

June 12, 2020

Dear Clarke County School District Community,

As your interim superintendent, I write to express my feelings on current events and my support of efforts to address the injustices unlawfully and unethically imposed on people of color. I have worked for days to process my feelings and capture my thoughts in a written format. I recognize that these times dictate the need for all people to take a stand. On March 8, 1965, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. preached a sermon on courage in Selma, Alabama. As he talked about the importance of taking a stand against injustice, he passionately stated that "a man dies when he refuses to stand up for that which is right. A man dies when he refuses to stand up for justice. A man dies when he refuses to take a stand for that which is true." As an individual and as a school district, we are compelled to take a stand regarding not only the recent incidents of racial injustice but the years of physical and systemic oppression that have been enacted upon people of color.

Unfortunately, our past and current realities have been filled with examples of men and women of color dying without justification. Lives have been lost, not only for taking a stand but simply because of the color of their skin. While there have been many improvements in racial relations since 1965, there are other areas that seem to either be stagnant or regressing. We have an obligation to speak against these injustices and to partner with each other to take action towards ensuring equality and equity.

As a mother, my heart bleeds for the physical lives lost as well as for the spiritual deaths occurring as our children witness the devaluing of their lives by some members of society. I shed tears at the thought that my birth children and school children cannot be guaranteed safety in their own communities. It is disheartening to have to engage in daily conversations about how to keep children safe from those who are in positions designed to protect them. I feel helpless as I listen to youth discuss their fears and frustrations and desires to find a way to be treated equally.

While I in no way condone illegal and violent behaviors, I understand the anger, which can lead to the responses. We must provide tools and resources for our families and staff to support students while they navigate the feelings they experience during these challenging times. I call on all of us to learn from this and to be our better selves.

The recent resurgence of attention to social and racial justice resonates closely with our school district's cry for equity in the teaching and learning of all of our students. Today, our focus on equity is more critical than ever. It is essential that we work to ensure all children have the resources they need to become college or career ready. Educating our

youth goes beyond merely teaching theoretical concepts. We also have an obligation to teach them how to apply the knowledge gained in a manner that develops them into engaged members of society. Our children must be taught the importance of voting and becoming actively involved in the social and political dialogues within their community and world. They must be taught that it is acceptable to be angry, but meaningful and sustainable change comes when that anger is channeled positively into avenues of productive action.

Three years after Dr. King's speech in Selma, he gave his last speech before his assassination. In this famous "I've Been to the Mountaintop" speech, he reflected on the horrible conditions of the times, yet he stressed the need for hope and encouragement. His statement of "only in the darkness can you see the stars," provides me with hope for where we are today. While we all may hurt personally and collectively, we cannot become mired in our place of pain. Instead, we have to search for the stars among our current darkness. Our students are stars. Our equity work is a star. The passion of so many teachers, school leaders, parents, and community members are stars. We must all commit to shining brighter now than ever before. We must not only shine our lights on the injustices faced by many in our community, but we must also shine a light on potential solutions to move us forward.

I look forward to engaging in this critical work with each of you.



Dr. Xernona Thomas

Interim Superintendent