

Winooski Students for Anti-Racism

“One either allows racial inequities to persevere, as a racist, or confronts racial inequities, as an antiracist. There is no in-between safe space of “not racist.” The claim of “not racist” neutrality is a mask for racism.”

- Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be An Antiracist*

Dear Winooski School Board Members and the Winooski School District Leadership Team,

The United States’ education system is an old, broken, and systemically racist system. Since the beginning of its time, the American education system was created to educate the white male children of colonial elites. It was a system created to ensure the maintenance of a racist and classist status quo. Today, this injustice still holds true. While education has now become available to more audiences, educational opportunities continue to be taken away from the members of the marginalized communities. Our existing educational system continues to uphold systemic racism, and, as research shows, students of color, particularly Black students, continue to be marginalized and oppressed. Students of color and immigrant/refugee students are frequently punished with less educational opportunity through higher rates of suspension/expulsion creating a the school-to-prison pipeline, use of unjust funding formulas that disproportionately affect poorer districts with more people of color, reliance on standardized tests to determine students’ potential, presence of police and militant forces in schools, lack of cross-culturally competent teachers and administrators, and so many more structures of racism; these forces collectively prevent the success and futures of students of color. The presence of biases and prejudices among teachers and administration exacerbates these systemic challenges faced by students, thereby preventing them from achieving their full potential.

The Winooski School District is not an exception. The district is often touted as the most diverse school in the state, home to students from various marginalized racial backgrounds, ethnic groups, and low-income families. The city itself is a home to over 20 years of history as an immigrant/refugee resettlement site, starting with the resettlement of Vietnamese and Bosnian families in the 1990s and subsequent resettlement of Somali and Bhutanese refugees. However, with this growth in diversity, fear, prejudice, and discrimination grew within the confines of important spaces for these families – within our very own school district. The Winooski School District has had and continues to have instances where implicit bias, police dependence, discriminatory suspension/expulsion, overt racism, and much more take place. Racism exists within the halls of our district. Many of our students, who may already come into the classroom with trauma as a refugee or first-generation immigrant, witness, learn, and never forget where and when racism has affected them in this school. In our conversations with current and former students of WSD, we learned about the presence of such biases, prejudices, and discriminations; these

unfortunate experiences range from microaggressions and blatantly racist comments from teachers, administrators, and white peers and community members to labeling a former refugee student as a “terrorist” and forcefully searching their entire body (including shoes, socks, and backpack) for over a month before they were allowed to go to the classrooms.

With the history of Winooski and America’s broken system in mind, the district’s key stakeholders have had plenty of time to unlearn their biases, educate themselves in anti-racism practices, listen to the stories and experiences of our students, and to develop support structures for students of color through anti-racist policy and curriculum. However, the only thing that remains consistent is Winooski’s nicely-worded commitment, without any tangible anti-racist action plan, to “create a positive and caring environment where every student’s success is important.” Given racism is a systemic issue embedded in our entire system (and particularly educational system), a “positive and caring” environment simply cannot be created in the absence of racially conscious policies, practices, pedagogy, and curriculum.

The School District blusters on about the diverse composition of the student body, continuously proclaiming, “Our students are our future.” However, while the student body has become more diverse, reaching a level where the majority of the students are students of color, almost every teacher at WSD is white. Despite having students mention the prejudices they faced/continue to face at school, the school board, as well as the school leadership, has failed to take any significant and tangible actions towards racial reconciliation and progress. In our discussions with students, we learned of incidents when students were gaslighted, thereby masking the reality of systemic racism that prevails in our school district. In such a diverse school district located within a city that is considered a refugee/resettlement site, the diverse culture and values brought by students and their families are still viewed as “foreign.”

Likewise, the school district knows that the former refugee/immigrant students arrive at the doorsteps of our school with deep trauma and distrust associated with armed police officers. And it is equally aware of the research findings that the presence of School Resource Officers (SRO) creates harsh environments of students of color, particularly black students. However, rather than attuning to the needs of our students and research findings, it continues to employ a SRO in the name of “school safety.” To this day, the District has made no efforts in hiring trauma specialists/experts in supporting refugee/immigrant students and students of color.

Let’s be honest and face the reality: **if Winooski truly cared about its diverse student groups and their future, it would have implemented anti-racism pedagogy and practices a long time ago.** It would have listened to the experiences of students of color in its classrooms and would have significantly changed its policies and practices. Instead, the district waited until the national discourse on #BlackLivesMatter movement became prominent and grabbed onto the opportunity to release a carefully-worded statement about racism in America and its education system. Even then,

the statement failed to own up to the fact that **racism is also Winooski's problem** and that **many students have suffered from racial biases, prejudices, and discriminations within the walls of WSD**. Failure to pointedly name the issue and to take ownership of the district's shortcomings are problematic in themselves. Furthermore, the statement simply promises some vague and abstract ideas, without committing to any concrete actions and structural change. If the WSD students truly are our future, Winooski School District must acknowledge and accept the fact that racism has existed in its halls for decades and, in many instances, it has caused long lasting trauma among many students of color. **The journey to progress can only begin with honest acceptance of the brutal truth and genuine commitment to remediate the existing situation.**

In its public statement, the WSD Leadership asserted that it “recognize(s) the need to develop a clear vision and action plan for moving our school community’s equity work ahead.” Likewise, the School Board expressed its commitment “to providing... equitable education” while calling “the community of Winooski to stand with [the Board] in combating racism in its all forms to ensure each of our students are truly afforded their inalienable rights.” If the Board and the leadership team are honest about their intentions and commitments, you must implement bold and tangible actions to create an environment where our students, particularly students of color, feel safe, welcomed, and respected. Our school must begin to feel like a place where all students’ identities are respected and the diversity of our community is celebrated. The diverse culture, values, and practices that our students and families bring to our District must be accepted as a part of our own society, rather than some “foreign” practices. Only then we can effectively ensure the success of our students, aka our future.

In conversations of this nature, activists/advocates are often asked “what actions should we take then?” Anticipating such inevitable questions from the Board and the leadership team, a group of current and former students reached out to our peers, learned about their experiences, researched policies and practices, and consulted with several community members and individuals with experience in equity and inclusion work. Based on the findings, we the undersigned members of the WSD community petition that the Board and the leadership commit fully to implementing the eight-point action items demanded through this letter. These signatures supporting our demands were collected via an online petition.

It is more important than ever that the Winooski School Board and the leadership team address our demands and take immediate action to ensure that Winooski begin creating an anti-racist environment, particularly one that is supportive for our students of color.

Our Demands:

- 1.** Immediately form a Racial Truth and Reconciliation Commission (“Commission”) tasked with organizing hearing campaigns related to the occurrences of racial biases, prejudice, and injustices at Winooski School District (WSD) in the past. The Commission must communicate with current and former Winooski students and their families using communication methods and language accessible to them. It must also guarantee that information shared by students and their families will be kept confidential, unless they agree in writing to go public with their testimonials. The Commission must comprise community members, students, parents, teachers, and school board representatives, and its racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and gender composition must reflect that of the WSD student population.

The Commission must release its findings within three (3) months of its formation to the public. The Board must take appropriate actions to remedy the effects of the past while also ensuring that similar incidents do not occur at WSD in the future.

- 2.** At the beginning of 2020-2021 academic year, launch a permanent Anti-Racism Committee to which students facing racial prejudice, biases, and discrimination can directly report the occurrences of these incidents. Upon receiving such complaints, the Committee must immediately begin the investigation process and the findings be presented to the Board. The Board must then take appropriate actions to remediate the situation and to ensure that same incidents do not occur in the future at WSD. As discussed above, the composition of this committee must reflect the diversity of our community.
- 3.** Replace the School Resource Officer (SRO) with two (2) trauma specialists trained in restorative justice practices/intervention. One trauma specialist will work directly with the elementary school and the other trauma specialist will work directly with the middle/high school. We demand that at least one of the specialists identify as (a) person of color.

To address issues of emergencies that may previously have required an armed officer on the school premises, the school district should develop a collaborative mechanism with the Winooski Police Department, so a timely response can occur in such unfortunate and rare emergency scenarios.

- 4.** At the end of Summer 2020, publicly release a fully developed strategy and action plan as it relates to hiring teachers of color at WSD. Such an action plan must be prepared in consultation with parents and students of color and community members. It must also make an explicit written commitment to ensure that at least 15% of the entire WSD teaching staff

are teachers of color by the academic year 2022-2023.

Students must continue to be an integral part of the teacher hiring process, with their opinions and feedback taken as key parts of the teacher hiring process.

5. Immediately require its teachers to incorporate components of ethnic studies curriculum and anti-racism pedagogy within the existing K-12 curriculum. It must also begin to develop a concrete plan to launch a fully-funded ethnic studies program by the beginning of 2022-2023 academic year. The program should be led by an ethnic studies coordinator and the funding must be made available for ethnic studies training for social studies teachers, and ethnic studies education for all teachers within the district.

Ethnic studies, the interdisciplinary study of difference and power, and anti-racism, the active effort of working against racism's unjust and multidimensional aspects, are essential subjects that the next generation of young people, especially students of color, must understand and use in their daily lives.

6. Form a review committee by the end of August 2020 tasked with the responsibility to review and evaluate existing curriculum, teaching practices, and policy structures to ensure that they conform to contemporary ethnic studies and anti-racism standards, expectations, and pedagogy. The review committee should consist of students, parents, teachers, community members, administrators, school board members, and subject-matter experts. This committee must review the curriculum and their execution throughout the 2020-2021 academic year and present its findings and recommendations to the School Board and the school leadership board by the Summer of 2021. These findings and recommendations must immediately be released to the public. Teachers should then be provided with training and support to ensure that the recommendations are executed by the 2021-2022 academic year.
7. Hire a professional on students' civil rights to host biannual workshops that educate and support parents and students in understanding how to advocate for their children and their own educational rights at WSD. These workshops must focus on the federal and local regulations related to the rights of "ELL" students as well as students with disabilities, civil rights and anti-discrimination laws, and school's responsibilities on areas such as family engagement and adequately supporting low-income students. These workshops must begin in the 2020-2021 academic year. The Board must ensure language accessibility through various language interpreters and technological accessibility through digital live streams and recorded video for parents to easily access.

In a long run, through the effective implementation of this program, families and students themselves shall be equipped to advocate for their rights at school.

8. At the beginning of 2020-2021 academic year, launch a mentorship program for “ELL” students through which all students are matched with community mentors with the goal of improving their English language skills and finding an advocacy partner in the community. The mentors must be provided with anti-bias, anti-racism, and students’ rights training once they sign-up for the program.

If the School Board and the leadership team is truly committed to creating a more equitable and anti-racist school environment, it must commit to implement the actions listed in our demands. Failure to do so and an attempt to push these demands with some other carefully worded statements and formation of “committees” without proper representation, community engagement, and concrete actions will simply reflect their unwillingness to tackle the issue of racism at our schools. Let’s accept the fact that racism is a serious social disease that exists within our school district; it continues to ruin the lives and futures of many students who have entrusted the school to help them navigate their journey.

Justice delayed is justice denied!