

STATEMENT TO BOE, INTEGRATED SCHOOLS

June 22, 2018

The Superintendent and the Board of Education of the South Orange Maplewood School District are in the process of presenting a plan for much needed building repairs and reorganization for the most efficient use of our buildings. **The Community Coalition on Race and its Schools Committee welcome** the improvements to the district's physical plant, and we support the district's decision to use the capital improvement plan as an opportunity to finally end the *de facto* segregation of our schools. We believe that one of the most important considerations for improving our children's experience and learning is true integration.

It is also essential for our community to realize that the case for integrated schools does not rest solely on benefits for children of color. There is a powerful rationale for why white people should be fighting hard for true integration. All students who attend integrated schools are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward people of different races and ethnic backgrounds. Empathy and reduced racial prejudice are best fostered in diverse classrooms. Students from integrated schools are more likely to choose integrated colleges, integrated communities to live in, and to have friends from other racial groups and ethnicities. Everyone benefits when the circle of people and experiences is broadened.

Furthermore, children who learn in racially/ethnically mixed environments master tools for living in the real world. They are more likely to become global citizens with a view of the world that is broad and inclusive. There is even evidence that their very problem-solving abilities become more flexible, their thinking more complex and nuanced.

The danger of segregated schools is that our students will not have the opportunity to learn the personal histories of students who are different, who do not share the same racial and ethnic background. This is perhaps the most important way to break down stereotypes. Eliminating stereotypes increases learning opportunities, cognitive capabilities, and the ability to interact productively with others. As the workplace becomes more global and diverse, productivity on the job depends increasingly on collaborative problem solving.

We all want the very best for our children, and we want our children to attend schools that help make us one single community. Our classrooms should reflect the demographics of our two towns. It is not enough to desegregate the school buildings, we must do the same within the classrooms as well.

We must also acknowledge that the final reorganization plan, whatever form it takes, will require some families to adapt to challenges more than others. We sincerely hope and expect that this process will not place an undue burden on the families of any one neighborhood, and that the fears and concerns of all the families will be addressed. **In particular, we must make sure that the changes do not unduly burden families of color. Families of all races are expressing concerns about issues like the loss of the comfort of neighborhood schools; the burden of distant schools to families who don't have someone to do pick-ups; options other than rezoning not being considered. There is a fear that we are backing into a plan based on the need for space and repairs rather than basing changes first on educational considerations or the need for integration.**

What we must keep in mind, however, is the larger picture of the importance for our children of living in a racially and ethnically mixed environment that benefits everyone. True integration of our schools must be among our highest priorities. We believe this expresses our community's values and gives our children the best possible preparation for the global community. If we truly value diversity, then we as a community must stand together for the greater good—in spite of personal inconveniences. If we truly believe in equity for all of our children, then we must fight for it.

Choosing to support integrated schools is perhaps the most meaningful way parents can act out their values and thus support equity and reduce racial disparities in our local community, in our nation, and in the world.

Presented by Carol Barry-Austin and Meredith Sue Willis, Co-chairs of the Schools Committee, on behalf of the South Orange/Maplewood Community Coalition on Race