

*An email message from Jon Sills, Superintendent of Schools
sent at 9:57 am on Friday, May 29, 2015*

Dear Families and Colleagues,

Thank you to the many parents who have emailed expressions of appreciation for the way in which the schools are handling this situation. It is especially heartening to read the many positive appraisals of our efforts to engage our students openly and honestly in difficult discussions about race and other differences. And I appreciate the respectfully communicated differences of opinion that some parents have taken the trouble to share.

The vitriole communicated by a few, however, is disturbing mainly because of its echoes in the halls of our high school. We just discovered a Snapchat image of one of our African-American students with the caption, "N****s not aloud [sic] here". We know that this is a minority opinion, but it is deeply disturbing, and it reveals the ugly reality behind the less lethal, often unintended, racial insults that our student videographer was attempting to address. Just three weeks ago, Dr. Turner and I heard testimony from a group of our African-American high school students who have been subjected to comments like, "Black people moving into Bedford are bringing the town down."

Please bear with me as I strive to clarify where Dr. Turner and I stand with regard to the conflicting claims of "double standards" and prejudice.

We believe that there is an important difference between hate speech or the accumulated racial slights that many of our students of color have unfortunately experienced on the one hand, and an attempt to educate others about racism that used stereotypes to make its point on the other. The problem with the latter is that it promoted the same "generalizing" mindset that underlies all forms of prejudice, and because it was shown without context or commentary, it pushed away many of the people whom it was intended to inform.

But hate speech and the accumulated hurtful comments have deeper roots and are expressions of persistent inequalities. Our job as educators is to address those inequalities where they exist in our educational institutions and to provide the tools with which students can truly come to understand each other, to empathize, and to be enriched by their differences. Everyone has a story, and when we take the time to hear each other's stories, we perceive our human commonalities and appreciate our individual uniqueness.

Bedford is a town that truly strives to be inclusive and caring. The community's multicultural day was a huge success. Our schools have for many years required all new teachers to take an course about racism and we devote much of our professional development to cultural proficiency.

Equity is a core value and it informs a great deal of our daily work. As one parent wrote last night, "I applaud the school's response and do hope that it will continue to inspire respectful and sincere debate among our high school students and families. One of the many reasons I love living in this town is that my children are receiving an education in a school system whose teachers and staff do pay attention to issues around diversity. At the end of the day, these young people will be entering a world that is so complex and in which many people do not consider the impact of their own inherent prejudice on others. I support the Bedford school system in providing education about prejudice and racism. It is SO important and necessary in these complicated times."

But it is difficult and complicated work. Our steps and missteps will upset some and encourage others. Above all, we strive to create a safe environment where all students feel safe to respectfully share and explore their feelings and perceptions, both because it is their right, and because change cannot happen unless we do. And when students of any race, background or belief feel shut down or ill-done to, their negative emotions interfere with learning. And learning is what we are all about.

It is a privilege to serve a community that stands behind its schools and encourages us to help their children grow into tolerant, thoughtful and empathetic citizens.

Jon

Jon Sills
Superintendent,
Bedford Public Schools
781-275-7588
jon_sills@bedford.k12.ma.us