

Winooski Students for Anti-Racism (WSA)

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

On July 15, 2020, the Winooski Students for Anti-Racism (a group of current students and alumni of WSD) presented you with a list of eight (8) demands aimed at helping WSD begin its journey towards becoming an antiracist institution. The list of demands was circulated via petition among individuals who are directly related to the Winooski community at-large and/or the WSD and it has received 261 signatures thus far. Additionally, several community members, teachers, and representatives of local organizations have testified as well as written to the Board and the Leadership Team in support of these demands.

The Board immediately accepted the demands and promised to review them and provide a final decision on their implementation during the Board's special meeting on July 20, 2020. However, the said meeting and the ensuing special meeting on July 22 (during which the leadership team presented its list of recommendations) did not lead us to any conclusive actions.

Following the July 22's special meeting, the WSA team members met with various stakeholders, including some Board members, community members, WSD's staff committee working on the Restorative Justice Practices, and the WSD Leadership team. During these meetings as well as our own group meetings, we reflected on our demands from the lens of implementation. As an example, on August 10 and 11, we hosted discussions with the WSD Leadership team in an attempt to understand the rationale behind each of its recommendations and to include the said recommendations - when deemed necessary - into our demands. As a result of these comprehensive efforts, we have now created a finalized version of our original demands that takes into consideration the implementation aspects as well as suggestions from other stakeholders.

We demand that the Board considers a motion to approve all of these demands as written and to explicitly commit to fully implement them. As we have stated time and again, students and alumni of WSD - based on their own experiences, research, and consultation with various stakeholders - have brought forth these demands, and our work thus far have shown our ability to take a lead in their implementation. Hence, we ask that the Board provides us with the resources and grant us the permission to immediately begin the implementation of our demands.

Once again, as evidenced from students' testimonials throughout this process, racism exists within the walls of WSD and students of color - particularly Black students - have long suffered from it. Therefore, we must work immediately and collectively to get rid of all forms of racist

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practices from our school district so that our students, particularly students of color, feel safe, welcomed, and respected. Through our actions, our school must begin to feel like a place where all students' identities are respected and the diversity of our community is celebrated.

Justice Delayed Is Justice Denied!

Our Demands:

- 1.** Immediately form a Racial Truth and Reconciliation 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 and WSD staff of color will be kept confidential, unless they agree in writing to go public with their testimonials. The Commission must comprise community members, students, parents, and school board representatives (2 maximum), and its racial, ethnic, socio-economic, and gender composition must reflect that of the WSD student population. WSA may decide to collaborate with a third-party facilitator to carry out these hearing campaigns. The Commission must be provided with training, resources, and funding to ensure a commitment to impartiality and integrity is reflected in their work.

The Commission must release its findings within six (6) 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 as a part of the Restorative Justice program at WSD 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, based on the recommendation of the Committee, to remediate the situation and to ensure that same incidents do not occur in the future at WSD. The primary goal of the Committee shall be to repair the damage caused by the wrongful action (racial prejudice, biases, and discrimination) and restoring--insofar as possible--the well-being of all those involved.

The Committee members, Board, WSA representatives, and WSD faculty shall receive professional development/learning related to legal aspects of receiving complaints, investigations and subsequent actions about racial prejudice, biases, and discrimination. To ensure legal compliance on the work of the Committee, the representatives of the Committee shall consult Board-designated legal counsel.¹

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 at the beginning of the 2021-2022 school year. 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 make an advancement towards the use of trauma specialists and trauma-informed practices, the school must begin defining the role and recruitment of a trauma specialist at the beginning of the 2020-21 school year.

In regards to the role of the SRO in the 2020-21 school year, we recognize that the SRO cannot be replaced since the FY20-21 budget has already been decided. Hence, for the 2020-21 school year, the SRO's 2020-21 role must be revised such that the SRO is unarmed, wearing civilian clothing, and not parked with their police car in front of the school when on school premises. In addition, any incidents where an SRO is called to intervene must be reported. Such a report must contain specific details, including but not limited to the following:

- The reason for the SRO being called;
- Student's personal narrative regarding the reasons for SRO being involved and their interaction with the SRO; and
- Action(s) taken by the SRO.

To transition away from using the SRO as a means of dealing with ordinary school "discipline" issues, faculty, staff, and administrators should be provided with training to use restorative justice practices at school.

¹ We are informed that the said investigation process may face some challenges due to the existing system of reporting harassments and discriminations at school. If such a scenario is determined, the WSA team will work with stakeholders - including WSD Leadership Team and the Restorative Justice Committee - and will propose a mechanism that is in compliance with existing regulations no later than the Board's September meeting.

The school district should develop a collaborative mechanism with the Winooski Police Department to coordinate a timely response in rare and unfortunate emergency scenarios.

4. By January 31, 2021, publicly release a fully developed strategy and action plan as it relates to hiring teachers of color at WSD. The Board will direct the WSD Leadership Team to develop a plan of action in collaboration with WSA and in consultation with parents and students of color, teachers and administrators of color, and community members. The Board must also make an explicit written commitment to hire highly qualified staff, teachers, and administrators of color by the 2022-23 academic year with the desired goal of the WSD staff, teachers, and administrators reflecting the student population.

WSA and WSD 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.

The Board must commit to financially supporting the following:

1. Developing a PK-12 curriculum framework that articulates knowledge, understanding, skills and dispositions of an indigenous, emancipatory, abolitionist, and anti-racist system;
2. Designating professional learning for staff in Winooski schools that advances the work of an indigenous, emancipatory, abolitionist, anti-racist education learning and system; and,
3. Hiring an Ethnic Studies Coordinator by the 2022-23 school year at the latest.

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, and school board members. If deemed necessary, the Review Committee may consider using a third-party to perform an equity audit at WSD.

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 August 15, 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 accessibility of technology 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. WSA will work with representatives from the ELL department and Special Education Department.

8. By January 2021, WSA will work with current programs/work to develop a plan to coordinate and communicate mentoring opportunities to students, families, staff and the broader Winooski community and present this plan to the Board and Administration.

At the beginning of 2021-2022 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.