

Manasota Anti-Racism Coalition
Peace Education and Action Center
P. O. Box 2540
Sarasota, FL 34230

October 19, 2020,

Sarasota County Schools
1960 Landings Boulevard
Sarasota, FL 34231

Subject: Petition about Racism in Sarasota County School District

Dear Superintendent Asplen and Sarasota County School Board Members:

School systems around the nation are seeing the need for a greater understanding of—and deliberate action to address—the sources of racism and racial inequities within their schools. They are making bold institutional commitments to an in-depth review of their policies and procedures, and investing in anti-racism education for students, teachers, administrators, and staff for the long run. In Sarasota, recurring tensions around race and persistent racial inequality indicate that the district needs to join these school systems around the nation.

The same educational systems that have created the “school-to-prison pipeline” for students of color are graduating white students with little or no understanding of the source of our country’s racial divide, the history of the oppression of people of color, or the nature of systemic racism and white power. This academic deficiency of white students in understanding the history and manifestations of racism has had a profound impact on how our nation functions. It has led to violence against people of color and amplified division and intolerance in our nation. Our educational system must be transformed for the benefit of all students and our country.

As other school systems organize to make anti-racist education a core competency of their systems, Sarasota County School District must begin the transformation necessary to sustain their A+ rating as a leading school district. School leaders know there is opportunity for improvement in racial equity in order to eliminate persistent racial gaps in performance and educational outcomes, racial disparities in discipline, and racialized opportunity gaps in the district. To that extent, and based on best practices being shared by leading systems about the methods for transforming a school, we petition the School Board to do the following:

1. **Establish a Racial Equity and Inclusion Committee.** We applaud the creation of the anti-racism task force in the district as well as the Superintendent Asplen’s decision to bring together community leaders to address racism, inequity, and the achievement gap in the Sarasota County School District. We encourage the district’s leadership to ensure that these

efforts develop into a committee, holding an established place within the overall structure of the district that will oversee the development and implementation of a Sarasota County School District Anti-Racist Program.

- Enrich the Racial Equity and Inclusion Committee for the school system with robust member representation of Black, Indigenous and People of Color (BIPOC), and give these members decision making powers. Include student representation, as requested by Sarasota Students for Justice, as well as teachers, administrators, and community members on this committee.
 - Empower the Racial Equity and Inclusion Committee along with district staff to conduct and compile research on racial disparities in areas including—but not limited to— student achievement, enrollment, suspension/discipline, graduation rates, and gifted identification.
 - Report quarterly to the school board, superintendent, and public about the research, programs implemented, and evidence of improvement in each area outlined by the anti-racism policy.
 - Change all racially insensitive school names, curriculum and mascots to something that is not offensive and marginalizing.
 - Develop a reporting process with clear accountability and mechanisms for transformative justice to address the reports of students and staff who have experienced racism or discrimination, including but not limited to Islamophobia, antisemitism, transphobia, homophobia, and misogyny.
 - Implement consequences for racists acts, including false reports of threat, violations, discrimination, or disturbances that exacerbate racial inequality, committed by students, educators, administrators and paraprofessionals with greater accountability and transparency.
 - Create clear policies that protect students and staff from retaliation for reporting incidents, including language clearly stating consequences for staff who do not report such incidents.
 - Assure that the responsibility and time requirements for the implementation of a system-wide anti-racist program does not fall disproportionately on educators and staff of color.
2. **Invest in Anti-Racism and Implicit Bias Training.** Require ongoing anti-racism and implicit bias training for all educators, school leaders, employees, administrators, and school board members in the district.
- Identify and contract with a professional anti-racism training organization to provide such training to the School District, which includes opportunities to develop a deeper understanding of local racial history and the racial history of the United States.
 - Establish clear, measurable goals for anti-racism and implicit bias training programs for staff and create a mechanism for employees to provide feedback about anti-racism and implicit bias programming.

- Provide additional resources and opportunities for continuing education and the integration of anti-racist knowledge into policies at the district, school and classroom levels, including within curriculum and classroom interactions.
3. **Recruit and Retain BIPOC Educators, Administrators, and Staff.** Establish hiring practices that accelerate the recruitment and retention of BIPOC educators, administrators, and staff. Studies have shown that having one Black educator in elementary school improves academic outcomes for black students, especially black males from working class backgrounds¹. Studies have also shown that even when taking performance on standardized tests into account, non-Black teachers are less likely to recommend black students for gifted programs².
- Implement programs that increase the number of BIPOC educators in schools; for example, develop full scholarships to train BIPOC educators and initiate programs that begin recruitment of BIPOC in high school.
 - Gain clarity on the specific challenges that BIPOC educators face in the county and cultivate the necessary support programs to ensure retention of BIPOC educators.
 - Increase the pay of paraprofessionals to a living wage, and cultivate more programs that help paraprofessionals become certified teachers.
 - Create appropriate accountability mechanisms to ensure the district is making concerted efforts to increase the diversity of its school staff and achieve the goals of the anti-racism program.
4. **Invest in the Development of Student Support Networks.** Reallocate funding to increase the number of counselors, social workers and mental health workers, implementing and funding restorative justice, trauma responsive interventions, anti-racism, and intergroup dialogue programs in all schools. The ACLU reported that students in Florida schools, especially Black students, are more likely to interact with law enforcement rather than student support professionals like nurses, social workers, or psychologists³. Additionally, although only about 8% of Sarasota’s students are Black, 23.4% of those referred to law enforcement in 2017⁴ and 36% of those arrested in 2018 in our schools were Black⁵.
- Promote reconciliation and individual student growth through restorative and transformative justice approaches, and revise the student code of conduct to incorporate

¹ Gershenson, Seth, Cassandra M. D. Hart, Constance A. Lindsay, and Nicholas W. Papageorge. 2017. “The Long-Run Impacts of Same-Race Teachers” IZA Discussion Paper No. 10630, *Institute of Labor Economics*, Bonn, Germany. <http://ftp.iza.org/dp10630.pdf>

² Grissom, Jason, and Christopher Redding. 2016. “Discretion and Disproportionality: Explaining the Underrepresentation of High-Achieving Students of Color in Gifted Programs” AERA Open 2, No. 1: 1-25. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2332858415622175>

³ Morton, Michelle. 2020. “The Cost of School Policing: What Florida Students have Paid for a Pretense of Security” American Civil Liberties Union of Florida Report, Miami, FL. <https://www.aclufl.org/en/publications/cost-school-policing#jump>

⁴ According to data collected by the U.S. Department of Education’s (Department) Office for Civil Rights (OCR).

⁵ These finding are based reports compiled by Michelle Morton, Esq. of the ACLU through their Juvenile Justice project.

more measures that teach and promote conflict resolution, intergroup dialogue, and positive behaviors.

- Limit the presence and role of police in schools and establish clearly defined, professionally trained, trauma and crisis response teams in every school to de-escalate conflicts and protect students and staff.
- Require all law enforcement and security personnel to participate in anti-racism and implicit bias training and—as the ACLU recommends—establish minimum requirements for training of police in schools, limit the use of force by police, and establish rules around the youngest age at which a child can be arrested.
- Hold regular “Know Your Rights” workshops for students and parents that detail and distinguish between a student’s rights when interacting with school staff and with law enforcement.

5. **Institute a Culturally Responsive and Anti-Racist Curriculum.** With commitment and intentionality, provide resources for the development and implementation of culturally responsive and anti-racist curriculum for every subject at every grade level that includes age-appropriate educational material on the contributions, culture, and history of BIPOC groups.

- The Florida Legislature has mandated the teaching of African and African American History [F.S. 233.061 Sec. (1) (G) (1994) as amended by F.S. 1003.42 (h) (2002)]⁶. Additionally, local community organizations such as Newtown Alive have documented local African American history and/or created resources that can be incorporated into the curriculum. The district should expand the resources available for educators to meet this standard and take advantage of these opportunities.
- Florida curriculum standards also require teaching about racial and cultural diversity. The district should adopt curriculum and instructional materials for all grades that reflect racial and cultural diversity, increase awareness of existing standards, and provide resources for educators to meet these standards.
- Create a requirement that all students in the district take BIPOC and/or Ethnic studies courses, including those focusing on the history of slavery, reconstruction, Jim Crow, the Civil Rights movement, and contemporary concerns.
- Provide opportunities for cross-cultural and cross-racial student interactions in both in-class and extra-curricular programs, and collaboration to foster respect for cultural and racial diversity. Additionally, provide students with anti-racism and intergroup dialogue training.

6. **Ensure Equitable Access to Educational Opportunities and Honors Programs.** Create initiatives that ensure equitable access to all learning institutions, magnet programs, AP/IB courses, and other honors courses for students, and hire additional Black Educators and Educators of Color to teach those classes.

- Require magnet schools, honors programs, and other special programs to track race data for applicants to ensure that BIPOC applicants are not underrepresented in the applicant

⁶ Standards discussed by the Commissioner of Education’s African American History Task Force (afroamfl.org).

pool. Search for and implement best practices for increasing applications by and enrollment of BIPOC students into these programs and institutions.

- Magnet schools, honors programs, and other special programs should start buddy programs with local neighborhood Middle Schools to promote preparation for matriculation in the programs.
- Ensure that students feel welcomed and have all of the necessary resources to succeed once being accepted to these programs and institutions.

These policies must be applied to all public schools as well as all charter and private schools that receive public money. The Sarasota County School District must act now and take this opportunity to become a Florida leader in anti-racism education. School systems that tackle these issues will be the educational leaders of the future. We look forward to discussing the contents of this petition with you. We can be contacted via email at SRQAntiRacismCoalition@gmail.com.

Sincerely,

The Manasota Anti-Racism Coalition

American Indian Movement - Florida Chapter

ANSWER Suncoast

Boxser Diversity Initiative

Center for Religious Tolerance

Manasota Interracial Book Club

Newtown Nation

Sarasota Anti-Racism Working Group

Sarasota Chapter of the NAACP

Sarasota Strong

Sarasota/Manatee Unit of the National Association of Social Workers-FL

Peace Education and Action Center

Progressive Sarasota

Rodney Mitchell Foundation, Inc.

Unitarian Universalist Social Justice Committee

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