

**Statement by Alissha Mitchell, President, Bexley Board of Education
Board Meeting, Feb. 14, 2023**

We have a resignation agreement before us tonight for consideration. Before I call for that vote, I wish to make a brief statement.

First, I want it to be clear that our board does not and will not discuss employment and discipline of staff and students. It is against our fiduciary duty and against the law. So those folks on either side of this issue calling for or asking for details, please know, we are not trying to be deliberately vague or not be transparent. That law is in place to protect both staff and students. It is not something we hide behind, but we uphold and it is non-negotiable.

Second, our board ultimately speaks through our policy. We have done tremendous work to begin reviewing them through the lens of equity and to the extent that we need to be more clear to support operations, discipline, or values, we have committed to review or adopt revisions in tandem with our DEI leader and administration. We will work to ensure that it is clear, racism will not be tolerated in our schools.

Lastly, that conversation does not begin or end at school. It should and must happen in our homes, in our social circles and even when we feel unsure or fear the way others may view us. I held the cousin of one of the cheerleaders, whom I adore, this weekend at a basketball game in my arms. She is not even 3 years-old. Full of golden blonde curls and cheer bows, she told me she loved my skin. I told her I loved hers too. She is not being taught racism; she is being taught love. I watched black students laughing and playing with friends at the game, saw videos of black children dancing and celebrating black history month with their white classmates at lunch while news crews filmed their pain from outside. I watched them once again share their stories with classmates who stood next them in support, and confusion in a student-led walk out, but they were there. Bexley, this is our story, but it isn't the only one we have to offer the world. The other story is that this community, looking at its past, is choosing to celebrate its future.

Angela Davis once said, "You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world and you have to do it all the time."

We have been working toward this very thing friends, and we must continue doing so. I thank everyone who has reached out to share their views, ask questions or sought to simply check in or understand. I am grateful for the voices of friends, neighbors and community members last week and since. I am grateful for the immediate response of our district leaders and staff to prioritize our students and staff first, over everything else. Thank you. There is a lot of support and healing needed for families and staff and I hope that we extend that grace to each other as we ask folks to think differently, act boldly and continue to write our story together.

With that, I'd like to call a motion to accept the resignation agreement before us.

**Statement by Alissha Mitchell, President, Bexley Board of Education
Board Meeting, Feb. 8, 2023**

Before we begin board reports, I want to take a few minutes to provide a brief statement ahead of those. It is difficult to procedurally provide a statement when not in open session, but I want to take this opportunity now as we report our respective committee reports. I want to ensure our community members are given their time to speak as well.

I considered how best to address our community in this moment. First, to provide clarity in this hour of unexpected hurt. Second to consider the work we have all engaged in together as a community, to express our gratitude for all the efforts and engagement in this moment, while affirming member of the community, and encourage our governance team, educators, staff and students.

As board members, we carry a unique weight. The duality of privilege as leaders in our community while also members of it. It requires a steady calm that you never really can prepare for. What may sometimes appear as our detachment or silence is to allow our administration to do their work. Our role is very clear in moments such as these. We offer support, or provide guidance when needed and we listen. Through our policy is where our collective voice is spoken. It is how we communicate to our students, families, educators or administrators the direction and expectation of our district. I stand before you today torn in that obligation of my duty and reality of my own pain as a black woman and mother of five beautiful and amazing black children. In this moment, why I may ask for your latitude.

To pretend I am unaffected would be disingenuous and lack transparency. As the events and emotions of last week began to ripple through our homes and classrooms, halls and private spaces, I began to question if all this work, this tremendous body of work had been in vain? As I wrestled with that question, I came back to a simple realization, that it has not. Our goal all those years ago to shape a learning community that embraces our differences and the many ways that arrives in our schools, was and is the right thing to do.

Bexley schools has faced some tough reflective moments in these last years. Our district has been on a path to consider what it meant to create safe space, equitable and authentic learning environments for almost a decade. Challenging closely held beliefs and traditions. Our community, families, students and educators have all leaned in with your own collective stories, experiences and knowledge, time and commitment to help chart that path. We remain grateful to you that you hold us accountable to honor that work in policy and practice and expectations.

To black students at Bexley Schools, I specifically wish to share this message to you. Perhaps, my own path would have been different had my school board president said these words. With this platform, and not to exclude other board members or students, because my words apply regardless, I wish to say this.

Your black is beautiful. Your black is proud and awe-inspiring. It is part of a brave and resilient song. Your black is African and American. And your black is mine and mine-yours. You deserve to have a place to learn and grow, to feel safe and seen. I hope as you navigate your spaces in the coming days you do so in celebration of every part of your story as a Bexley student.

Lastly, as our families come forward tonight to share with our board their experiences, their pain and their voice, I want to encourage our board in your support and advocacy of our learning community. This part requires your fortitude and balance, but is necessary in any relationship. The moment we listen and allow folks to be heard. We want our community, our administration and educators and most of all our students to have the chance to heal forward. For the privilege you have given us to serve you, we look forward to building that trust as we all being that important next step.

**Statement by Victoria Powers, Vice President, Bexley Board of Education
Board Meeting, Feb. 8, 2023**

Before I provide my report to the board, I want to acknowledge that this has been a very difficult week in our community, and especially for our black students, families and staff, as we come face to face with the racist incident that occurred in our school last Friday. Our staff and students and our entire community are suffering and I know that it is not for the first time. I am grateful for Ms. Mitchell's comments. I also want to express my gratitude for the efforts that have been put into place to address this particular incident and to ensure that processes are improved going forward. I am grateful for the honesty and openness with which our administrators, and in particular Principal Caudill and Superintendent Fine, but others as well, have addressed the situation and have communicated about it. I am grateful for the ways in which our administrators and staff have intentionally engaged in teaching around the wrong and the harm, and also in supporting our students and one another. And I am grateful for the ongoing work in our district to continue to focus on anti-racism and equity. It is discouraging to be reminded of how much more work lies ahead. But I am encouraged by the hard work that Mr. Braxton and Dr. Fine have been engaged in for the development of an Equity Plan to help us to do better and to be better. And I am encouraged to know that the board is steadfast in supporting and in prioritizing this work. We all want a swift resolution. Our deliberative process is underway. Also, Ms. Mitchell mentioned our board policies. We will be looking at our polices. Ms. Pickrell has percolated an idea, and the we will look at that and will continue to look for other changes that may be needed.

**Statement by Dr. Jonathan Baker, Member, Bexley Board of Education
Board Meeting, Feb. 8, 2023**

The board, Dr. Fine and the BCS leadership will do the work to address this situation. But this reminds us that there are bigger situations to address and we are all collectively committed to doing this work.

When you see an iceberg, you see just a little bit on top, but there is so much more beneath the surface. In our family, we talk about having a public persona and a private persona. When something comes out in the public, you kind of wonder what's going on privately. And I think for me, as a Black man, a Black father, that's in the back of on my mind – when something comes out publicly, what's happening beneath the surface?

My kids went to Maryland. There's a quote we once said, "We are who we say we are, even when no one is watching." How much do we need to continue to learn from our elementary school days!

As a young boy growing up in 99% Black community in Chicago, we celebrated Black History Month. We had oratorical contests. We sang "Lift Our Voice and Sing," we did all three stanzas. I still remember them to this day. I remember being Frederick Douglass with the hair and the voice.

And for some events to occur at a time of celebration, you just never forget them. If there's a celebration planned and it goes south, they stay with you. The only way I can kind of connect it is to birthdays. There are certain birthdays you remember that it rained or something bad happened and you can't remember the exact year, but you remember the bad situation that happened on that birthday. And for me, and many of you, this is one of those times where we tried to celebrate, we tried to extoll and remember the great things that happened in the community, in our history, but there's a stain. And it hurts.

Conversely, I do feel as though we're learning a lot as a community. We've gone through some training. We know we may have some implicit biases and it tells us to watch out for our blind spots, to work even harder to mitigate against them. So we're not perfect, but you have to work harder.

And one thing I want to talk to is this notion of being color-blind. This is not the time to be color-blind. This is the time to be color-aware. To be aware of the differences that we bring as a board, the differences that we bring to the community, and I see it as a monolith. If you're color blind, the tendency is to say, "oh, that won't bother many people." But do the work. Find out more about the different cultures, the different subpopulations of Bexley, the different students we have. Let's do the work. Let's hold to our true values. Let's be color-aware. Let's be empathetic. Let's be supportive of one another.

The board, Dr. Fine, and the BCS leadership will do the work to address this situation, but this reminds us that there are bigger issues to address and we are all committed to this work.

**Statement by Dr. Marguerethe Jaede, Member, Bexley Board of Education
Board Meeting, Feb. 8, 2023**

First, I want to reiterate the condolences to those most affected by this incident, our Black and Brown students, families, and staff. This should not happen anywhere. Last of all in a place where we expect, or at least hope, our children and the adults who serve them will be safe and protected. I also want to reiterate the appreciation for all the staff who spent the weekend working: speaking with families, crafting community communications, and planning for a thoughtful and safe return for students and staff. The long hours you put in over the weekend and throughout this week are appreciated. In particular, I would like to honor our Black staff members, who, themselves experienced the despicable behavior of those who should know better, while simultaneously investing their time and energy in the development of a plan for how to respond. You were the first responders to a crisis that many white people in our schools and community have much work to do to fully understand. We owe you a debt of

gratitude for continuing to put the healing and care of students and their families ahead of your own. You forfeited your own time to process in the service of others. In the coming weeks, I hope you will find healthy ways to care for yourself. Your well-being is as important as the well-being of the young people you serve. You cannot give what you do not have. Please take some time for yourself.

On that note, it is important to emphasize that the burden of responding to this incident should not rest on the shoulders of our Black and Brown staff, students, or community members. It is not their responsibility to explain racism to us. It is not their responsibility to help us understand what happened. Why it happened. Or what to do about it. It is not their responsibility to tell us that despite what happened, we are good people. That this is a great school district. Or that this is a wonderful community. It is not their responsibility to assuage our guilt... or our collective culpability. Each of us own a piece of what happened last week. As well as the micro, and macro, aggressions our Black and Brown students, staff, and families experience every day.

The burden of dismantling racism should fall squarely on the shoulders of white community members. We are the beneficiaries. We own the responsibility to change the systems and structures that foster an environment where posting an offensive image during morning announcements can take place. And let's be clear, this incident did not occur in a vacuum. It did not happen in isolation. It is not the result of a single student or a single teacher. This is not the case of one bad apple.

This incident is the by-product of a community that allows the N-word to be thrown out in conversation and where Brown students are labeled terrorists. As though it's a joke. Not intended to hurt... Kind of like the image of an orangutan and a watermelon. We are a community where it is not uncommon for residents, students, educators, community members to pretend like we didn't hear, didn't see, didn't know what happened. Because confronting racism is uncomfortable. It requires that we dismantle a white-centered culture that dehumanized the "other". And, what happens when we don't know exactly what to do or to say, we often ignore what makes us uncomfortable... Because we think it's someone else's responsibility. Didn't we hire someone to do that?!? Or we hope that maybe it will just go away.

If you were surprised by this incident, then you have not been paying attention. I don't know a student or family of color who was surprised. Angry, yes. Hurt, yes. Disappointed, yes. Surprised, no. I spoke with someone yesterday who told me they expect it. That is the community we live in. You just might not have noticed because power and privilege are often most invisible to those who hold it.

The truth is, when we don't confront it head on, racism just festers. Mutates. Re-emerges in different forms. Becomes more insidious. It does not, however, go away. Our unwillingness to talk openly about racism, name it, expect, and support our educators to teach and talk about it, teach young people the history of racism, how to recognize and respond to it, makes us complicit. And our children are watching. When we turn away from difficult conversations, we model for our children that they should turn away too. We teach them to be bystanders.

Without question, the school community has an obligation to ensure every child is positioned to be safe and smart. We have the obligation to ensure that every educator is equipped with the skills and tools to facilitate challenging and necessary conversations as they relate to race, religion, gender, LGBTIA+, and all the intersecting sociocultural identities that make us who we are and impact how we live in the world. We have the muscle to respond to this. Our community understands the consequences of allowing discrimination to go unchecked. The skills for fighting racism and discrimination of all forms are

transferrable. The challenge we are facing here is less about skill and more about will. The question for the greater Bexley community is do we finally stand for our Black students and teachers and say NO MORE.

Every educator and every community member have the obligation to be human... and to see the humanity in all young people. There is no tolerance for anything less.

What is also true, is that while this incident occurred in the school, the school community alone is not responsible. We are all responsible. All of us. Each community member has the responsibility to hold ourselves, and each other, to a higher standard. To intervene when demeaning language is heard and behavior is present. We are responsible to challenge our families, friends, and neighbors. To challenge ourselves to understand more. Be better. If you don't know how. Learn. There is no shortage of information to support your personal learning. There are books, movies, podcasts, videocasts, websites. Resources about how to understand and combat racism are ubiquitous. There is no excuse for not knowing. For not trying. Because while this incident occurred in a school, it is unlikely the beliefs that were the catalyst to this behavior originated at the school. There were fostered. Allowed to find roots in our community. Future incidents will not be solved by pretending this is an isolated occurrence or that the school district can solve this problem independent of the community. True transformation will only come by confronting the root problems associated with othering people different from ourselves, by hiding from the painful truths of our shared histories, by allowing dehumanizing language to go unchallenged, and by assuming things will change without actually taking the steps necessary to change ourselves first.

We pride ourselves on being good people. On living in a caring community. But the truth is, Bexley is not good for everyone. It never has been. But it can be. It is a choice we make. Everyday. This incident, and all the ones like it that happen daily in hallways, playgrounds, classrooms, playing fields, and homes represent who we are. Not who we can be.

As you know, our district is in the midst of a strategic planning process that will inform policy, practices, curriculum, funding allocation, and hiring for years to come. It will be the North Star guiding decision making. Please take the time, energy, and passion that inspired you to send emails, brought you here today, and include it on the feedback form for the strategic planning team. It's important that your voice is heard here. And, to influence long-term, deep structure transformational change, it is important your voice is captured there as well. Thank you.

**Statement by Joanne Pickrell, Member, Bexley Board of Education
Board Meeting, Feb. 8, 2023**

Racism and racial incidents are unacceptable and should not be tolerated in our district and community. The image displayed last week was hurtful and the individuals involved in the incident need to be held accountable for their actions. These individuals involved should also participate in restorative justice programming to repair the harm caused by their actions and to rebuild relationships in school and the community.

As students and staff participate in support services to heal from this event, we also need to increase and build upon educational efforts- on race, gender, sexual orientation and other critical areas- so that these incidents don't happen again. Through these conversations or resources provided on these topics, we can hopefully change behaviors in our community.

I tried to think of an action I can take as a board member, one of five board members. I want to suggest that the board in conjunction with the administration explore the possibility of developing a set of clearly defined consequences and student supports for when an incident like this happens. Recently, we had a detailed review of policies on Substance Abuse for Extracurricular Activities and Academic Integrity policies and a structure for consequences for violating these policies. I will work with the other policy committee members to figure out if we can add a similar set of consequences and supports for incidents of racism and discrimination in our board policies, or if we can suggest consequences to be included in school handbooks, which the board also reviews and approves. And this will take time process will take time and require the input of staff, students, administrators, the board and community members.