

Community Coalition on Race's Schools Committee Co-Chairs Speak before BOE on De-leveling Proposal

February 20, 2018

The promise of true academic excellence and equity in the South Orange/Maplewood School District for all students regardless of race remains unfulfilled. We have heard story after story of students of color who felt locked into a level, not given an opportunity, or discouraged from advancing from lower levels to more challenging ones. Too many students have never realized their full potential because they were held back by an archaic discriminatory system.

The Coalition on Race has been working towards true equity and excellence in our schools for our entire existence as an organization – more than 20 years. Academic studies make clear that when deleveling is implemented in an educationally sound manner, all students benefit: the positive effects include a narrowing of the racial academic achievement gap, a pro-integrative effect within schools and classrooms, and increased flexibility and creativity in thinking among all the students.

In 2003, the Coalition on Race fully supported what was then a controversial plan to de-level the sixth grade. We also supported the de-leveling of 7th grade in 2010, the more complete Middle School Transformation project in 2012, and the reduction in levels in 9th grade in 2013. We have always maintained that our excessive educational tracking system does not serve all students well, has failed to prepare children in the lower levels for college, results in de facto racial segregation, fosters a biased school climate, does not support the closing of the racial academic achievement gap, and robs all children of the benefits to be derived from mixed-ability classrooms.

We also supported the Access & Equity Policy with the belief that it would provide more opportunities for students of color in the high school and result in less segregated classrooms. But, we have been troubled by the lack of help for students in choosing their levels and support for those who opted to take more level up. This decision was a small step in what has become a truly divisive issue for our school district. It is our hope this evening that we can come together as a community and support, as well as hold the district leaders accountable for ensuring that all students realize their full potential.

It is our understanding that the superintendent's 2018 plan being presented to the board is aimed at changing the district's math program to strong standards-based courses with no more level 2 or level 5. We believe that this is a step in the right direction. We support these changes if the implementation serves all students—high achievers along with students who need academic support. We also want to be sure that staff are supported in these changes: that they have the training needed to handle classrooms with mixed ability students, that their classrooms are manageable in size, that they have professional development, that they have adequate classroom time to teach, and that they have adequate school day time to meet students needing support or challenges.

Nationwide, Black and Hispanic students are penalized by tracking, while white and Asian students benefit. Why should we expect anything different here when we continue to follow the same practices in leveling high school classrooms? How do any parents—white or black, American or foreign born—explain to their children that the same kids they've been in classes with since kindergarten are now in separate classrooms that can be identified by race? We owe all students a high school experience that is racially integrated, equitable, challenging, supportive, and preparatory for their chosen paths upon graduating.

Our district has talked a good game about equity, integration and diversity for far too long while the schools have had an educational system that has resulted in divisions by race. We, the community, demand better for our students.

We believe that all of our students need the same things: classes that stimulate and excite their desire to learn and rigorous standards that challenge even the brightest student. No student should be

denied that opportunity. We urge the Board to support the Superintendent's plan, but especially to put in place measures to support the success of the students who are moving up and to keep expectations, standards, and opportunities at the highest possible level for all students. Our students deserve nothing less.

On behalf of the South Orange/Maplewood Community Coalition on Race

Carol Barry-Austin and Meredith Sue Willis
Co-chairs of the Schools Committee