

June 9, 2020

Dear Members of the CAIS Community,

In the past two weeks since George Floyd was murdered, and then buried today, I have heard eloquent statements from citizens protesting racial violence, read letters from national leaders such as Barack Obama, reread commentary on the murder of Black People and People of Color in our communities, and read letters from heads of CAIS schools that have been thoughtful, personal, and wise.

This letter is flawed because it is a reaction. It reflects my reaction to the murder of George Floyd as well as my reaction to the shooting death of Breonna Taylor in her own home, the vigilante death of Ahmaud Arbery, and the racist encounter endured by Christian Cooper in Central Park and numerous other racist acts against Black People and People of Color. And, this reaction has a long history going back to the history we know and that which we have regrettably forgotten, such as the Tulsa Massacre of 1921.

In my own efforts to write words I have struggled because I recognize I can only respond through my lived experiences. As a teacher I know that what I need to write must have a call to action. As the executive director of this association, what I write has to move us to action. As a person, I need to take action. And what I also heard in protests and statements and letters was this question: what are White People going to do to evoke change? As a white leader of a voluntary association of 92 schools, I found writing what to do required in me something deeper than the words I wanted to write – words of anger, of contrition, of despair, of confusion. Action could be fueled by these, but not sustained.

I sent a draft of an earlier letter to two intelligent, thoughtful, and passionate leaders who chair the CAIS Commission on Diversity in Independent Schools (CODIS). Not surprisingly, their response to the draft was both supportive and also pointed – “but what are you going to do?” There are levels of what I could do: things I could do as a person, and things I could do as an executive director of an association of schools - - schools who are different in almost every way. These are *independent* schools; I was aptly reminded. *Independent schools* like individuals, must take independent actions based upon their communities, programs, and missions.

With *independent* in mind, I begin with a near-term call to action for our association of schools to do the things within their power to do and so I encourage school leaders to:

- Lead from the front, by engaging in courageous and transparent conversations about your experience with diversity, equity and inclusion. If action is going to happen at schools it has the start with leaders owning their own experience with privilege and power.
- Engage the resources at your disposal to fully support your Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Program and personnel. Prioritize diversity, equity and inclusion at your schools and bring a trained professional and the issues of equity into every leadership conversation, as equity needs to be present in every decision.
- Use your Board Retreat or other meetings to bring in professionals to discuss diversity, equity, and inclusion and challenge to the Board to take substantive action as a Board, including looking at inclusionary power structures.
- Commit to making conversations about privilege, white supremacy, and racial violence, a priority for your school community and hold yourself accountable to listen for recommendations to take action.
- Listen to your constituents including parents, alumni, faculty and staff, and especially students.
- Incorporate the history of your school into the study of history for all students, and be transparent about the present.

As Executive Director, I raise a call to action for the Association to

- Invest in the Commission for Diversity for Independent Schools. Our commissions raise their own revenue to fund programming and return a portion of that revenue to CAIS to fund the overall work of the association. I will include in every school invoice for 2020-2021 a request to add to the annual membership fee an additional amount to be used specifically for a CODIS fund directed toward to the Student Diversity Leadership Conference.
- Support the executive director in investing time in Commission for Diversity for Independent Schools and support its work and persistently ask how the association might assist more.
- Review CAIS accreditation standards around diversity, equity, and inclusion and seek input from the Commission for Diversity for Independent Schools around these standards, and ask other accrediting associations to do the same. This review also includes reviewing the association's own statements on diversity, equity, and inclusion.
- Work with the CAIS Board to bring equity into every discussion within the Board room and create a CAIS Board-level committee whose role is focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion in our association governance.

How do we address systemic racism? We are educators, so our path is through education, and in actions that are intentional, persistent, and reflective. As important as it is for the association to take these near-term actions, we must use these to near-term actions to sustain long-term progress to address systemic racism that often results in violence against people of color.

While I commit to the association level goals, I also commit to my personal goals. I appreciate the input I have received, including early in my tenure at CAIS the recommendation from a CODIS member to read Dolly Chugh's book, *The Person You Mean to Be: How Good People Fight Bias*. It was a good recommendation for someone Chugh would probably describe as "semi-bold" and a "work in progress." Her advice as a social scientist is in part to audit our behavior. That resonates with me, but further, from that audit, take action.

I am also cognizant of my life breathing the smog. Beverly Daniel Tatum wrote, "Cultural racism—the cultural images and messages that affirm the assumed superiority of Whites and the assumed inferiority of people of color—is like smog in the air. Sometimes it is so thick it is visible, other times it is less apparent, but always, day in and day out, we are breathing it in. None of us introduce ourselves as "smog-breathers" (and most of us don't want to be described as prejudiced), but if we live in a smoggy place, how can we avoid breathing the air?"

I commit to drawing on the power of our weekly head of school Zoom meetings to engage in conversations around diversity, equity, inclusion, and what processes we can implement that will lead to positive change. We can take steps to audit, reflect, listen, and take meaningful action, then reassess, and commit to persistent and systemic change in our schools and in our association. In addition, as a member of the Board of Directors for the National Business Officers Association, I have asked that my committee service be on the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee for the coming year.

The action items are a beginning and as such, they are both works in progress and part of an ongoing plan for action. I also believe this is a renewal of our commitment as an association that recognizes each of us has a vital role to play in this process. I ask our members to continue to engage actively in this process with their schools, the association, and with one another. Thank you for your commitment to change and for being on this journey together.

Best regards,

Rick Branson
Executive Director