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John E. Johnson, Esq., Interim Director
Michigan Dept. of Civil Rights
3054 West Grand Blvd., Suite 3-600
Detroit, MI 48202

Re: Brighton Area Schools

Dear Mr. Johnson:

As you may know, there have been recent reports about young men identified as students in the Brighton Area Schools who posted blatantly racist and homophobic images to social media. One media report stated:

“The pictures show a young white male, identified by multiple parents and their children as a Brighton High School student, in black face, both wearing a cowboy hat and making a Black Power sign with his fist. A third picture shows the same teen in red paint with an anti-gay slur written across his forehead. The pictures, which do not appear to have been taken on school property or during school hours, were reportedly posted to the teen’s social media and from there quickly passed along on various Facebook group pages.”

The ACLU of Michigan is concerned because of suspicions voiced to us that the racial attitudes displayed in these social media posts are not unique and isolated, but in fact reflect a persistent trend of racial hostility in the school district itself. We are further concerned that, notwithstanding the school district administrators’ written policies and stated opposition to such conduct, their response to these circumstances is ineffective. As you know, unchecked racial animosity, harassment and discrimination can create a racially hostile educational environment that is prohibited both by Michigan’s Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act and Title VI of the federal Civil Rights Act.

The reasons for the school district’s racial problems may be found in a parent’s reaction to the racist social media posts. In a news report she describes the Brighton school district as a “homogeneous bubble.” Brighton is more than 99 percent white, and Brighton Area Schools has racial demographics that are not significantly more diverse. Brighton’s school district administrators claim they have instituted projects intended to promote cultural competence, but scholar Dr. Willis Hawley has explained the inherent dangers of all-white academic settings. He notes:

“...[A]vailable evidence indicates that indirect programs that merely emphasize the transmission of information about other groups but are not able to utilize intergroup contact have little impact

on actually changing the behavior of students. Like learning new communication skills, the skills needed to relate to students of other racial and ethnic groups require practice.”

Hawley goes on to explain:

“It has been found that the reduction of stereotyping and the increased understanding that racial exclusion is harmful are products of children’s social cognition, perspective taking, empathetic responses, and moral judgments, all of which are enhanced in integrated environments. These outcomes are especially important in the education context, where stereotypes may inhibit academic interaction and learning by all students.”¹

The ACLU of Michigan became aware of these dynamics when we were contacted by a distressed parent in 2018. At the time, her son was in the second grade at Hawkins Elementary School in Brighton. He was the only Black child in his class. As part of the family’s efforts to raise the child’s racial self-esteem, he began to grow locks. Before the locks were fully grown, his teacher used the child as an involuntary prop by placing a knit cap with artificial locks attached to the inside band on the child’s head, presumably to demonstrate for the class what his hair would look like when fully grown. The child was not only humiliated when other children laughed at him, but photos were taken of the child and shared.

The child’s mother says she complained to the principal because the teacher (a certified special education teaching assistant) should have known better. She says she also asked the principal to arrange cultural competency training for the staff, but the principal refused and dismissively claimed the child was told about the hat the preceding day, and that he was happy and excited about it. Given the risks of racial isolation and humiliation borne out by the actual results, the mother believes she should have been consulted instead of her son. The mother was told the teaching assistant was later promoted to a fourth-grade teaching position and also that other personnel involved in the incident were transferred to other schools. Consequently, we filed a complaint with MDCR which has been pending since 2019, and which remains unresolved.²

Since the filing of the MDCR complaint, the family has observed heightened and genuine concern about the racial climate by a few school officials, but it has become increasingly clear that the absence of a critical mass of students and teachers of color in the district is a continuing impediment to the type of racial transformation that the school district’s environment needs. We therefore propose that as a method of not only addressing the specific concerns of our client family, but also achieving an objective that will benefit the entire school district, that MDCR initiate discussions with school district administrators about how to ensure the development of relationships between white Brighton students and students of color – particularly at the elementary school level.

Education experts are likely to be able to propose a number of strategies for achieving this objective. Possibilities include, among others, the development of student exchange programs

¹ Dr. Willis Hawley, “Cross-Racial Understanding and Reduction of Racial Prejudice.”

<https://www.learningforjustice.org/professional-development/crossracial-understanding-and-reduction-of-racial-prejudice>

² MDCR Case No. 493885

where school districts with opposite racial demographics essentially “swap” selected students for specified periods of time. Another option might involve having classes partner with classes from other districts with opposite racial demographics on collaborative projects, using technology when in-person meetings are not feasible. Empatico (www.empatico.org), which connects children from diverse backgrounds is a platform worth exploring. In sum, the district should move with some urgency in helping their students develop meaningful relationships with people of different racial and cultural backgrounds.

There is more that can and should be done in Brighton’s classrooms to ensure that students value any cross-racial experiences they might have. Unfortunately, because of a long history of white supremacy, too many people, often on a subconscious level, have internalized not only beliefs that communities of color are an “other” within the society, but also that they are inherently inferior because of false notions that historically, only Europe had the intelligence and initiative to develop civilization, and all other regions of the planet were primitive. A revised curriculum can do much to demonstrate the global similarity of the human experience with respect to social, political and economic development. Brighton’s school administrators should be encouraged to consider the following steps:

1. The revision of curricula for history and social studies classes to incorporate meaningful sections about the origins and development of ancient non-European civilizations. Examples of such civilizations include but are not limited to: Mali (West Africa); the Mayan civilization (Central America); and the Tang Dynasty (China).

It is worth noting that Michigan law (MCL 380.1164b) provides: “A school district or public school academy that teaches world history in a middle school or high school grade is encouraged to focus the content of instruction regarding Africa on at least 1 or more of the following kingdoms: Ghana, Mali, Songhay, Benin, Bornu, Nubia, Axum, Meroe, Monomotapa, or medieval Ethiopia, or on the Swahili coast prior to 1750. This section is not intended to prohibit or limit teaching about other areas of African history.”

Children have the capacity to learn and appreciate the universality of human development and thereby gain the ability to respect all people regardless of race or ethnicity. Learning the basic lesson that all people have an equal capacity for development is a good first step.

2. Because students who learn of ancient non-European civilizations become curious about the fate of these societies, revision of the curricula for high school history and social studies classes to incorporate meaningful instruction and discussion of the roles of the slave trade, conquest and colonization in the underdevelopment of certain non-European territories can provide answers to questions about why ancient civilizations did not keep pace with, or even overtake western civilizations.
3. Viewing and discussing age-appropriate films about slavery that have been recognized by credentialed historians as reasonably accurate depictions of life during the slave era can make more real a period in history that is difficult for modern minds to imagine. The re-make of the *Roots* series is one such resource. The devastating impact of slavery is often minimized, and such distortions are often used to discount assertions that what happened

in this hemisphere over the course of centuries in many ways shaped the racial perceptions of all who live in America.

4. After learning about the realities of historical racial oppression, students benefit from the experience of learning to appreciate the tremendous sacrifices that were made to resist and overcome racial discrimination. In a series of sessions, all students might view and discuss the documentary series “Eyes on the Prize” or comparable documentaries about the Civil Rights Movement or the Abolitionist Movement.
5. The social, historical and institutional factors that account for the enhanced benefits and protection enjoyed by the white community must be understood if racial problems are to be effectively addressed. Students might therefore benefit from participation in seminar discussions of the concept of white privilege facilitated by an appropriately credentialed scholar or analyst.

None of this is a guaranteed roadmap to success, but it does provide a general conceptual framework for changing the curriculum in consultation with experts.

Finally, school district administrators must be challenged to develop an effective plan for attracting and retaining faculty and staff of color. We don’t dismiss the difficulty of this task, but minimally there should be consultation with experts who can provide informed guidance.

Thank you for not only considering these ideas, but also for sharing them with Brighton school administrators with an eye toward resolving my clients’ complaint pending with MDCR. If you need additional information, do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

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