fact. What ends up happening is teachers do nothing,' says Lister. 'If a kid says, 'Fuck you' to you six or seven times and there are no repercussions — it becomes pretty clear who is in charge.'"

"Leah is a special education teacher at a Madison middle school. She blames Cheatham for what she calls 'an extremely rough school year.'

"She is more interested in seeming woke than supporting teachers. Downtown [administrators] just want to look a certain way and when they don't, teachers get blamed,' Leah says. "There's no recognition that the daily grind is just unmanageable. I suspect we will see another exodus of teachers at the end of this year. That's at least what I'm hearing.'

"Leah supports the Behavior Education Plan's principles, but calls its implementation 'a complete failure.'

"What's changed is kids have the mindset that they are in charge now. You walk into the school and there are just kids everywhere. Walking the halls. Leaving the classrooms whenever they want,' says Leah. 'I do believe in restorative practices. I also believe in holding kids accountable. If we don't, we aren't preparing them for the real world. Cheatham really thinks she can close these achievement gaps by just loving and hugging them all.'

"Leah says some teachers have grown accustomed to daily confrontation in the classroom.

"If I wrote up students for swearing at me, that's all I would do. Today in a math class, I asked a kid to put her phone away and was told to 'fuck off,' says Leah. 'I said, 'Okay. But could you please put your phone away? Her response, 'Don't fuck with me now because I'm not in the mood. I'm going to call my mom.' 'I thought, 'wait, that's supposed to be my line.'"

"Peter Opps, a history teacher at La Follette High School, estimates that up to 5 percent of students hang out in the halls on any given day.

“It can be a real circus and it’s happening at every high school and at middle schools, too. It’s like the district is lost on what to do. This year is different because we are seeing respect break down on so many different levels,’ says Opps, who notes that most of the students in the halls at La Follette are African American. ‘There has been a morph from an educational environment to more of a housing environment. You want to know where our achievement gap is? It’s out in the hall.’

“Leah doesn’t blame the students.

I

“I love these kids. But they are going to push the envelope as far as they can,’ she says. ‘That’s what middle schoolers do. This isn’t their fault.’”

“That’s-what-middle-schoolers-do” seemed to go right over Dr. Cheatham’s head in that, even in the face of all of the negative feedback, she continued to act as if the achievement gap can be closed with love and hugs – *without consequences or their respect*. It is a matter of some concern that a person who seems to have so little grasp of child psychology or pedagogy is now at Harvard teaching the leading educators of tomorrow.

The Whitehorse and Leopold incidents. The prime example of the disastrous way Dr. Cheatham applied her Behavior Education Plan, which has effectively emasculated teachers’ ability to discipline disruptions by black students, occurred at Whitehorse Middle School last February. The way the Administration abandoned teachers when challenged unleashed the kids’ worst instincts at Leopold Elementary School a month later as minority students learned they could extricate themselves from responsibility for misbehaviors by crying racist.

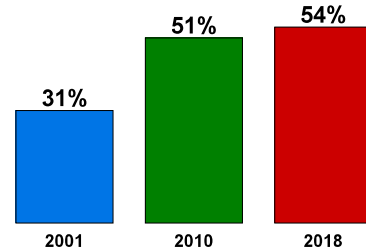
Dr. Cheatham summarily forced the resignation of a 30 year veteran teacher after a African American girl accused him, without evidence, of punching her, and Freedom, Inc. vociferously demanded he be fired and jailed without a trial. Shortly after the word got out among the student body, a girl who was black falsely accused her Principal of hitting her and the Principal only avoided being physically beaten by the girl’s uncle because, in that case, there was a video of the actual incident.

Because false representations about what happened at Whitehorse have been so loudly and frequently repeated, many have come to believe their counterfactual fake news story that the teacher brutally beat a student. The reality was the opposite. In fact, as the police and District Attorney found after extensive investigations, there was no evidence to support the girl’s charge, nor did the teacher have a record of racist incidents. Indeed he had been the District’s leader in setting up the restorative justice program. To recover the known facts about what happened so its vital lessons can be learned and applied to the selection of the next superintendent, the cases are documented in the NOTE.²

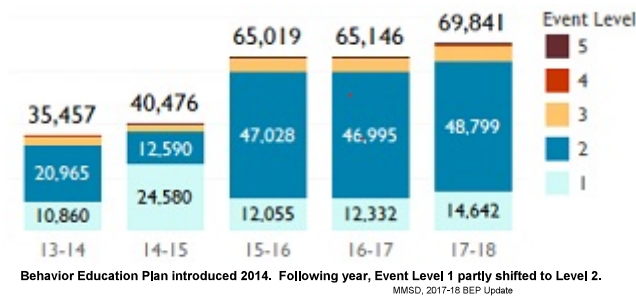
Middle class flight and teacher departures. Middle and upper class families of all races seek to insure that their children have the best chance to succeed in life, and understand the vital role that education plays in today’s high tech economy.

Racist parents departed the District a long time ago, and a significant share of the families who remain value diversity – but not if their child cannot feel safe and receive a good education in the City’s schools. As the number of students on the subsidized lunches, who have a higher proportion of behavior problems, grew, and reported behavior events increased. As the District

Share of MMSD Students on Subsidized Lunch



Free lunch students had 6 times the reported behavior events
DPI data on subsidized lunch program



went to extensive efforts to avoid punishing troubled kids, but failed to impose any consequences, their concerns have mounted. Increasingly, they are moving to the suburbs or sending their children to private schools, as I have heard from black as well as white parents in my acquaintance.

MMSD also heard anecdotally about this concern in [its own survey](#) in the comments by parents:

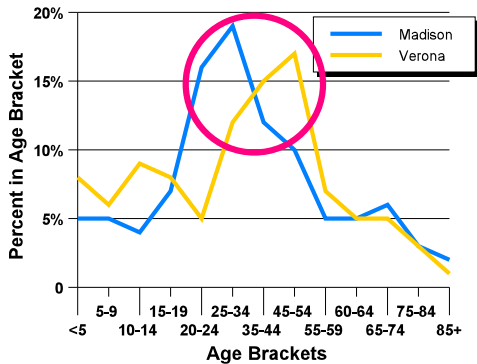
“We’re losing staff, we’re losing families.’ ‘We would like to see data/feedback on what effects the BEP is having on kids who don’t require intervention regarding the number of minutes of teaching time lost to BEP implementation/events,’ ‘As practiced, the BEP is literally destroying the education of children who are ready to learn,” and ‘if disrupting children are kept in the classroom, the learning of the children who are paying attention is negatively affected.’ Stakeholders also expressed concerns about a lack of safety.

“Feedback included: ‘Our family is debating leaving the school district because of the increasing violence in the schools and concerns for our daughter's safety,’ ‘why is it that is schools are a ‘gun free zone’ and how is it that a child can bring one to school and that child can return back?!’ and ‘This BEP is not strong enough to keep our kids safe.’

“ Respondents also cited a need for policy changes. Stakeholder comments included: ‘Students who are not ready to learn cannot remain in the classroom. There has to be another plan or the majority of our students suffer. The BEP does not work and is causing so many great educators to leave our district,’... ‘There has been too many discussions and planning meetings on safety and the BEP. Make some changes and make our schools safe again or step aside and let new people in to do so.’”

There is no statistical data directly tracking middle class flight from the District, but there are proxies that, by themselves, are imperfect, but, because they converge, are reasonably suggestive that there are serious grounds for concern.

Exodus to Suburbs for Safe Schools



Comparing recent [census data](#) for Madison compared to its suburbs for families in their 30s, when they enter the child rearing years, there is a sharp decline in the city and a direct corresponding sharp increase in neighboring suburbs, even after accounting for the temporary influx of college students to the University of Wisconsin. Although census data does not prove motivation, the shifts are consistent with middle class flight.

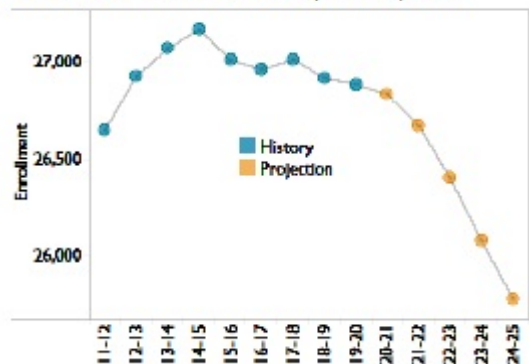
Upon reaching child-bearing age, Madison families exit MMSD, and there is a corresponding uptick in suburban school districts where they are moving to, as shown in the circled cross-over point

US Census data for 2017

declining since the 2014-2015 school year,” before which it had been increasing. Its projections anticipate more significant declines later (see graph along side), even as Madison’s overall growth in population is projected to accelerate, and three major annexations mean substantial student additions on top of that. The staff report attributes this trend to anomalous declines in live births in the School District, but that is now long after the Great Recession caused a dip. In any event, that begs the

The District’s [enrollment studies](#) notes that, coincident with the roll out of the Behavior Education Plan, “[o]verall, K4-12th grade enrollment in MMSD has been slightly

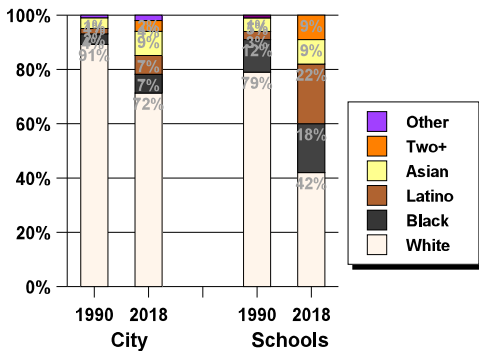
K4-12th Grade Enrollment History and Projection



question of whether the perceived decline is, itself, due to middle class families leaving the City upon entering child rearing years.

Racial/Ethnic Breakdown

in Madison in 2018



Census data and MMSD data

Also, comparing Madison [census data](#) to [MMSD enrollment data](#) by skin color, in 1990, white proportionate enrollment in the District was 87% of the white population. In 2018, it was only 58%, a 33% decline.

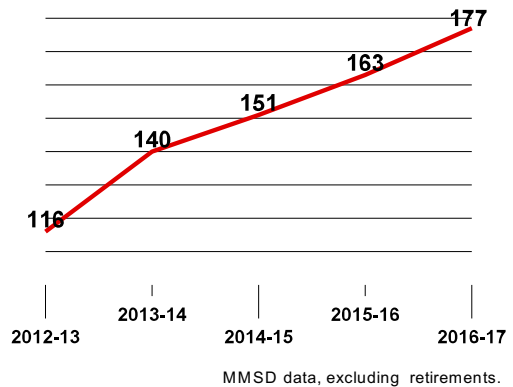
When the black and white parents in stable families pull their children out of Madison’s schools, essential public support for adequate funding and referenda to override state revenue limits wanes, along with parental engagement, because their own kids future will no longer be at stake. Also

lost is the ballast and glue provided by students who come to school ready to learn. The District

will become a husk of its proud past, yet another failed school system in which mostly the disadvantaged will be trapped.

In tandem to the flight by middle class parents, teachers are also resigning in growing numbers at an annual increase of 11% over the prior year, even as the number of teachers only increased by less than 1%/yr, in response to the loss of respect and turmoil, and possibly compounded earlier by the reaction to Act 10. One of those resignations was commemorated in a [widely publicized blog](#) from a 16-year veteran at Sherman Middle School who was dedicated to closing the achievement gap and dismayed by an incompetent Principal promoted far over her level of competence. That led to “over 60 years of collective educational experience and wisdom will be exiting at the end of this school year.”

Annual Teacher Resignations from MMSD



“I have been a teacher in the MMSD for 16 years; my emphasis for those years has been on closing the pervasive achievement gap. During that time, I have been a leader at all levels — classroom, team, school, union, and district. As a leader, I have always put the children first. After all, they are what brought me to this profession and to the Madison Metropolitan School District. ...

“My choice to leave is tied to my love for the students. I am leaving this district, because I cannot serve the children I love in the current climate. I have never seen a building as deeply in crisis as Sherman Middle School, yet my cries for help went unanswered for three years. I saw “Band Aid” fixes and many more promises. I saw a principal being given chance after chance and three years of her being coddled and coached with no substantive change.

“The problems being ignored by our district are of great magnitude. I cannot understand the purpose or priorities of any organization that allows this level of incompetence, particularly one that is supposed to serve children.

Ignoring the fact that blogger joined her commitment to reduce the achievement gap and had, over three years, first privately sought to convince the Administration to address the problem, which it had not done, Dr. Cheatham chose to [attack the messenger](#). Although the blog had not mentioned the race of the Principal, Dr. Cheatham chose to publicly do so in order to effectively reply that for racial prejudice to be overcome, minorities beyond their level of competency had to be hired and retained, even long after they had clearly failed.

The Superintendent appeared oblivious to the fact that success stories like Milt McPike and Kaleem Caire and many others showed that not only was it unnecessary to promote minority

candidates without the required competencies, but doing so counterproductively feeds into stereotypes and reactionary attacks on affirmative action.

The data shows that the City’s schools, once the jewel in Madison’s crown, have been, literally, coming apart at the seams under Dr. Cheatham’s leadership before she sought to escape responsibility for her failure by bolting to academia. Again, the problem has not been with her focus on the black achievement gap, it is with the myopic, self-serving way that she went about it. Anyone seeking a replacement in the same mold as Dr. Cheatham is doing the District a fatally tragic disservice.

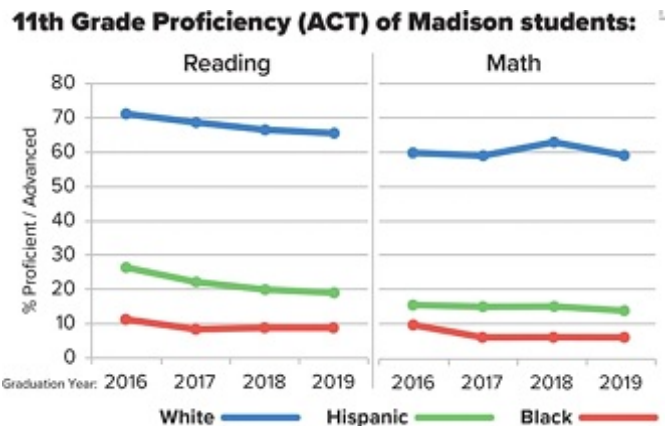
Policies failed. Tragically, not only did her strategic plan undermine the functioning of Madison’s schools, it also completely failed to help the targeted black students she claimed to help. On standardized tests, black and Latino students effectively [made no academic progress](#) over Dr. Cheatham’s tenure.

Not only did skills not improve, but also neither did the disproportionate number of black students punished or expelled. According to the Districts statistical staff, “[t]he Behavior Education Plan had no consistent impact on lowering racially disparate suspension rates.” [Overall behavior problems worsened](#) substantially, with total reported events increasing by 61% after the plan was implemented (although a part of the reason that low-level incidents later were classified as mid-level incidents may have been from better reporting), without improving disparate effects. Black student suspensions increased by 35%.

Coverup failures. In the face of these failings, instead of exploring new approaches that might produce concrete results, Dr. Cheatham sought to cover up the fact that her most important policies did not work by using misdirection for the appropriate performance metrics and data manipulation.

Last year, the District [boasted](#) that it had improved the education of black students, as shown by a dramatic increase the *graduation rate* among black students from 64% to 73%, which was an incredible 14% jump for just one year. Cheatham credited the rising graduation rates to “[working hard](#) at just knowing our students better and intervening earlier.”

In fact, however, as was uncovered by the student-run *Simpson Street Press*, her success was abetted by highly questionable administrative assists of dubious education benefit. She instituted the use of summer “[credit recovery courses](#)” that, after the fact, increased students’ grades to allow graduation. According to education experts these “courses” involve little or no



DPI Stats, cited in *Isthmus*, “Yes, they graduated, but can they read?,” Oct 4 18.

meaningful effort or actual acquired knowledge, and usually rely upon taking a simple quiz while being heavily coached. This was shown by a subsequent analysis reported in *Isthmus* that, at the same time graduation rates supposedly soared, black students' *reading and math ACT test scores* remained stubbornly stuck unchanged [below 10%](#).

In the District's [own survey of teachers](#), they reported what I continue to hear in my interviews with teachers about the Administration's efforts to hide the number of students roaming the halls, namely that they are advised directly and indirectly to skew the data they report in order to paper over problems:

“Participants also described concerns related to documentation and accountability. In particular they described concerns about the system, inaccurate or inconsistent documentation practices, and the types of data being collected. ‘If our District focus is on a certain variable,’ began one participant, ‘that creates a culture among staff to hesitate to do anything that will make that data look worse.’”

In the end, as the situation has become more and more dire, Dr. Cheatham ratcheted up happy talk, laced with hyperbolic superlatives about every student being college ready, which was completely unrelated to the mean streets that the at-risk youth inhabit, and as effective as her now-you-see-them-now-you-don't zero tolerance policies:

“[E]very student [is prepared] to graduate from high school college [and be] career and community ready;” [a place] “proud to be home of a beautiful population of students”, [where] “[w]e believe in the brilliance, creativity and bright futures of Black youth throughout Madison.”

To which has now been added a major campaign about [Black Excellence](#), which is wonderful for upwardly mobile black students, but unmoored from the lives of troubled youth mired in drug infested neighborhoods. When blue sky fantasies become a substitute for programs that actually address the needs of our at-risk kids, that only succeeds in distracting our focus on actually closing the achievement gap.

② Progress can only come from proven proposals

Reaching kids who have tragically been marginalized by the remnants of slavery, racism and poverty, and, to survive dysfunctional homes and mean streets, have acquired anti-social behaviors, is one of America's most daunting challenges. New York City just poured nearly a trillion dollars over three years into reforming its public schools within their overall existing structures with [little to show for it](#). There is no cook book with easy answers. In its selection of a new superintendent, the Board members need to look beyond the loudest voices to determine who has insights with scientific support that they might actually work.

Over the last year, the Board has heard mostly from Freedom, Inc., whose organizing skills has dominated much of the conversation. But, there is also innovation in the community to consider, along with critical scientific research.

Freedom Inc.'s solution. Freedom Inc. has not presented a comprehensive vision for addressing the achievement gap, but continues to claim that order can be maintained by redirecting the funds for SROs to counselors, by involving the neighborhood in discipline, and that “radical queer black feminism” has the answer.

But, the few social workers that the cops salaries could fund would be drop in the bucket compared to the magnitude of family problems, poverty and effects from racism that the District’s at risk kids suffer under. What can be said about the power of radical queer black feminism? As to their main point, reliance on the community to maintain discipline in the classroom instead of the teacher is an incredulous suggestion.

For one thing, there is the logistical challenge of how someone in the neighborhood, who would not be able to get to the classroom for a half hour, can restore order in the moment the breakdown in order was occurring, even if they had the necessary skills. For another thing, the whole idea undermines the authority that teachers must have to, themselves, maintain discipline, and would quickly snowball downward, until chaos dominated classroom. Finally, it is difficult to imagine that any teacher would chose in the current climate to ask the neighborhood to intercede to restore order. That could wind up with him or her being fired just for being accused of racism, or possibly, as almost happened at Leopold Elementary School, beaten up.

Research points to focus on pre-kindergarten years. In one sense, to be fair to Dr. Cheatham’s record, the great weight of research indicates that the accumulating wounds from centuries of racism become so deeply ingrained by the time a toddler becomes a child that later interventions in middle and high school are largely doomed to fail.

Only early interventions in pre-kindergarten or before have been shown to achieve the substantive changes in hard wiring needed to turnaround the lives of disadvantaged kids. This is the consistent finding of the scientific research, by [Chetty](#) in terms of the indirect effects of open housing opportunities for the very young, and direct early interventions at the pre-kindergarten and earlier level by [HighScope](#) in Michigan and by [Abecedarian](#) in North Carolina.

For all Dr. Cheatham’s much heralded efforts to address the achievement gap, it is less than inspiring that such an ostensibly qualified educator appeared to have little awareness of either the best research on the [science of reading](#) nor on that research on how only early interventions have been able to demonstrate progress.

One City Schools. The saddest thing lost in all the recent sound and the fury is how neither the Board nor protesters can look outside of the boxes that confine them to real progress

elsewhere. It is especially unfortunate that Freedom Inc. has become subject to the same myopia as the white establishment they chastise. That has caused them to lose sight of the one major proposal – from the black community – that research, experience and logic shows may, with more work, actually work.

That was Kaleem Caire's 2011 proposal, originally for a [Madison Preparatory Academy](#). Mad Prep would have created a Madison charter school for grades 6 to 12, specifically structured for troubled black youth. With the right leadership, urban academies may evolve to succeed with some of the toughest kids in a unique way that the public schools have shown themselves unable to reach.

Earlier efforts in Chicago for urban prep academies raised high hopes, but, more recently have [sputtered](#). To his credit, Mr. Caire has continued to act on the best research and has subsequently refined his original approach to focus on the early grades, because, by high school, the problems have become too deep rooted to repair.

He first found a way to [work-around the School Board's opposition](#) by getting the University to approve his [revamped urban prep model](#), now called One City Schools. Always thinking of ways to actually improve educational opportunities for black youth, he reworked his target audience pre-kindergarten, instead of high school, based upon research showing that gains were more readily made when at-risk kids are very young.

That said, yes, there are major concerns with typical charter schools, because, when they succeed, too often they rely on cream-skimming that undermines public schools, which are the foundation of a civil society. But, charters like urban academies and One City do the opposite. They predominately take the troubled kids that the public schools are usually unable to educate. Also, if those unsocialized students remain, in a political climate where they are inculcated to disrespect public school teachers, their disruptions makes teaching the other students very difficult.

③ **The whole community needs to come together to heal racial wounds**

Because racism casts such a long shadow, the schools cannot solve the problem by themselves. Furthermore, beyond the urgent need to secure the wider community's support for higher taxes to fund major remedial programs is something even more important. That is the imperative for grown-ups to model for our youth their active efforts to promote, not denigrate, real social integration in so-called liberal Madison.

At present, that path forward is impeded by shibboleths of the woke that polarize the community, which Ms. Cheatham followed. They conflate anyone who has white skin with white supremacists for which every white person must atone. But, the actual definition of a white supremacist is a racist who uses violence to suppress minorities, not the implicit tribal biases everyone harbors embedded in the human genome.

Tribalism became hard wired in our genes at the dawn of man and woman on the unforgiving African savannah during the recurrent mega-droughts as the planet wobbled on its axis, ice ages ebbed and flowed, and the atmosphere's moisture periodically became locked up in miles-high glaciers, repeatedly driving our ancestors to the brink of extinction.

The mechanism was Darwinian survival-of-the-fittest that selected the genes for our sympathetic nervous system with instinctual biases against competing tribes for frightfully scarce resources. It was not the work of a wrathful Old Testament God as a pestilence for their sins inflicted only on white people. In fact, white people did not even evolve until tens of thousands of years later after a small band of black skinned homo sapiens left Africa for the higher latitudes of Europe where their descendants lost their skin pigmentation in order increase Vitamin D.

If the goal is to rally the larger community to the massive task of desegregating Madison, it is questionable whether the best way to call the public to volunteer is to call them names and demand that they atone for their sins. Self-flagellation is an acquired taste with limited appeal. Far more effective when summoning volunteers across the community is an appeal to people's "better angels of their nature" to come together in activities where they can have fun together and together learn to see the other as people just like themselves.

With many of the District's teachers coming from all white small towns across Wisconsin, undoubtedly it is likely that some of them may be insensitive to the black experience, and harbor implied biases against what looks to them like anti-social behaviors, but stems from coping mechanisms to poverty and racism.

However, that is not the same as overt racism, nonetheless White Supremacy, which is no longer generally accepted, and suppressed racism lingers as mildew mostly in the closet. Those subconscious biases that remain is human nature's apprehension of "the other," not the Devil's work for which the white race alone must commit life-long contrition and penance, as Freedom Inc. demands.

Though unfortunate that the tribalism gene has survived into today's global society, something that is a hard-wired part of everyone ought not be confused with evil incarnate. Instead of vitriolic shaming, we need to rationally unravel [what approach constructively functions](#) to best help people work around our initial instinctual response, which, in the modern world, no longer confers pre-history's survival value. We need to return to a road of comity between Madison's black, brown and white communities, both so that, freed from continuing accusations of being White Supremacists, teachers can re-acquire the respect that they must have from their students to teach. Moreover, Madison's segregated housing and social groups deny all of us the richness that only comes from a diverse life well-lived.

There is also an entirely different approach to the rites of self-flagellation that Freedom Inc. demands that was [first propounded by Harvey Milk](#) back in 1976. He argued that the way to secure gay rights – the prime archetype of the “other” – was for everyone to come out of the closet to their neighbors to be seen as mostly just like them. Not, as homosexuals had since time immemorial, as queer.

Incredibly, in light of the fact that major social change had been thought to work on a geologic time-scale like the slow continental drift of tectonic plates, he turned out to be right. In barely the short 20 years before *Obergefell v. Hodges* legalized gay marriage, [popular support for that right turned around](#) from 2-1 against to 2-1 for.

To bring people to emotionally embrace one another, Madison has a Dane Dances! where folks from all of walks of life come to have fun together in the primal act of dancing. But, we also need a Dane Churches, and a Dane Sports and Dane Dinners, to pray, play and break bread together, too.

In the end, the combination of white guilt and black rage has become a toxic brew in our town. Yet, every one of us, black and white, brown and yellow and, of course, red, co-inhabit these same 60 square miles of glaciated hills, valleys, prairies and marshes that surround our four life-giving lakes. Each of them with lilting Indian names evocative of our past – Mendota – Monona – Waubesa and Kegonsa.

As we seek a new lingua franca to find common ground together, we also need to discover how to upend our segregated world and redesign our racially cloistered lives. Forty years ago, Harvey Milk preached to the gay community that to succeed in this journey, we should come together to share with each other the joys along with the struggles in our lives. Here that is as a reborn rainbow tribe, in Taychopera – the Ho-Chunk’s name for the land of the four lakes.

Call it Taychopera. Call it Madison. Call it the Promised Land or call it The Troubles.

This land is our Home. □

PETER ANDERSON, a longtime Madison activist, founded Wisconsin’s Environmental Decade (now Clean Wisconsin), Dane Dances, and with others, the local chapter of 350.org. Earlier in his career, he taught 5th grade in an all African-American/Puerto Rican school in the South Bronx. His four adult children went, and his two beautiful bi-racial grandchildren now go, to Franklin, Randall, Gompers and Crestwood Elementary, Velma Hamilton and James Madison Middle, and West and Memorial High Schools in Madison.

1 That said, nothing in this comment should be interpreted as critical of the motivations of groups seeking racial justice. Moreover, it would be wrong to deny the legitimacy of the indignation deeply felt by those vocal black parents – not after 250 years of slavery, the wrenching separation of slave families, a hundred more years of brutalizing Jim Crow, thousands of lynchings, discrimination in employment, segregation in housing, red-lining and disinvestment, family-destructive welfare rules, pervasive violence in impoverished neighborhoods and mass incarceration. Any group who has suffered so much wrong has ample grounds to be angry.

However, when people become furious, even when they are fully entitled to be mad, it is exceedingly difficult to develop tactics and strategies that will achieve the group's own objectives. In Freedom Inc.'s case, they appear to have failed to anticipate how the other parents, who are focused on their children's education, will react if it turns out that the District's acceptance of their recommendations significantly increases disruptions. For this reason, the justification for the protesters' anger is not at issue in regard to the new hire. Rather, what is critically relevant here is the self-serving and unreasoning way Dr. Cheatham responded to it, in contravention to all pedagogical and democratic norms.

The best example of how rage clouded judgment is Freedom Inc.'s 3-year campaign to remove School Resource Officers from the four high schools, detailed in the note. ***Removing School Resource Officers***. Freedom Inc., has conducted a 3-year long campaign to remove the dedicated police officers, called School Resource Officers or SROs, assigned to each of the District's four high schools. Screaming "take the [damn cops](#) out of schools," shouting over those who disagreed, and shutting down Board meetings, they demanded an end of the special police in Madison's four high schools, because some black youth are traumatized by the blue uniform.

After the terrible [reign of police killings](#) of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, Walter Scott and other black men, not to mention the Sandra Bland affair, undoubtedly some are. But, the fact that some students have understandably become hyper-sensitive to police due to all that reported brutality, and their parallel experiences on the mean streets they inhabit, does not exist in a vacuum.

Police were brought into the high schools [20 years ago](#) in the aftermath of Columbine and to handle the [surge in gangs](#) and the increasing proportion of troubled kids, some of whom were prone to lash out defiantly and provoke fights. Increasing disruptions makes it exceedingly challenging to maintain a learning environment.

Unfortunately, as fallout from the drive for racial justice, and as the Whitehorse incident described in NOTE 2 graphically dramatized – teachers now risk their careers if, to restore order, they touch students to pry them apart. Consequently, street police had been the only ones left who could physically intervene to stop out-of-control disruptions.

But, historically, calling beat cops too often led to arrests that begat the [school-to-prison pipeline](#). The concept of a kind of live-in cop evolved to prevent those bad outcomes.

To forestall insensitive policing, [specially selected and trained officers](#), who were themselves minorities, and personally sensitive to the crippling effects of poverty and the implicit bias against black and brown kids, were assigned to one high school full-time. In this way, they could take the time to learn about the individual students' problems at home and in the school in order to sort out how best to defuse conflicts, as well as when to intercede early in order to avoid fights from later breaking out.

Rather than cuffing them, a student recounted, when deflection or avoidance did not work, they would take the disruptive teenager across the street to a coffee shop for a donut to calm down. And, when avoidance was not possible, instead of punishment, they offered [opportunities for restorative justice](#), which bypasses the criminal justice system. Also, in the coming school year, they will [no longer even wear police uniform](#).

That is to say, the SROs were a well-thought out compromise between competing concerns, neither of which has the luxury to exist in a vacuum, and is certainly not proof, [as the protesters claimed](#), that the schools "don't give a

fuck about black youth.”

Ironically, the protesters’ demand to remove the SROs, because they are ostensibly the jack boots of white supremacists and agents of oppression, would wind up leaving schools few options to break up fights. All the schools would be left to do would be to make more calls to the same street cops who are far more likely to react harshly to kids acting up, and perceive adolescent hijinks, especially by black boys, as a challenge to their authority. Inevitably, this would result in sending more students into the school-to-jail-pipeline – to a result that is directly the opposite of what they say they champion.

2 As the [police report](#) about the Whitehorse Middle School incident recounted, an 11-year old girl came to school in an agitated state, lashing out at her teachers. First, she was removed from her home room class for arguing with her teacher, and sent to the office to talk with Robert Mueller-Owens, the school’s Positive Behavior Coach.

After counseling, Mr. Mueller-Owens thought the girl had calmed down and, so she wouldn’t lose another school day, returned her to class instead of sending her home. Unfortunately, she continued disrupting that class, telling the teacher to “shut the fuck up.” The teacher then called the office, and a teacher’s assistant was sent to help and stand next to the girl in an effort to discourage more outbursts. When the girl continued swearing and threatened to spray the teacher, the assistant called Mr. Muller-Owens for help.

He first sought to gently encourage the girl to come with him out of the room so the science class could continue, to no avail. He next sat behind her as she moved around the room in an effort to discourage her disruptions. When nothing worked, he next asked the entire class to leave in an effort to avoid a confrontation. But that, too, fizzled when, at first, she said she would leave, only to promptly change her mind and get up again supposedly to sharpen her pencil near the back door.

There they got into a tug of war as the girl attempted to slam the door as an expression of her anger, and he put his foot in the jam so it wouldn’t loudly slam. This only succeeded in making her angrier, calling him a “white bald headed motherfucker,” and punching him in the face, breaking his glasses, which, led him to cross his arms to protect himself, and then to physically attempt to push her through the doorway and outside the classroom. [Footage](#) from the video camera in the hall shows them rapidly going through the doorway (in less than a second) and across to the other side of the hall (2 seconds) where they fall onto the floor (8 seconds).

It is at this point in the hall outside the classroom where the participants’ statements to the police diverge. Only in the interval where they fell was there time for Mr. Mueller-Owens to do what she alleged. In those 8 seconds, he either, as the girl claimed, uncrossed his arms and punched her in the arm, and then ripped out her braid extensions. Or, as he recounted, he kept his arms crossed in front of him to protect himself from her punches, as he attempted to push her out of the room, where they accidentally fell. While the teachers aide told the police her view that he was not justified to have attempted to push the girl out of the classroom, she did not state that she saw him hitting the girl. The [video](#) from the hallway is too indistinct to show the position of his hands, but, in addition to the teachers aide, the video shows that there were at least two other people in the hallway at that time, whom the police presumably interviewed. No one is reported to have corroborated the girl’s claim that, as they fell, he hit her and pulled out her hair. The police said they found [no evidence](#) that he struck her.

That was the bottom line of the police report: *none of the charges by the girl, who had come to school already agitated and disturbed, were corroborated by anyone*, and none of the girl’s advocates have since brought forward any evidence to contradict the police report.

Certainly, any student’s charge of racism should be scrupulously investigated. But, treating a child’s claim seriously is an entirely different matter from accepting an unsupported charge of racism as *ipso facto* true – much less doing so before undertaking a full evaluation at which the accused may be heard. Jumping to conclusions about unproven allegations against someone is always morally wrong, and is especially disturbing when these were made just months after “Empire” star Jussie Smollett’s [hate crime turned out to be a hoax](#).

Yet MMSD has admitted to the *Capital Times* that, notwithstanding Dr. Cheatham’s commitment to “review

every fact to understand what happened,” [the District never even conducted an investigation](#), nor talked to nor provided Mr. Mueller-Owens with an opportunity to be heard in his own defense. Nor does Dr. Cheatham appear to have considered how a school can function if teachers are fired for doing their best under challenging circumstances when the race card is played..

In addition to the fact that the police report turned up no evidence to support the girl’s claims, nothing has surfaced in Mr. Muller-Owens 30-year record with the District to suggest anything but his being an empathetic teacher. MMSD’s website continues to [highlight his good work](#) from 2015 on behalf of students leading the restorative justice project, in recognition for which, Dr. Cheatham [took him to the White House](#). The District Attorney, who is black, was similarly [unable to find any basis](#) to press charges, and instead concluded that the protesters’ [“narratives are based on incorrect information](#) and assumptions that have been alleged as fact.”

Nonetheless, after Dr. Cheatham was [pilloried by protesters](#) claiming that the School District was “racist” for, allegedly, allowing an innocent child to suffer a “brutal beating,” that led her to be “violated,” “violently brutalized” and “beaten bloody” with “her hair ripped out of her scalp” by “an ass-fucking white man,” who is “a White Supremacist,” the Superintendent issued a peremptory diktat. Without even giving him a hearing, she publicly branded his actions as [“especially horrific,”](#) and to underscore that her final determination was rendered without regard to any facts, she added *“no matter what comes out of the police investigation.”* In contravention of every tenet of a democratic society, she effectively forced Mr. Mueller-Owen to resign.

Somehow, even though branded a White Supremacist, with his life’s career in ruins, Mr. Mueller Owens was able to only think of how he might quell the community’s anger. He [confided to a reporter](#) that he had “nothing but love and compassion for this family, for the girl in particular ... I only want healing to happen.”

Weaponizing children’s dark side predictably acted like an accelerant, turning a brush fire into an inferno. For Dr. Cheatham’s actions telegraphed to the District’s students that they could, by calling out “racist,” get any teacher fired for the crime of trying to curb misbehavior in order that others might learn.

Predictably, two months later, at [Leopold Elementary School](#), another black girl called her mother to cry that the white principal had hit her in the face. The child’s mother and uncle stormed the school screaming “where is the fucking principal, I’m going to beat her white ass.”

Luckily, in this case, before they were able to inflict bodily harm on the principal, who had cold-locked herself in her office, an aide interceded to show the mother a surveillance video of the incident, which revealed that the child had lied. But, what will happen next time when there is no video?

In the aftermath of the Whitehorse incident, few qualified teachers will any longer be willing to either take the now suicidal position of Positive Behavior Coach. Or, if they do, they will no longer be willing to engage when their intervention is badly needed.

Beyond that, though the underlying Behavior Education Plan was a well-intentioned effort to deflect misbehaviors and avoid suspensions, the way Dr. Cheatham went about implementing it poisoned the well. In the real world, it is inevitable that sometimes the best efforts by teachers to defuse disruptions will turn out messy. But, her repeated reactions to racial controversies showed that she treated any outcome short of perfection as proof of racism and grounds for termination, without even a hearing. Teachers reacted in bewilderment, saying she would [“throw them under the bus”](#) just to inflate her reputation to the vocal protesters, whom, her actions suggested, were the only voices she answered to.