

April 28, 2021

Boulder Valley School District Board of Education  
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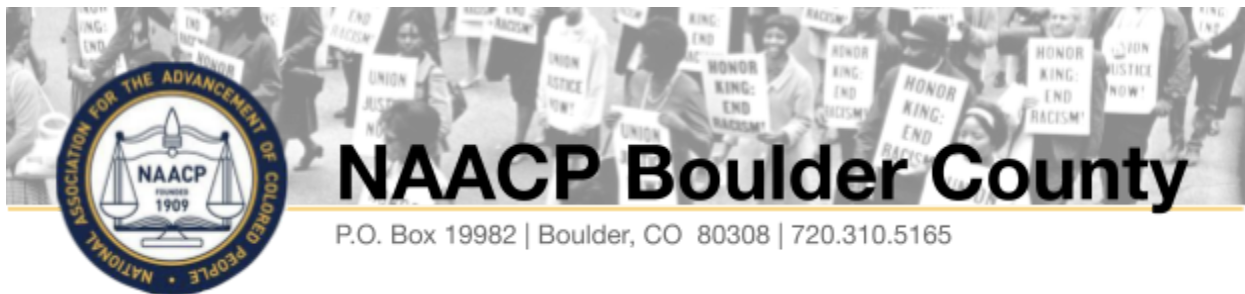
Dear Superintendent Anderson,

In developing our relationship, I committed to telling you when issues of racial equity in our schools arose so that we could problem solve together. This week, the NAACP Education Committee learned of an assignment at Meadowlark School, which asks students to write an essay comparing and contrasting “pro-slavery” and “anti-slavery” perspectives. This is an unacceptable assignment for any class. There are no “pro-slavery” perspectives. Chattel slavery in our country was a system of kidnapping, exploitation, torture, rape, and murder.

This assignment is harmful to all students, especially Black students and their families. Any argument for or attempt to come up with justification for these atrocities is racist and perpetuates racism. No student should be assigned to write a racist essay, and no teacher should think it acceptable for children to create an argument for slavery. Not only does this assignment hurt Black children, it teaches white children to justify and defend racism against their Black peers. No Black student should have to go to school in a classroom full of peers who have been taught to justify racist atrocities.

Unfortunately, what happened yesterday at Meadowlark School is not uncommon when teaching slavery in US schools. Black students have been [“sold” by white students in mock auctions](#), [8th graders have pretended they were slaves and written letters home to Africa](#) and [students have been asked to ‘tweet’ in support of slavery from the Civil War era](#). Despite the many, many instances of racist lessons, school districts consistently abdicate responsibility for addressing systemic racism in their lessons by blaming the teachers. They claim that the teachers are given independence over their curricula and the schools and districts have no role in racist lessons. I would like to partner with you to change this pattern by proactively addressing the underlying problem and creating lasting change.

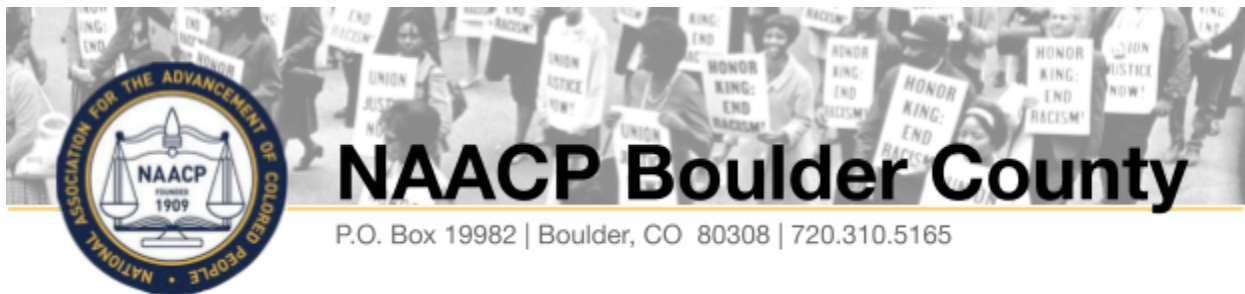
The assignment at Meadowlark School is a reflection of teachers and staff who lack cultural competency and who are not being trained to a standard level of competency. The problem of racist lessons is not due to individual teachers. I know that BVSD leadership is committed to equity work and I’ve seen some of the great work that BVSD administrators, teachers, and parents are doing in this area. However, schools have a large degree of autonomy over how they prioritize and carry out



racial equity work, resulting in inconsistent progress across schools. We must make sure that *all children* in BVSD are educated using a culturally competent curriculum, regardless of the priorities and projects of their individual teachers and administrators. I know that Amy Nelson has been doing excellent equity work in her region, and I would like to discuss how we can expand this work so that all students of color across our many schools can benefit.

Because the issue of culturally insensitive curriculum and assignments is not unique to this one incident, this one teacher, or even to BVSD itself, I would like to discuss how to be proactive in preventing similar incidents from happening in the future and how to address them safely, quickly, and effectively when they do arise. Rather than focusing exclusively on punishing one particular educator, which will not solve the underlying problem, I hope you will use this opportunity to drive policy changes that protect Black students and other students belonging to marginalized groups from discrimination in the classroom. Our branch would welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss current practices and potential improvements in the following areas:

- 1. Training and professional development:** We understand and appreciate that teachers are required to complete professional development hours on cultural competency. We would like to understand oversight measures that are in place regarding the quality and content of these cultural competency hours, and what additional oversight or quality control can be implemented. Furthermore, it is our understanding that teachers in Colorado are not required to take cultural competency training prior to certification, and are only required to do so in professional development. We would appreciate more information about the extent to which teachers in BVSD complete cultural competency or equity training before entering the classroom. We would welcome the opportunity to partner with you to implement this training and/or review its content to ensure it will meet the needs of Black students and families.
- 2. Accountability and transparency:** According to BVSD's Educator Effectiveness Supervision and Evaluation Guidebook, it is expected that the teacher "creates a classroom environment in which diversity is acknowledged and used to further student learning" and "uses instructional materials and approaches that reflect students' backgrounds" (Standard II, Element a, Learning Environment). We would like to learn more about how teachers are evaluated on this criterion (whether through classroom observation, lesson plan review, or both), and what measures are taken to improve performance if they are evaluated as "partially effective" or lower in this area. Effective evaluation and remediation in this area can help prevent harm to students in their learning environment.
- 3. Lesson plan oversight:** Because teachers are permitted to adopt lesson plans and materials that are outside of the district-supplied materials, we would like to learn more about whether and how outside materials are reviewed before being used in the classroom. Students deserve to learn using high-quality materials that do not "other" them in the classroom while they are trying to learn. A system in which teachers exchange and review each other's



materials prior to implementation would still allow for teachers to be creative and develop dynamic activities for their students but provide a safeguard to ensure the appropriateness of classroom materials. Furthermore, we would like to see teachers who use or propose culturally insensitive materials assigned a coach to assist them in identifying appropriate lesson plans, similar to the excellent practices BVSD already has in place for ELD teachers.

4. **Reporting harm:** We would like to see a standardized reporting system for parents to make the district aware of these issues when they arise. Currently, because no such system exists, parents must expend a significant amount of energy and emotional labor to ensure that their concerns are addressed. It is cruel and unjust that the burden of educating teachers about racism currently falls to parents and students who are experiencing the stress and trauma of racism in their everyday lives. A transparent system for reporting bias that results in action and that all parents are made aware of would minimize the additional trauma caused to families who are experiencing racism in our schools.
5. **Repairing harm:** Racism in schools traumatizes students and their families, leading to symptoms such as loss of sleep, lack of engagement in classes, and fear of additional harm in classrooms. There must be a way to care for students and their families when they experience racism as a result of BVSD employees' lack of cultural competency. Providing culturally responsive, licensed, third party family counseling and support services to students and their families following racist incidents as well as developing a plan to ensure students and their families are safe from additional harm is critical to their recovery. Our schools must take responsibility for alleviating the trauma that results from these harmful events.

I feel comfortable reaching out to you about this issue because I have seen BVSD demonstrate strong leadership on issues of equity. I appreciate the recent progress that has been made, and I believe that BVSD can continue to be a leader not only statewide but across the country by ensuring that appropriate standards of cultural competency are met in the classroom. I am confident that you and your staff and teachers are up to the task of implementing proactive solutions to racism in BVSD schools and I look forward to partnering with you so that all BVSD students, and especially students of color, can reach their full potential.

Alicia Graves  
Education Committee Chair  
Executive Committee Member  
NAACP Boulder County Branch