

June 7, 2020

Dear Parents, Guardians and Colleagues,

These are uncertain times. We have all been sharing conversations lately in our effort to find some clarity amidst the confusion. A minister friend of mine recently described what we have been facing as a brutal “one-two punch.” In boxing, a “one-two punch” is a combination of blows delivered in rapid succession. It is an apt life metaphor for the succession of events in recent weeks.

The Coronavirus has killed over 100,000 U.S. citizens and left many millions unemployed in an economic free-fall. It caused educators to rapidly re-invent teaching methods in response and we will continue to do so moving forward. While staggering from this, we have been eyewitness to a gut-wrenching video of a cruel, purposeless killing of a Black man, George Floyd. It is one of too many such recent episodes of injustice. We find ourselves angry, saddened, unsettled, and drained all at once. We are reeling from this “one-two punch.” Just as we immediately got back on our feet and rapidly responded to the first, we must also be prepared to quickly address the second.

Nelson Mandela said, “No one is born hating another person because of the color of their skin, or his background or his religion. People must learn to hate. If they can learn to hate, they can learn to love.” Learning to love is reflected in one of our fundamental “Learner Outcomes” of the Berlin School system, helping all students to become kind, compassionate citizens.

The Berlin Public Schools has a unique opportunity to help with this learning. Educating is our foundational purpose and learning, our aspirational outcome. Looking ahead will require both a telescope and a mirror.

As we hold up the mirror, we see some of the ways we have already been addressing the issues of racism, tolerance, civil discourse and social justice.

-We have instituted events during Black History month at Berlin High School. Our Unity Club is now determining how celebrating people of color can occur all year round.

-We have reviewed our Language Arts/English curricula and made changes to offer more diverse literature selections, as well as investing in the purchase of more diverse texts for classroom and school libraries.

-We instituted two new social studies electives, *Human Rights and Social Justice* and *Debating Current Events*, which will provide an opportunity to engage our students in learning more about the past and present struggles in the fight for justice in this country and around the world.

-We provided a number of professional learning opportunities for teachers within the district, including *Productively Addressing Hurtful, Biased Comments or Actions in Elementary School*, *Boost Your Cultural Competency*, and *How Diverse is Your Classroom Library?* Additionally, a group of more than 30 Berlin teachers and administrators have been participating in a year-long study as Equity Advocates.

-The district supported teacher attendance at a variety of outside professional learning sessions on culturally responsive schools, equity, and college admissions for students of color and restorative practices.

-The district increased our seats for the Open Choice Program.

We are only at the tip of the iceberg as we continue moving forward. Holding up the mirror also requires us to look at previous missteps and mistakes as well. The members of the Berlin Board of Education have read and digested the thoughtful emails of former students highlighting some experiences that they felt were problematic. This provides the district with important feedback for improvements. We want all students and alumni to know that they can bring their concerns and suggestions directly to the school superintendent. As a district and as individuals, we are committed to continuous improvement and to never stop being learners ourselves.

When we look ahead through our telescope, we will look to more fully engage our students, faculty and community members in needed discussions to determine additional impactful responses.

Black activist Malcolm X wrote, "There is nothing better than adversity. Every defeat, every heartbreak, every loss, contains its own seed, its own lesson on how to improve the next time."

It is in that spirit of embracing adversity that we will seek to successfully move forward from where we find ourselves today, to where we can be tomorrow; a better Berlin Public Schools and a better world.

Berlin Superintendent of Schools and
Berlin Board of Education