



Northern
California

December 13, 2017

Joshua Whiteside, Esq.
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Re: Follow-up to meeting re District's next steps to address racial hostility

Dear Mr. Whiteside,

We write on behalf of the ACLU of Northern California and ACT for Women and Girls. First, thank you for meeting with Abre' Conner on November 27, 2017, to discuss Visalia Unified's commitment to addressing and affirmatively combatting the racial bias on campus that we raised with you. We appreciate that the District is amenable to entering a written agreement that would outline the steps that the District would take to ensure students are learning in a welcoming environment. We expect the components of such an agreement to include: training for District staff, guidance regarding how to address instances of racial hostility on District campuses, procedures and protocols for tracking instances of racial hostility, and guidance regarding the taskforce and peer leadership opportunities. We look forward to working with you on the terms of that agreement.

It is our understanding that the District would like to start working with students immediately on a taskforce to address racial bias on campus. We believe that a taskforce is an important aspect of the District's efforts, and after talking with a number of District students who have experienced racism with VUSD, we offer the following suggestions:

Selection Criteria:

We strongly believe that it is essential that the District prioritize the voices of students who are part of historically oppressed and marginalized communities at the District. These groups may include: students of color, students with various religious affiliations/non-affiliations, students from different gender identities and expressions, sexual orientation, and abilities and disabilities. We hope that the District will not include academic standing and/or existing involvement in student government as criteria for the taskforce, as these factors may exclude the students who do not feel welcome at school.

In terms of identifying students, we suggest an open application process where students can explain their reasons for wanting to be on the taskforce and what they will contribute. We further suggest that the application process be “blind,” so that the persons selecting the taskforce would not know the students’ names. The District should clearly state selection criteria to ensure students are not discouraged from applying based on traditional standards for leadership opportunities.

Meeting times:

In selecting meeting times, the District must be cognizant that students will have different schedules, including after-school responsibilities like work and care of family members. The meeting times should prioritize the times when students will be available, not District administrators or the facilitators. Because some students may have to miss a few meetings, the District should also ensure that someone take detailed notes of taskforce meetings that can be circulated.

Term of Taskforce membership:

To ensure continuity as well as institutional knowledge, the students would like the minimum time to sit on the taskforce to be one year, and a maximum of two years. This would allow students to sit on the taskforce a second year if they would like to continue sharing ways the District can address racial hostility. Selecting new students each year may seem like a way to gain various perspectives, but in our experience, it is generally not helpful in terms of continuity and long-term change.

Facilitator/Moderator:

Although students appreciate the District choosing an in-district facilitator for the taskforce, to ensure robust conversation and heighten the comfort level, we strongly believe that it should engage an outside, experienced person to co-facilitate the meetings. It should go without saying the impact that having a teacher or administrator as a facilitator may have on a student, but this power dynamic may increase tension when discussing topics that may implicate that school official directly.

It should also go without saying that any person leading a difficult conversation should strive to recognize their implicit and sometimes explicit biases against groups of people. While the District has identified a facilitator, it hasn’t stated whether this person received any additional training regarding implicit bias, current and historical information regarding bias and discrimination in the District as well as across the country, students’ rights, or how to conduct these meeting in compliance with the Brown Act while also protecting student privacy. Without careful attention to each of these topics, we fear the District may not fully address racial tension. Indeed, the facilitator may unintentionally exacerbate the problem.

For these reasons, we request that the District identify the trainings the facilitator will undergo prior to starting taskforce meetings as well as identify an outside co-facilitator.

Scope of the taskforce:

The scope of the taskforce should allow students to discuss, and put the school board on notice of, current race relations while ensuring that the District is accountable to whether campus life is more inclusive. At the same time, the school board should be working to ensure a more inclusive school environment through a more comprehensive written agreement, which we look forward to working with you on.

The students feel it is important to address various issues that lead to an unsafe and hostile environment. The dress code is an important portion of that discussion. However, students have expressed that addressing other specific incidents of racial tension should be within the purview of the taskforce. Indeed, students are the best gauge of their lived experiences within the District. Thus, the taskforce and students should decide the topics of discussion.

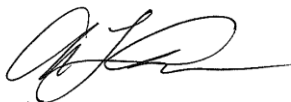
As it stands, the District has not explained the mechanism to ensure the taskforce can help create meaningful change. To ensure transparency and accountability, students would like the school board to report on findings from the taskforce at school board meetings. These reports should also include any tangible next steps the school board is considering to address the student taskforce discussion.

In addition to these steps and recommendations regarding the student taskforce, it is our understanding that the District is interested in starting a community taskforce. Given the various steps needed to ensure that the student taskforce meets the requirements listed above, we would recommend the District wait before adding more taskforces. This will give the District the vital time necessary to consider any role for a community taskforce. And, this will likely help the District maintain the student voice as a priority.

In conclusion, we appreciate the opportunity to work with you in bringing about meaningful change in the District. To that end, we would appreciate a meeting in early to mid-January to discuss the taskforce and other components of the District's plan to address racial bias on campus. Could you please let us know your availability for the following dates: January 10, 11, or 18th?

As always, please do not hesitate to reach out if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Abre' Conner
Staff Attorney, ACLU of Northern California



Gina Rodriguez
Program Director, ACT for Women and Girls

cc: Dr. Todd Oto, Visalia Unified Superintendent
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