

Good evening Agawam Public Schools community,

As district leaders, the events of the last week have left many of us speechless at a time when we recognize the need to speak. We watched as George Floyd, among a growing list of African Americans like Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, unjustly killed. We watched as individuals across America and other countries voiced their anger and frustration as they came together to protest. And we watched as peaceful protests that voiced anger and demanded justice turned into civil unrest, rage, violence, and destruction.

Robert Trestan, ADL New England's Regional Director, shared the following message earlier this week:

“Racism is foundational to our country’s history. It taints the country’s application of its laws, values, and ideals of justice. It is used to decide who will be heard, who will be free and who will be deserving – of justice, of education, of health care, of mercy, and most tragically, of life itself. We have seen its taint historically and we see its taint today in the very institutions we turn to for justice and safety: our courts, our police, and our government institutions at every Level.”

As a predominantly white leadership team, we cannot fully imagine the feelings of our black students, families, friends, and colleagues, many of whom are shouldering the impact of these losses in addition to a pandemic that is disproportionately impacting communities of color. As educators, we do not condone violence and destruction, yet we stand firm in our support of the millions of people across our country who believe that we all must be better.

Watching the demonstrations unfold over the last week, we do not want to be a school district that is perceived as complicit or uncaring, especially as leaders of our schools, which are among our community's largest and most prized institutions. It is our responsibility as educators and school leaders to challenge systems that privilege some while disadvantaging many others. We need to reflect and educate ourselves as leaders, staff, students, and as a community to ensure that our schools provide a safe and inclusive space for everyone. Our schools, classrooms, and community are critical in addressing legacies of inequity and systemic racism, and the absence of trust with and by communities of color requires us to have a greater commitment and urgency around this work.

In his message, Tresta,
continued:

“We all must contribute to the effort to dismantle the thinking and systems that have institutionalized racism. Each of us can begin, right now, by taking a stand in our own communities, on social media platforms and in daily conversations, and by supporting organizations engaged in this effort. Collectively, we must imagine a country that is better, believe that it is attainable, and

work together to create it.”

It is incredibly frustrating for us and our staff members to be apart from our students and one another during these historic and difficult times. We miss the opportunity to meet face-to-face with our students and families to process these events in meaningful ways because these conversations make us all better.

In Agawam, we have a Director of Social Emotional Learning, Marlene DeJesus. She has been working diligently in her position to help the district in many ways in dealing with daily stressors our students experience. Marlene will be sending a letter very soon similar, in many ways to this letter. In addition, she will be providing resources for all of us to learn and share with one another, and especially with our children.

We do not have all of the answers, and the issues are more complex than we could ever write in this letter. Yet despite the complexity of our times, we need to move beyond watching to acting, and we are more committed than ever to working collaboratively with our community- our staff, students, families, and community members- to develop and implement strategies to address inequity, bias, hate, and racism.

Sincerely,

Steve Lemanski, Supt. of Schools