

## **Superintendent's Statement at Board of Education Meeting, Wednesday, March 8, 2023**

We have spent the past month in our schools in a period of deep self-reflection and analysis about our culture, our practices and our ongoing work to purposefully and intentionally address anything in our schools that perpetuates or sustains anti-Blackness, racism, racist ideology, racist practices, or racist ideas.

Going back at least to December 2021, when this Board passed its Equity in Education Policy, through last month when we presented our Equity Plan to you, we have made equity the goal running through every program and policy we're reviewing or adopting.

Our pursuit of equity specifically means that we need to acknowledge, address, and disrupt racism, whether internalized, interpersonal, institutional or structural.

This incident has prompted us to continue rethinking our institutional and cultural shifts. Our principals report to us that critical preventative conversations are happening in our schools and that this reinforces how we must examine any incident like this, individually, but also systemically.

From our parents, guardians, and others in our school community, we continue to receive a lot of valuable feedback, with more promised. The fresh perspectives and new ideas we're receiving are invaluable and will continue to help inform and guide our work. We've also had multiple conversations with experts in the field of racial and equity matters.

We have been moving with a great sense of urgency since that late January event and we've been deliberate in our work – assessing how to best teach cultural awareness and address racial biases in an age-appropriate way in every grade and every building.

We know that we must show, not just talk about, how we are determined to do better. We want to move quickly, but we must move smartly and intentionally. Most importantly, we want to take the time to gather feedback from those who are in our schools every day and from members of our community.

Everyone in Bexley Schools is working hard to effect positive change for our students.

First, your amendments to board policies addressing student conduct clarify expectations for students and make more explicit the prohibition of the use of derogatory and demeaning language. The policies also move our district away from a zero-tolerance position, toward one that provides students with the intervention, support, and opportunities to participate in restorative practices when violations occur.

Since late January, we have provided additional spaces for our Black students to share their experiences and their needs, discuss their emotions and begin to heal.

We have held numerous student focus groups, listening circles, and restorative conversations.

We've had intentional teacher training at all levels to facilitate and provide them the tools to disrupt and stop racist interaction and then take proper action to deal with the situation.

We've had age-appropriate student lessons in our elementary schools teaching cultural awareness.

We are reviewing documentation of our schools' morning announcement procedures.

Our schools' climate committees have continued their vital work on cultural awareness, cultural proficiency, and restorative practices.

We continue to emphasize our Positive Behavioral Intervention and Supports expectations in all of our schools, meaning we acknowledge positive behavior and intervene, when appropriate, to redirect students' behavior.

Our district leadership meetings have focused on personal impacts of racism, discrimination, and racial trauma, as well as how they impact us as leaders. Our next leadership meeting will focus on culturally responsive school leadership practices.

We've also created and posted our Equity Issue Reporting tool in a prominent location on our district website, making it easily accessible to the public.

Finally, we are not limiting our responses and actions to our schools. Through a collaborative approach, the City of Bexley, the Bexley Public Library, and the Bexley City Schools will create an educational platform to increase community conversations and provide learning experiences to address critical issues facing residents, so Bexley moves forward as one community.

These are not the only actions we've taken. This work continues every single day. We plan to go into greater detail during the next Board meeting on April 12, when we'll hear from building and district leaders about the vital work going on in each school.

I'm happy to take any questions from the Board.

### **Superintendent's Statement at Board of Education Meeting, Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2023**

Last week when we met we talked about the time we would need to better understand what has happened here, to listen to our students, staff, and community and to continue taking the actions that would help us heal.

That process goes on. I have heard from students, staff, parents and community members. Like all of us, they have talked about the pain, anger, and confusion they are feeling.

I am listening. We are listening. And I am emphasizing to everyone that we are working at this. We also have emphasized that we must take action in response to this incident. After the careful and thorough investigation, I believe it is appropriate to accept the teacher resignation that has been submitted to you.

### **Superintendent's Message to All Bexley Parents/Guardians Friday, Feb. 10, 2023; 6:10 p.m.**

Subject: Bexley City Schools Update

Dear Bexley Families:

The teacher who supervised the middle school announcement has submitted his resignation and will no longer work with any of our students, nor return to any of our classrooms, effective immediately.

The teacher was placed on administrative leave while we investigated how a racist image was used during school announcements on Feb. 3 and his role as the supervisor of the announcements.

The resignation will be voted on by the Board of Education at a special meeting on Tuesday, Feb. 14, 2023, at 7 p.m. While this special meeting is a public meeting, there will be no public comment.

We know this cannot be treated as any sort of ending or closure and we are steadfast in our commitment to our continued efforts to eradicate racism in Bexley Schools.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jason Fine, Superintendent

**Message to Middle School & High School Parents/Guardians  
Friday, Feb. 10, 2023**

Subject: Student Walkout

We're writing to share with you that many of our students participated in a peaceful and respectful walkout protest, beginning at about 1:35 p.m.

Our priority during times like this is to keep students safe. While students originally gathered on the Cassingham side of the Complex, we encouraged students to gather in our stadium, away from streets and traffic.

On the stadium field, students gathered in a large semi-circle and listened to several students who talked, via a bullhorn, about their experiences of racism in Bexley Schools. At one point, the students formed a healing or friendship circle, many hand-in-hand.

The walkout protest was organized by students at the middle school and many high school students joined them.

The protest lasted for about one hour, before the students returned safely to their classrooms.

**Superintendent's Message to All Bexley Parents/Guardians  
Thursday, Feb. 9, 2023; 5:19 p.m.**

Subject: Bexley Schools Update

Dear Bexley Families:

I write today with more distressing news and an even heavier heart.

We've been made aware of racist social media posts, allegedly created in early January and shared from one student to another.

We also know the posts are circulating more widely in our Bexley School community, spurring the demand, understandably, that we do something and that we report what we've done.

When we learn of unacceptable actions allegedly committed by our students, we respond immediately, we investigate, and we apply the appropriate reaction based on our Board of Education policies. And then we do not talk about student consequences publicly.

In response to the appallingly racist image included in a recent middle school announcement, our students have asked us to create spaces where they can openly and safely share their feelings and concerns. We have tried to provide this safe space for them.

And now we receive examples like these racist social media posts, and we are sickened by what we are seeing.

We make this strong appeal to any family whose children are feeling unsafe, for any reason: Please reach out to us. Contact a school counselor, administrator, teacher, staff member or any trusted adult. We will set up individual meetings with families to understand what's needed, so we can offer proper support.

We continue to offer individual support to students through our school counselors and are exploring making additional mental-health resources available to meet students' needs.

Our priorities are the same: providing supportive resources, creating spaces for our students to express their needs and concerns, and using student, staff, and community input to work toward creating a safe environment.

Our challenges are growing by the day. So is our determination to meet them.

### **Superintendent's Statement at Board of Education Meeting, Wednesday, Feb. 8, 2023**

Last Friday, we experienced a disheartening and shameful incident at our middle school, when a racist image was included in the background of the school's morning announcement, displaying immediately after a historical fact was stated in relation to Black History Month.

I assure everyone here that I condemn racism in the strongest sense. I am angry, appalled, embarrassed and sickened by this event and I am deeply sorry this occurred in our schools.

Racism has no place in our schools or anywhere in our society and everything about this incident goes against the values we hold dear as a school system, an administration, and a Board of Education.

It is also important to acknowledge, recognize, and respond to the immense feelings of hurt, disrespect, and outrage, as well as the personal and profound impact that this incident and other incidents in the past have had on Black students, staff, administrators, Board members, families, and loved ones.

From the time this occurred, our administrators have worked, not only to swiftly investigate, but to also put in place the support for our Black students and staff to help heal from this hurt, provide opportunities to openly and safely share their feelings and opinions, and to keep our families abreast of what occurred.

Because our investigation is ongoing, there is much that I cannot share at this time. In addition, due to privacy requirements, some information must be kept confidential now and in the future. We do not

share information about our students because of student privacy laws. I do want to share that the teacher who supervises the announcements is currently on an administrative leave.

We acknowledge that our work to flourish as an inclusive, safe, kind, and equitable school system needs to be constant.

Our work to heal and establish trust among our Black students, families, and staff is ongoing.

Our work is ahead of us, and we understand, too, that this is not an isolated incident, and we know we are not where we need to be.

I assure everyone that as the district's superintendent, I am firmly committed to taking actionable steps to overcome the hurt and impact that this and other abhorrent incidents have caused to our learning community.

I believe that it will take time to heal; it's not something that will occur overnight. But we will move forward and work together with our students, our staff, our families, our Board of Education, and our community members, toward a better Bexley school community. We can, and must do better through our actions.

(pause) Happy to take any questions from the board before inviting Mr. Caudill to the podium.

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At this time, I would like to invite Middle School Principal Jason Caudill to the podium to share the steps we have taken at the middle school to support our students and staff over the past few days. I am appreciative of Jason, assistant principal, Raquel Armstrong, and their team for their immediate and heartfelt response last Friday and this week. Their commitment to education and restoration, while focusing on the well-being of students and staff, is clearly evident.

Jason...

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The agenda now calls for the district's Leader of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Marcelius Braxton, to present a summary of the Bexley City Schools' Equity Plan.

It's important to note that this presentation of our Equity Plan to the Board of Education was scheduled for this date for many months now.

With the events of the last week, today's presentation is timely and truly relevant to our continued efforts to build a safe school environment that values equity and inclusion. I very much welcome the timing.

It's also important to share that this is a product of years of collective work from students, staff, administration, community members, and the Board of Education. We would not be presenting to you today without the work of so many people throughout our community.

The Equity Plan you will see tonight is a result of the Equity in Education Policy passed by the Board of Education at the December 2021 meeting. We were tasked with developing an equity plan that carries out the tenets of the Equity policy and I want to thank Marcelius for his invaluable efforts in leading us through this process.

I want to also recognize how difficult this week has been and the impact it has had on Mr. Braxton, both personally and professionally, while putting our students' and staff's learning and well-being at the center of the work.

Marcelius...

**Bexley Middle School Morning Announcement**  
**Monday, Feb. 6, 2023**

Good morning BMS. Announcements obviously look a little different today.

I am here to acknowledge the harm that was done to everyone, especially our Black students and staff when a racist image was included in the announcements last week. It is horrible that it happened, but for it to happen as we recognize the achievements of Black Americans this month makes it even more difficult to understand.

While there is nothing inherently racist about primates or watermelons, these symbols have been long used to dehumanize Black people. Regardless of the intent in using that imagery, it harms those whom it targets. The impact is real.

It is important this morning to share with you the history of these symbols so that you understand why they are so offensive.

After emancipation in the 1860s, one of the crops that southern Black people grew and sold to earn a living was watermelons. White supremacists of the day were angry to see freed people competing in the financial marketplace and living autonomous lives, including eating whatever they pleased. Once it became more difficult to steal their freedom, labor, and lives, they found every opportunity to steal their joy and dignity.

The media of the time also promoted the idea that Black Americans had a pathological weakness for watermelon. Newspapers were filled with made-up stories about Black fruit thieves who lacked the self control to not steal the fruit. Medical journals even included false accounts claiming Black patients had their intestines clogged by watermelon seeds. The whole point was that Black people could not be trusted and were not fit for society.

There are historical records dated back to the 1600s when Europeans held the stereotype of Black people as apelike. As the theory of evolution began to be taken more seriously, books were published that considered Black people as less-evolved homo sapiens, more akin to chimpanzees. It is believed that it was much easier to justify the horrors that were inflicted on enslaved Africans when people believed they were a lesser human. More recently, racist taunts including monkey grunts have been directed toward African soccer stars, Formula One star Lewis Hamilton, and other Black sports icons in an effort to attack them at the deepest levels.

Because these and other racist stereotypes are so prevalent in society, it is easy for those of us who are not the target of the attacks to be ignorant or desensitized to them. These ideas can be dismissed as jokes or exaggerated for comedic purposes.

However, we must understand that our Black students, staff, and families are constantly made to feel that they are not considered equal to their white counterparts. It is common that they are monitored closely when they go to a store, watch people cross a street to avoid encountering them, or have the police called on them for being “suspicious.” Without a doubt, these acts of such blatant disrespect take a toll. I have heard from so many people generous enough to share their feelings with me that they are tired of getting up each day just to face a community that will never genuinely care about them.

The hate being expressed in this school and community is not limited to this one incident, but it must end now. If you are making derogatory statements about others' race, color, ethnicity, religion, gender, abilities, or sexual orientation, it will not be ignored. You can't change the past, but you can make decisions about how you conduct yourself moving forward.

I can't begin to express my embarrassment and sadness over this situation. Clearly I have failed some of you who believe that expressing hatred is an acceptable thing. While I'm certainly not perfect, I do my best to put each student and staff member in a position to succeed. We are still investigating this situation so there are certain things I can't communicate. I ask for your patience and trust, even if I have disappointed you before.

I can share with you that we are changing aspects of the announcements and the approval process before it is published. We considered not publishing the news show this week, but some of our students have worked hard to prepare for future shows celebrating Black History Month. We believe it would further devalue our Black students to not honor their work.

We have an obligation to acknowledge when harm has been done and to improve and repair relationships between individuals and our community. That means that everyone will need to play a role in this process to develop, build, and repair our community. Today during SEL time we will have facilitated opportunities for students to speak, listen, and share their perspectives in an environment that we will ensure is safe and fair. We want to support, resolve conflict, and heal from this, but we know we will only move forward through acknowledgement, feedback, responsibility, and accountability.

To those of you who are uncomfortable with speaking up during these discussions, we hope you will listen to how this situation deeply hurt others. When you're ready to share your feelings, you are encouraged to talk with a school counselor or other trusted adult.

**Superintendent's Statement to Teachers & Staff; Morning Stand-Up Meeting  
Monday, Feb. 6, 2023, 7:45 a.m.**

I am deeply apologetic to everyone who experienced this act of racism first-hand and to those who have since learned of the incident and felt the pain of such disrespect.

I am angry, appalled, embarrassed and I am committed to doing more to create a working environment that is safe for our black students and staff and is free from this abhorrent behavior.

Today is an opportunity to center learning, which as educators is what we do. Today is an opportunity to discuss the impact of the image that students saw and how racist stereotypes continue to devalue the experiences of Black people and how to prevent this from happening in our community moving forward.

This is hard work and we all must continue to embrace it and acknowledge the harm that was done to our black students and staff and our community. In order to heal, it will take time. We, along with the Board of Education, are working through our continued communication. We welcome critical feedback and we will engage in ongoing conversations with you, our students and our community to generate actionable steps to bring about positive change.

I want to assure you that we are working quickly to investigate, provide ongoing support, and work together as a district and community to attempt to prevent this from happening in the future. bring about resolution. We understand transparency is very important and we must honor the confidentiality of those involved.

We want to provide a few strategies for staff as we prepare to welcome students back into the building this morning.

- Support our students - guide them to counselors when additional support is needed.
- Support our colleagues - staff can reach out to their supervisors and counselors are available for staff as well. [Employee Assistance Program \(EAP\)](#) and other external support is available. See Melissa Klosternam-Lando, Director of Employee Relations for more information.
- Reiterate that racism has no place in our organization and in the world and will not be tolerated - It's not ok. What occurred is racist, offensive, and wholly unacceptable.
- Direct all media contact to our Public Information Officer, Carol Taylor
- Remain professional as employees of BCS and follow Board of Ed policy, Employee Code of Conduct and all ethical and professional standards of teaching/your profession
- Refrain from discussing anything about the students involved
- Refrain from discussing anything about any staff member involved
- Refrain from discussing anything about any potential disciplinary action/consequences
- Focus on restorative practices and student education
- Allow time for processing - We would encourage a restorative circle
- Reach out to colleagues, principals, counselors if you need support - its ok not to know all of the answers

**Superintendent's Message to Members of the District's  
Four Strategic-Planning Subcommittees and the  
Superintendent's Strategic Planning Advisory Committee  
Sunday, Feb. 5, 2023; 7 p.m.**

Dear Subcommittee & Advisory Committee Members:

We know that many of you likely are aware of a situation in our middle school on Friday in which an overtly racist image was shown in the background of the school's morning announcements immediately after a historical fact was presented related to Black History Month.

The use of this image targeted our Black students and staff members and reinforces false and racist stereotypes and tropes about Black people. This matter has harmed everyone in our learning community at Bexley Middle School and beyond and has directly impacted our Black students, staff and families.



We have since communicated the situation to everyone in the Bexley Schools' community, students, staff, and families, and I, as superintendent, expressed my deepest apology that this happened in one of our schools.

It is imperative that all Black students and staff feel a genuine belonging in our schools and that they, too, feel supported and cared for in a safe and inviting environment.

We are working to educate our students about why the image shown is racist. In fact, Middle School Principal Jason Caudill will discuss this in tomorrow's morning announcement. High school students, staff, and families will receive the information Mr. Caudill will share as well.

I, along with our Board of Education and administrators, strongly condemn the racism directed toward all of our middle school students and staff. This bigotry has no place in our school or anywhere in society. We know many students and staff feel deep pain and disrespect from this incident and we are committed to providing the resources to support their well-being, as well as providing a safe environment in which they can express their feelings, including outrage.

A thorough investigation is underway into how this situation was allowed to occur. Our administrators are working diligently to complete the investigation in a timely manner and any action taken will be in accordance with Board of Education policy. We cannot share details of an ongoing investigation and there is certain information that must remain confidential due to privacy requirements.

This week you and your peers on our strategic-planning subcommittees and the Superintendent's Strategic Planning Advisory Committee will continue your important work. We know that this situation may remain in your minds as you move forward in your study and future recommendations. In fact, we hope it does.

Harkening back to the beginning of our strategic planning, it was important for us to chronicle what we believe we're doing well and keep it. And then we worked with our community to understand where we can do better so we can work toward change in those areas.

This incident of racism cast toward our Black students and staff is clearly a wrong that cannot be tolerated and one that we must work together to correct. I know your conscientious work will address this appropriately and I look forward to your recommendations to affect change and promote progress.

I will do my best to reply to anyone with questions or concerns and will provide all of the details and information I can.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jason Fine, Superintendent

## Monday Announcements

We wanted to provide families with the script that I will be using for the school announcements tomorrow in case you want to discuss it with your student ahead of time. Our intent is not to catch anyone off guard, but to acknowledge, apologize, and educate.

Good morning BMS –Announcements obviously look a little different today.

I am here to acknowledge the harm that was done to everyone, especially our Black students and staff when a racist image was included in the announcements last week. It is horrible that it happened, but for it to happen as we recognize the achievements of Black Americans this month makes it even more difficult to understand.

While there is nothing inherently racist about primates or watermelons, these symbols have been long used to dehumanize Black people. Regardless of the intent in using that imagery, it harms those whom it targets. The impact is real.

It is important this morning to share with you the history of these symbols so that you understand why they are so offensive.

After emancipation in the 1860s, one of the crops that southern Black people grew and sold to earn a living was watermelons. White supremacists of the day were angry to see freed people competing in the financial marketplace and living autonomous lives, including eating whatever they pleased. Once it became more difficult to steal their freedom, labor, and lives, they found every opportunity to steal their joy and dignity.

The media of the time also promoted the idea that Black Americans had a pathological weakness for watermelon. Newspapers were filled with made-up stories about Black fruit thieves who lacked the self control to not steal the fruit. Medical journals even included false accounts claiming Black patients had their intestines clogged by watermelon seeds. The whole point was that Black people could not be trusted and were not fit for society.

There are historical records dated back to the 1600s when Europeans held the stereotype of Black people as apelike. As the theory of evolution began to be taken more seriously, books were published that considered Black people as less-evolved homo sapiens, more akin to chimpanzees. It is believed that it was much easier to justify the horrors that were inflicted on enslaved Africans when people believed they were a lesser human. More recently, racist taunts including monkey grunts have been directed toward African soccer stars, Formula One star Lewis Hamilton, and other Black sports icons in an effort to attack them at the deepest levels.

Because these and other racist stereotypes are so prevalent in society, it is easy for those of us who are not the target of the attacks to be ignorant or desensitized to them. These ideas can be dismissed as jokes or exaggerated for comedic purposes.

However, we must understand that our Black students, staff, and families are constantly made to feel that they are not considered equal to their white counterparts. It is common that they are monitored closely when they go to a store, watch people cross a street to avoid encountering them, or have the police called on them for being “suspicious.” Without a doubt, these acts of such blatant disrespect take

a toll. I have heard from so many people generous enough to share their feelings with me that they are tired of getting up each day just to face a community that will never genuinely care about them.

The hate being expressed in this school and community is not limited to this one incident, but it must end now. If you are making derogatory statements about others' race, color, ethnicity, religion, gender, abilities, or sexual orientation, it will not be ignored. You can't change the past, but you can make decisions about how you conduct yourself moving forward.

I can't begin to express my embarrassment and sadness over this situation. Clearly I have failed some of you who believe that expressing hatred is an acceptable thing. While I'm certainly not perfect, I do my best to put each student and staff member in a position to succeed. We are still investigating this situation so there are certain things I can't communicate. I ask for your patience and trust, even if I have disappointed you before.

I can share with you that we are changing aspects of the announcements and the approval process before it is published. We considered not publishing the news show this week, but some of our students have worked hard to prepare for future shows celebrating Black History Month. We believe it would further devalue our Black students to not honor their work.

We have an obligation to acknowledge when harm has been done and to improve and repair relationships between individuals and our community. That means that everyone will need to play a role in this process to develop, build, and repair our community. Today during SEL time we will have facilitated opportunities for students to speak, listen, and share their perspectives in an environment that we will ensure is safe and fair. We want to support, resolve conflict, and heal from this, but we know we will only move forward through acknowledgement, feedback, responsibility, and accountability.

To those of you who are uncomfortable with speaking up during these discussions, we hope you will listen to how this situation deeply hurt others. When you're ready to share your feelings, you are encouraged to talk with a school counselor or other trusted adult.

**Superintendent Message to All High School Students  
Sunday, Feb. 5, 2023; 4 p.m.**

Dear Students:

On Friday, an incident occurred at Bexley Middle School during that day's morning announcements. Specifically, an overtly racist image was shown in the background immediately following a historical fact honoring Black History Month.

The use of this image targets our Black students and staff members and reinforces false and racist stereotypes and tropes about Black people. This matter has harmed everyone in our learning community at Bexley Middle School and beyond and has directly impacted our Black students, staff and families.

As the superintendent of Bexley City Schools, I am deeply sorry to all students and staff who felt the pain and disrespect this caused and to our families and community who have felt its impact as well. There is no excuse that this was permitted to happen and I assure you that I, along with our administrators and Board of Education, take this very seriously.

It is my goal that our Black students are welcomed and feel a deep sense of belonging in our community. The presence of racist images in school undermines our important work and we will do everything in our power to rectify the hurt caused in this situation, rebuild trust with our students, staff and families, and create the caring and nurturing environment you deserve.

We know that as you and others learned of this incident over the weekend that many more individuals have felt deep offense, hurt, and pain, as well as a sadness that this happened in one of our schools. The use of racist images in any context is unacceptable and goes against the strongly held values of our Board and administration. It can, and has, caused significant harm within our school community.

Our district's response to the incident is ongoing. We recognize there is much work to do and it has only begun. On Friday, middle school administrators launched an internal investigation that is ongoing and they moved swiftly to address the concerns and dismay felt by Black students and staff. Direct communication was made with a number of Black students at the middle school who experienced the incident first-hand and personal phone calls were made to several students' parents who expressed immediate and deep hurt during the school day. A school-wide communication also was issued.

Principal Jason Caudill will address all middle school students tomorrow and there will be an opportunity for students to further process the situation in small-group conversations. You can read the content of Mr. Caudill's morning announcement at this [link](#). In addition, Black students at the middle school will have the option to meet with Racquel Armstrong, Middle School Assistant Principal, and Marcelius Braxton, Leader of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, to identify our students' needs for support.

A full and thorough investigation is currently underway. Further action will be taken following the investigation per Board of Education policies. Until the investigation is complete, we cannot provide further details or comment on the situation. That said, it is important to understand, too, that some information may not be shared in the future due to privacy requirements.

Our top priority is providing an encouraging and openhearted learning environment for all of our students and that didn't happen on Friday. Our district is committed to our anti-racism Board Policy and our values of diversity, equity and inclusion. In our efforts to provide support in line with those commitments, we recognize how essential it is, especially in this moment, to center the feelings and needs of our Black students, staff, and families.

We will provide supportive resources, lead conversations – and take actionable steps to back up those conversations – and ensure a safe environment to help heal the hurt that was caused.

It's important to remember that Bexley City Schools offer individual support to students through our school counselors. If you are in need of support, please contact a building principal, counselor, or other trusted staff member.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jason Fine, Superintendent

**Superintendent Message to All Middle School Students**  
**Sunday, Feb. 5, 2023; 4 p.m.**

Dear Students:

It is likely that you are aware of an incident that occurred at Bexley Middle School during Friday's morning announcements. Specifically, an overtly racist image was shown in the background immediately following a historical fact honoring Black History Month.

The use of this image targets our Black students and staff members and reinforces false and racist stereotypes and tropes about Black people. This matter has harmed everyone in our learning community at Bexley Middle School and beyond and has directly impacted our Black students, staff and families.

As the superintendent of Bexley City Schools, I am deeply sorry to all students and staff who felt the pain and disrespect this caused and to our families and community who have felt its impact as well. There is no excuse that this was permitted to happen and I assure you that I, along with our administrators and Board of Education, take this very seriously.

It is my goal that our Black students are welcomed and feel a deep sense of belonging in our community. The presence of racist images in school undermines our important work and we will do everything in our power to rectify the hurt caused in this situation, rebuild trust with our students, staff and families, and create the caring and nurturing environment you deserve.

We know that many students and staff felt deep offense, hurt, and pain, as well as a sadness that this happened in one of our schools. The use of racist images in any context is unacceptable and goes against the strongly held values of our Board and administration. It can, and has, caused significant harm within our school community.

Our district's response to the incident is ongoing. We recognize there is much work to do and it has only begun. On Friday, middle school administrators launched an internal investigation that is ongoing and they moved swiftly to address the concerns and dismay felt by Black students and staff. Direct communication was made with a number of Black students at the middle school who experienced the incident first-hand and personal phone calls were made to several students' parents who expressed immediate and deep hurt during the school day. A school-wide communication also was issued.

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**Superintendent's Message to All Bexley Parents/Guardians  
Sunday, Feb. 5, 2023; 4 p.m.**

Subject: District Update on Middle School Incident

Dear Bexley Families:

On Friday, we sent a message to our Bexley Middle School families regarding an incident that took place during that day's morning announcements. An overtly racist image was shown in the background immediately following a historical fact honoring Black History Month.

The image used, of an orangutan eating watermelon, directly targets and reinforces racist tropes and stereotypes about Black people. We are cognizant of the harm this has done to the entire community, but we specifically want to emphasize the impact of anti-Blackness caused and represented by these actions.

As the superintendent of Bexley City Schools, I am deeply sorry to all students and staff who experienced this on Friday and to our families and community who have felt its impact through their children and loved ones. There is no excuse that this was permitted to happen and I assure you that I, along with our administrators and Board of Education, take this very seriously.

It is my goal that our Black students are welcomed and feel a deep sense of belonging in our community. The presence of racist images in school undermines our important work and we will do everything in our power to rectify the hurt caused in this situation, rebuild trust with our students, staff and families, and create the caring and nurturing environment our students deserve.

We know that as our community learned of this incident over this weekend that many more individuals have felt deep offense, hurt, and pain, as well as a sadness that this happened in one of our schools. The use of racist images in any context is unacceptable and goes against the strongly held values of our Board and administration. It can, and has, caused significant harm to students and members of the school community.

Our district's response to the incident is ongoing. We recognize there is much work to do and it has only begun. On Friday, school administrators launched an internal investigation that is ongoing and they moved swiftly to address the concerns and dismay felt by Black students and staff. Direct communication was made with a number of Black students at the middle school who experienced the incident first-hand and personal phone calls were made to several students' parents who expressed immediate and deep hurt during the school day. A school-wide communication also was issued.

Jason Caudill will address all middle school students tomorrow. He also will help educate our students about why the use of this image was racist, offensive, and wholly unacceptable. You can read the content of his morning announcement at this link. There also will be an opportunity for students to further process the situation in small-group conversations. In addition, Black students will have the option to meet with Racquel Armstrong, Middle School Assistant Principal, and Marcellus Braxton, Leader of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, to identify our students' needs for support.

A full and thorough investigation is currently underway. Further action will be taken following the investigation per Board of Education policies. Until this is complete, we cannot provide further details or comment on the situation. That said, it is important to understand, too, that some information may not be shared in the future due to privacy requirements.

Our top priority is providing an encouraging and openhearted learning environment for all of our students and that didn't happen on Friday. Our district is committed to our anti-racism Board Policy and our values of diversity, equity and inclusion. In our efforts to provide support in line with those commitments, we recognize how essential it is, especially in this moment, to center the feelings and needs of our Black students, staff, and families.

We appreciate the cooperation and understanding of our school community during this process. Aside from the investigation, we are focusing our efforts on supporting our students and staff throughout the district. Our priorities are providing supportive resources, leading conversations – and taking actionable steps to back up those conversations – and ensuring a safe environment to help heal the hurt that was caused.

It's important that all families and students understand Bexley City Schools offers individual support to students through our school counselors. If your child, at any building, is in need of support, please contact your building principal, building counselor, or a trusted staff member.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jason Fine  
Superintendent

**Superintendent's Message to All Staff Members  
Sunday, Feb. 5, 2023; 3:30 p.m.**

District Update to Middle School Incident

Dear Bexley Staff:

On Friday, Bexley Middle School experienced a disturbing incident that occurred as part of its morning announcements when an overtly racist image was displayed in the background immediately following an historical fact honoring Black History Month. First and foremost, this is unequivocally unacceptable and has no place in our learning community or anywhere.

I am deeply apologetic to all students and staff who experienced this act of racism first-hand and to those who have since learned of the incident and felt the pain of such disrespect. I want to assure you that we are working quickly to investigate, provide ongoing support, and bring about resolution. Further action will be taken following the investigation per Board of Education policies.

For those unfamiliar with Friday's situation, I want to provide a brief recap. Shortly after the announcements aired showing the racist image, BMS administrators launched an investigation into all of those involved in the production of the announcements and how that process allowed the incident to occur. The investigation is ongoing.

That day, administrators also reached out to many of the Black students and staff in the building to provide individual support. It was clear that the hurt felt was pervasive. Also on Friday, immediate

precautionary measures were added to the process for future morning announcements and a message was sent to middle-school families informing them of the matter at the end of the school day.

Jason Caudill will address all middle school students tomorrow. He also will help educate our students about why the use of this image was racist, offensive, and wholly unacceptable. You can read the content of his morning announcement at this link. Middle school students also will have opportunities to discuss and process not only what happened, but also share what they're feeling on Monday and the days that follow.

The fact that this has happened in our school community is unsettling to us all, especially our Black students, staff, and families. Please know that we support you as you process the hurt this situation created and we want to help you heal from this incident. If you need to speak with someone, please reach out to a counselor or trusted colleague. Staff resources also are available to help support everyone's mental and emotional well-being.

As educators, we have a duty and responsibility in this moment to be available to our students and to educate them about why this incident is inappropriate and racist. We also need to help them understand how such a situation perpetuates stereotypical tropes in our society. We can and will use our time in the classroom on Monday and in the days that follow to meaningfully impact all of our students in a positive way and help them learn from this incident. There will be an early morning meeting tomorrow where we will help prepare staff for these conversations. Communications from your building principals will follow shortly about the details of these building-level meetings.

Our district's response to the incident is ongoing. We recognize there is much work to do and it has only begun. The work to create a truly inclusive culture in our schools is not easy and this is a moment when our decisions and reactions will determine our path forward.

Our priorities moving forward are providing supportive resources for students and staff, leading conversations – and taking actionable steps to back up those conversations – and ensuring a safe environment to help heal the hurt that was caused.

I will do my best to reply to anyone with questions or concerns and will provide all of the details and information I can. Please know that we cannot share information about an ongoing investigation and communication related to it may be limited. In addition, you will receive the community message being sent separately at 4 p.m. today.

Sincerely,

Jason

**Bexley Middle School Message to All Parents/Guardians  
Friday, Feb. 3, 2023; 3:19 p.m.**

Morning Announcements - Racist Imagery

Dear Bexley Middle School Families:

Ahead of your student(s) arriving home, it's important that we share an issue that arose today at our school. After this morning's school announcements, which featured a historical fact as part of Black History Month, an image of an orangutan eating a watermelon appeared on the green screen



background. This was and is highly offensive to our staff and students and does not align with our values as a district.

The use of racist images in any context is unacceptable and goes against the values of inclusiveness and respect for all individuals that we take seriously at Bexley City Schools and at Bexley Middle School. This material has no place in a learning environment and can cause significant harm to students and members of the school community.

We have taken swift action to investigate how this was able to occur and will be instituting further safeguards on all announcement productions moving forward. The background will now be a standard background and additional staff will review the announcements prior to publishing. On Monday, there will be an opportunity for students to further process this during SEL time in facilitated small group conversations.

Again, we understand and acknowledge that this caused significant harm to students. We have partnered and joined in the process of hurting and healing with many of our students today. If your child is struggling with this incident, please reach out to either of us, a school counselor, or trusted adult.

Sincerely,

Jason Caudill, Principal

Racquel Armstrong, Assistant Principal