

PRESS RELEASE



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Statement by Laura Steele at Mountain Brook Schools BOE Meeting on July 12, 2021

My name is Laura Steele and I have been a resident of Mountain Brook for 15 years. I have two boys who have attended Crestline Elementary School. I am also a Child Psychiatrist and have worked with countless Mountain Brook families.

I'm here to talk about what I know best: children and their emotions. I want to start with a truth that I think we can all agree on, our children are stressed and confused. The last year has been hard on all our kids. They are in need of the adults (us) to help them navigate our complicated, changing world. Even the teenagers who may be behaving as if they are beyond this need our guidance.

I have done my best to listen and be empathic to the concerns expressed about possible negative consequences to our children from implementing programs that encourage inclusion of all children in our schools. I heard that people are worried that it will put more stress on our children. I'm understanding that there is concern that children will feel anxious about getting pronouns wrong. Another concern appears to be that if a child says or does something that is perceived by another child as racist or antisemitic, there will be damaging consequences hence the worry that our children will be "walking on eggshells". Listen, I get it. I have kids too. I love them boundlessly just like these concerned parents love theirs. But we are not doing our kids any favors by trying to change reality out of our own fears and anxieties.

The reality is that we live in a global world. For our children to be prepared for the global world, they need to know how to get along with a wide range of people who look different, pray differently, and love differently. I would much rather have our children start to learn about how to talk about race, religion, and gender differences in the safety of our schools, with adults trained to gently teach them when they make the inevitable mistakes, then launch them unprepared into college and jobs where the consequences of a racial slur, for example, can be expulsion from school or loss of a job. They are just children now but soon that will not be the case.

Now I would like to address the board about our children who have experienced prejudice, antisemitism, and bullying because there seems to be a lot of misunderstanding around this. I have heard many people claim that either this is not occurring or that it is inconsequential. Or that while it may be occurring, it is not the job of the school to intervene. I find myself in a difficult dilemma because children and families have shared their pain with me but I cannot share the details of their stories or I would be breaking their trust. Many of the stories are from my clients but many of them are from members of our community who just needed someone to listen to them. I have seen people request data on how many children have had negative experiences around prejudice and bullying. I will give these people the benefit of the doubt that they genuinely haven't heard these stories themselves, therefore are not convinced of the need to address the issue. But I will ask the question of why would children and families come forward and share their pain in a public forum when they see that only makes them a target? Heck, I watched the superintendent be attacked and bullied at a formal meeting. What do you think that tells families about the safety of sharing their stories?

So I will simply have to do my best to convey some of their pain and if people feel the need to attack me for it, so be it because I feel strongly that loving your neighbor sometimes means taking the heat of hate for them.

I want to start with racism. It is not an accident that we have so few Black neighbors in Mountain Brook. While I heard someone screaming at the last board meeting about how welcoming we are, that is simply not how many Black people have experienced Mountain Brook. The N word is used commonly in our schools. In fact it has been drawn on school property with some frequency. Visiting teams have been subjected to racial taunts. My understanding is that when issues of racism have been brought to school administration, the response often does not result in that student feeling supported but rather more vulnerable. What frequently occurs next is that the family pulls the child from the school to protect them. The friends of the families who have had these negative experiences learn that their friends were not welcomed and they decide to not send their children to Mountain Brook Schools. This results in our schools continuing to be segregated.

Antisemitism has become all too common in the Mountain Brook School system. I believe that the reason we hear about more incidents of antisemitism is largely because we have more Jewish neighbors than other minority groups. We are all aware of the swastika incident from last summer but I hear that there have been many swastikas drawn on school property such as on books and in bathrooms. Children have been subjected to being told "I hate Jews" by other children. I've honestly lost count of how many times I've heard that a child is told that they are going to hell. Imagine how frightening that must be for a child? To be clear, from the families I have talked to this statement is not delivered with love or concern but rather as a threat. Children should not be made to feel unsafe in their public school because of their religion.

I have been surprised to learn about some of the issues involving the LGBTQ community in Mountain Brook Schools. For example, I thought we had outgrown using the word "gay" as an insult but I understand that it is everyday jargon which contributes to some of our children feeling excluded. Many children I have spoken to have shared examples of comments and actions from both their peers and teachers which leave them feeling that it would be unsafe to be honest with people about who they are. I also understand that the Gay-Straight Alliance was trolled by a group of high school boys who showed up to heckle the club members. I realize that it is hard to keep up with the latest thinking around sexuality and gender and some people may feel confused or upset by the change. But imagine how confusing it is for the children? We need to meet them where they are at with these difficult conversations so that they are not alone. Regardless of one's beliefs around these issues, hopefully we can agree that it is not acceptable to be cruel to another child. Period.

I have only touched on three groups of marginalized people and I hope that others are able to give a voice to more of the groups. MB Listens has collected a number of stories from the community but please understand that these stories only come from the people who feel comfortable enough to share them. Many of the people who privately shared their stories don't feel safe to publicly share them, even anonymously, due to concerns that the details will be recognized. I do hope that MBS begins to track incidents of racism and prejudice in the future so that it is easier to understand the extent of the issue.

Thank you for your time.

About MB Listens

MB Listens is a nonpartisan, 501(c)(3) nonprofit, grassroots organization that is striving to ensure that everyone is accepted, welcomed, and treated equally in Mountain Brook. To learn more about MB Listens, please visit us at www.MBListens.com or www.facebook.com/MBListens.