



OBSERVER CORPS REPORT

Task Force Against Discrimination 1/17/24
Zoom (recorded)
LWVM Observer: Shari Pressman

Members in Attendance:

Helaine Hazlett (co-chair), Diane Gora (co-chair), Deacon John (Joe) Whipple, Chris Bruell, Reece Dahlberg, Chief Dennis King (ex-officio), Kim Gubelman

Introductions:

Guests: Julia Ferreira (Assistant Superintendent), METCO Director Caja Johnson, Pastor James Bixby, Leigh Blander, Louis Meyi, Cindy Tower-Loewen), METCO parents of students in MPS, and Jacqueline Wade, President Boston METCO PCO and METCO (parent)

Discussion with Caja Johnson, METCO parents, and members Marblehead Racial Justice Team (MRJT)

Chris noted that TFAD has a 30-year history in Marblehead. It should “let folks know we exist” and be more proactive than reactive in being a resource for people to assist making their experience better and help people feel welcome here.

Pastor Bixby said we are in a crucial moment. The School Committee is in the news every week. The MRJT has raised the alarm bell a couple of times and has sent letters to the School Committee that were summarily ignored. TFAD was commissioned by the Select Board, which “relies heavily on it to incorporate all people who are here to be safeguarded for good moral measure, but also for good legal measure. The Select Board doesn’t want to have to pay legal fines because they’re finding out that discriminatory actions are taking place in town. MRJT has informed the

Select Board that the School Committee is going down that path currently. He described the Committee in a “freefall” in its loss of moral standing. Pastor Bixby described flags as symbols of comfort and acceptance. He is “morally very concerned” but believes the Select Board will pay a lot more attention if there’s a good chance they’ll face a lawsuit about their flag policy.

“School Committee is going to cost the town a lot of money”.

He asked what tools and policies and possible leverage the TFAD has as an “interior” organization. He hopes that it and the MRJT are “aligned and work together using both our lanes” to turn the town around as soon as possible so that we don’t face costly lawsuits, lose more candidates for superintendent and other positions, and welcome all people who want to go to this school and be educated.

METCO Director Caja Johnson said she was so grateful to have support within the community from MERGE and TFAD. She noted that “we, as adults and educators, have to “model basic humanity and a sense of belonging for our students”. She noted the “huge sacrifice and commitment parents have made to send their children over an hour away to a different community”. She asked that METCO families speak next.

The grandmother of a METCO student said the School Department has made drastic mistakes toward students that need to be corrected.

She went on to say that the issue is very near and dear to her, but she can’t fix it. She said she’s taken all the steps by going to the principal and to the superintendent but feels as though she’s treated with discrimination and being pushed under the rug. The news doesn’t tell the students’ and families’ stories, only the teachers involved.

Chris and Helaine thanked her and said they could hear the pain in her voice.

The mother of the METCO student said “her very young child’s not having a good experience in Marblehead” and that nobody sees what other children are doing to him. She reported that he felt “afraid and unsafe” in Marblehead, not supported in trauma, looked at as an outsider, and treated differently. She felt a “step-by-step” reorganization is necessary and is completely disappointed in the school system.

Jacqueline Wade, Boston METCO Parent Council Organization President, a teacher in a Boston public school and a METCO parent of a student in Marblehead, pointed out that growing up in Marblehead schools, where many of the students have gone to school together all their lives and may know each other outside of school, is different from a city school experience, where students haven't all been together. Her son has faced what she called possible unknown or unintended bias, even from teachers. She said part of being an ally in school is to find "teachable moments" and safe spaces for people to learn, ask questions, and possibly unlearn what the community and TV have taught. She has checked her own bias dealing with her own students.

Chris suggested more interpersonal training in Marblehead. Pastor Bixby noted that several high-quality, internally developed, interpersonal trainings were abandoned at the school level because of the School Committee pursuing the leadership they were interested in doing. The pastor believes the trainings would have given teachers the equipment to deal with what we've heard today.

Chief King replied directly to the mother of the young child, apologizing as a chief, a person, and a parent that her son feels unsafe and unwanted in Marblehead and added that her words were impactful. He said the police department has been doing a lot of implicit bias training over the last five to seven years. He said that whatever she needed from him to address and correct it, he would try.

The grandmother said she was sorry and didn't know that a police officer was involved in the meeting. She said she'd spoken with Chief King and would like to talk later. She said evidence had been submitted by the School Department and that criminal charges need to be brought. Chief King will meet with the mother and grandmother offline again.

Diane, a teacher for 30 years at Glover, said she doesn't know the details, but hearing her colleagues described in negative terms is disheartening. She said she works with caring individuals. She understands that this has been the family's experience and isn't negating it; she just hasn't had the same experience with colleagues as the family has had.

Diane also said that except for this past year, teachers have spent the last three years training in implicit bias so that students can see themselves reflected in curriculum (mirrors) and feel included in others' experiences (windows).

Jacqueline said she didn't know one teacher who goes into this line of work thinking, "I want to ruin these kids and be racist". She feels that teachers can make mistakes unintentionally. Colleagues are caring and give 110% of themselves. She noted that what the family is going through is larger than what we are aware of in this forum.

Chris said that we must be able to eliminate the types of experiences the families have had. It's concerning and that's one reason why families were invited.

Chris added that as a committee appointed by the Select Board, TFAD needs clearly defined expectations from the Board and methods that TFAD can use.

Caja closed by thanking the families brave enough to log on, a wonderful staff, and organizations within the community that are very supportive. Marblehead Public Schools has work to do. Parents apply to METCO for the right reasons. How do we come together and take "action" steps?

The mother thanked everyone for listening. Teachers come with the intent of being great and not harming, but her son could have died. She'd like to come to the next meeting and closed by asking TFAD to do something fast.

Update on Marblehead Police Department News--Chief Dennis King

MPD is continuing to monitor the community for any hate incidents and is being vigilant. The hoax incident at Temple Emanuel provided an opportunity to work with the temple as a partner. If the perpetrator(s) is (are) found, most likely the case would be dealt with federally. MPD is also working with Community Road institutions.

Update on Marblehead Public Schools

Riko wasn't present but had updated Reece. The School Committee's Flag Policy Subcommittee held a meeting during "magic block". Team Harmony presented a small slide show with different proposed policies. Jenn Schaffner, chair of the subcommittee, was present.

Julia Ferreira noted that three listening sessions were held. School Committee members were present at two of the three.

Student Democrats, Team Harmony and others held a protest rally after school, with a great turnout.

Report on MPS Flag Policy

Julia Ferreira reported that the policy is not ready for its first read yet.

Louis Meyi (MRJT) reported that the Housing Authority has legal counsel regarding the flag policy.

Leigh Blander noted that the legal opinion is on the Housing Authority's website.

Joe Whipple suggested that TFAD weigh into School Committee with an opinion on the flag policy. He'd like it on next month's agenda.

Discussion followed about members of TFAD attending the next subcommittee meeting. Question about whether meeting dates had to be posted. Julia attends as a district administrator and will let Reece know when the next meeting is.

Discussion: February Book Read

Diane suggested the picture book The Other Side by Jacqueline Woodson as a February vacation book read. Older students will read and discuss the book at home and at school and then some will join TFAD at the beginning of a meeting. Previously, Natalie Belli has lead discussions with the book group she facilitates. Primary grade students could respond with an art activity. Diane has activities for younger students. Reece will talk with local bookstores to secure books for everyone participating and added that the district will usually provide some funding for books. Reece would like to include METCO students and parents.

Update on Asian American and Pan Islanders Heritage Month

Kim has reserved May 4, 2024 at MHS for a celebration. She'd like to feature a dragon or lion dance or other cultural performances and involve students in the project. She also would like to see local vendors participate. She has some funding from the Asian American and Pacific Islanders

Commission but will be seeking funding from local merchants and organizations.

Update on International Holocaust Remembrance Day Event

On Friday, January 26, 2024, the gathering will be held in the Select Board Room at noon. Chief Dennis King, Rabbi Michael Schwartz from Temple Sinai, and Moses Grader, Acting Chair of the Select Board, will speak.

On Friday evening, January 26 at 6:00, Temple Sinai will host, with Moses Grader among the speakers. Dessert and coffee will be served.

Update from Marblehead Racial Justice Team

Louis said that MRJT is active with Team Harmony at MHS and hoping to go to Boston and spend time with METCO parents.

Next meeting: February 7 at 7:00pm