



219 North Main Street, Suite 402
Barre, VT 05641 (p) 802-479-1030 | (f) 802-479-1835

MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents, Principals, Independent School Headmasters, All Educators
FROM: Rebecca Holcombe, Ed.D., Secretary of Education
COPY: VSA, VPA, VT-NEA, VCSEA, VSBA, VISA
SUBJECT: Responding to Bigotry
DATE: September 19, 2017

Many of you have expressed concern about how, given some of the toxicity in language and action in our public spaces, you can make sure all of our Vermont children feel safe and supported. Many of you have also spoken of the challenge of maintaining a strong sense of community, given increasing polarization. In response, I have been thinking a lot recently about what distinguishes us each as individuals, but also what binds us as Vermonters. Of course, our own personal experiences frame how we understand and make sense of issues of freedom and unity. As for many of you, my own personal commitment to making sure our schools ensure our children are safe and supported is rooted in my own experience of needing to feel safe.

My own family moved from Afghanistan to Pakistan in 1979. This was about the time the U.S. Embassy in Iran was seized—in fact, our school superintendent in Pakistan had just moved from Tehran and was back in Iran to collect his belongings. He was unlucky enough to become one of the hostages who spent 444 days in captivity.

Around the same time, a political demonstration laid siege to the U.S. Embassy across town from my school in Pakistan, and for hours, our school remained in lock down, with American children unable or afraid to leave. For over five hours, a mob stormed the Embassy, breaking down walls and eventually burning it to the ground. Until the last minute rescue by the Pakistani military, the 100-odd staff on site was holed up in a steel-lined and windowless vault on an upstairs floor. Meanwhile, angry demonstrators roamed the capital, looking for other American targets, and the school was one of the most visible.

The staff gathered us into the school's stand-alone auditorium. Our school's athletic director, Bill Hamidullah, and a Pakistani parent who sent his child to the school, stood guard outside the auditorium in which we sheltered, armed only with hockey sticks, an abundance of courage and a determination to protect the children inside. The rest of the mostly American staff-- some of whom no doubt had family in the burning Embassy-- played games and joked with us, and kept us busy. All the while, I now realize, their hearts and minds must have been someplace else.

I was lucky. My mother borrowed a head scarf and a car from a Pakistani friend, and a Pakistani man who worked with my father drove her to the school to get me and my brother,

risking the streets to protect us. They arrived just before the demonstrators and took us to safety.

Those who remained were kept safe by the courage of Bill Hamidullah and a few others, who deterred the mob that arrived by wielding nothing more than the power to shame those who would hurt children. Though much of the school and property was damaged, the auditorium where children huddled stayed safe.

Why do I tell this story? Because it made a lasting impression on me, and taught me much of what I know is true about teachers and people.

- I learned how brave educators can be, taking incredible personal risks to protect other people's children as if they were their own.
- I witnessed first-hand how people of a different nation and a different faith were willing to take enormous personal risks to protect me and my family in their land, in ways for which they will never be recognized. They did it because it was the right thing to do.
- I learned that there is strength in working together; no one teacher could have prevented danger alone, but by standing together for what was right, these adults saved children.
- I learned that we can reasonably disagree, but having seen war up close, I can tell you there is no place in a democracy for using the language of violence and hatred against our own citizens.
- I learned there is goodness everywhere and in every people, and sometimes what it takes is one person, like Bill Hamidullah, to step up and stand up for basic human decency, and others will follow.
- I learned that many people, from all countries and all races and of all religions, believe, as Governor Scott said at the opening of the school year in Barre, that "we're not going to defeat hatred with more hate."

I wanted to share that story, because several of you have expressed concern recently about what feels like a fragmentation of our sense of shared civic purpose. We read different papers, we have different cultural tastes, we react differently to the news, and we can almost predict political affiliation by how we drink our coffee (if we drink coffee). At the same time, our schools have always played-- and can continue to play-- an essential role in exposing our students to people from different backgrounds, perspectives and circumstances, and teaching them to work together as members of a pluralist democracy with a shared interest in civic wellbeing and economic prosperity. Democracy is a team sport. It is not something we do on our own, or by only focusing on ourselves. It is something we do together.

Sometimes, doing so is hard. It means engaging in difficult conversations, and protecting space for diversity of opinion. In my case, it means reserving judgment and giving others space to learn and grow, and working to relinquish the notion that I am always right. It sometimes means letting go of individual preferences to protect the larger community in an increasingly polarized cultural environment. And most of all, it means confronting injustice when injustice enters our communities.

I wanted to share a news story that Deputy Secretary Amy Fowler sent my way this week, which describes a group of your peers grappling with these challenges in their own schools.

The [incident described in the story](#) took place in a small Northern, rural town in Iowa, with demographics that are pretty similar to those of Vermont. It happened there, but it could happen here, and in fact I know some of you are grappling to manage other fraught situations in your communities.

The adults in this story were compelled to act quickly and with conviction. They removed those players in the picture from the football team, even when that action no doubt will affect the performance of the team in a season that had barely started. They did this because of a commitment to be firm in their support of those who feel targeted by symbolic acts of racism. In this moment, we see who these educators are and what they believe. As the principal said: "I don't mean we're going to get a speaker to come in one time and say, 'Hey, we're doing something because we brought in a speaker.'"

I encourage us all to think hard about what we can do now to foster a culture in which this kind of event does not happen. I also encourage us to anticipate how we want to respond, if, as some of you have had to do in the last few weeks, we are called on to confront bigotry and heal our communities.

Consider this [second story](#), from a newspaper about an event in Claremont, NH—a town a stone's throw from our own border whose demographics also mirror those of Vermont. A group of teenagers used racial epithets and threw a rope around the neck of a biracial 8-year-old boy, and then pushed him off a picnic table. The resulting neck injuries were serious enough that the boy had to be airlifted to the regional hospital.

These incidents create unimaginable fear and hurt for some of us—and in these two cases, for our children of color and their parents-- in ways that reverberate and compound. These acts are ugly and hateful, and they erode our shared wellbeing. The incidents remind us that bigotry and bias are more a part of our world and thinking than we would like to believe. I spoke a while back with Curtiss Reed, the Executive Director of the Vermont Partnership for Fairness and Diversity. He told me about a little girl, whose friends kept asking her, from a place of care, whether she too was going to get shot for being black, like in stories on TV. However well intended, the questions reminded her of her difference, and every day wrapped her in an invisible film of fear and stress, and competed with life and school tasks, for her attention.

As Dr. Martin Luther King said, "Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." Inversely, when we work together to surface and challenge the biases that shape our interactions in injurious ways, we create communities that enable every member to contribute to our shared wellbeing.

Recently, State Board of Education member John Carroll forwarded an article on the public purpose of schools, in which the author (Erika Christakis) noted: "Our public-education system is about much more than personal achievement; [it is about preparing people to work together to advance not just themselves, but society.](#)" We bring together children from different backgrounds to play and to work and to learn how to build a shared American enterprise.

After the cross burning incident by some of his team members, the Iowa coach understood how important healing the team was to healing the community, and he helped the remaining players

understand that by moving forward together, they would move their community forward as well. In every community, our children are a reflection of where we are headed and who we believe we are. Our children do things that fill us with pride and optimism: they support each other, solve complex problems or surprise us with their minds. Occasionally, they do something that makes us shake our heads, wonder what the world is coming to and despair. In this Iowa school, the educators figured out how to lift the team and community back up.

We can support all our children together, here in our schools, or we will pay the price of inequality for the rest of their lives.

Thank you for sharing your thoughts and hopes over the past few weeks, and most of all, thank you for all you do in service of our children and the wellbeing of the state.