

EQUITY COMMUNICATION GUIDANCE

FOR PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Stemming from the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis and other violence toward black men and women, protests and calls for justice have emerged across the United States and around the world, including in communities throughout Pennsylvania. During this historic time in our nation, Pennsylvania school board directors and district leaders have looked to engage their communities in more meaningful conversations around critical issues of equity, antiracism, civil rights and social justice.

Specifically, Pennsylvania public school entities are grappling with how they can best speak with their stakeholders about racial violence and how they can address the impact George Floyd's death has had on their communities and our country as a whole.

To assist school boards and district leaders at this time, the Pennsylvania School Boards Association is providing guidance on communicating about equity and related issues in school communities.

It is important to note that the decision to engage in this dialogue is best made at the local district and board level. To that end, in offering this guidance, PSBA is not advising board or district leaders about the degree to which they should engage their communities on these issues. However, this guidance does provide key considerations if a district or board does choose to comment on these issues publicly.

This guidance supplements PSBA's ongoing commitment to provide equity training, tools and support for our member school districts in offering equitable learning environments and opportunities for all students. You may find helpful [Equity Tools & Resources](#) on our website.

Why Engage Your Community On This Issue?

Although the issue of racism and racial violence towards black persons and other persons of color is not a new occurrence, the death of George Floyd was undoubtedly a turning point in our nation's history, the effects of which will be felt for a long time to come. School and district leaders are, at their core,



educators who tend to assess the impacts of such events as important learning opportunities for young people to examine race and racism.

As such, many educational leaders believe it is now critical to engage students, families, and other stakeholders in conversations about race in a safe and supportive environment. It is a natural part of educators' mission to meet the needs of all students, including individuals who have experienced marginalization themselves and those who have witnessed others being marginalized, but did not feel empowered to speak up.

Now also marks an opportunity to speak to the work that has already taken place in your district related to equity, antiracism, civil rights and social justice. It allows you to inform your community that these are issues you take seriously and offers you a chance to potentially expand your work in these areas.

Key Considerations For Your Statement

As you develop your district's statement, we encourage you to go beyond platitudes or general references to equity, diversity, and inclusion, and speak more deeply to these issues than you perhaps have in the past. Below are some key considerations:

- Recognize that the protests taking place nationwide are about much more than the death of George Floyd alone. They are also about systemic racism, social injustice and numerous other serious issues affecting our society.
- Be specific about your district's efforts related to equity. Share what the district has done in recent years in this area and what you plan to do to advance these efforts in the future.
- Speak to how systemic racism affects children from an early age, contributing to issues like achievement and opportunity gaps, such as disproportionate disciplinary actions for students of color.
- Acknowledge that, as a district, you are not perfect, but that you are working hard to continuously improve to ensure you are meeting the needs of all students by analyzing your own school policies and practices with an equity lens.
- Remind stakeholders that, as educators, you have a responsibility to teach students about important issues in our society. As such, the district would be doing a disservice to its students and families if it did not speak up at this time.
- Ensure your school district community knows that, in addition to making a commitment to equity, you also are listening. Provide opportunities for families, students, staff, and community members of all backgrounds to make their voices heard so that you can improve in meaningful ways. Incorporate and center voices that have previously gone unheard. Seek out voices and input from within the community of marginalized populations, those who may not typically have engaged with school district leadership.

In many ways, school district stakeholders are looking for more than words. They want to hear about meaningful actions your district is taking to address these important issues.

Managing The Response To Your Statement

Once you have released a statement or otherwise publicly commented on these issues, your district may receive a wide variety of feedback from stakeholders.

Many students, parents, staff, and community members will likely praise your statement and your commitment to equity. Depending on the details of your statement, some may feel you have not gone far enough. At times, these stakeholders may call out the district on social media or through other channels, highlighting ways in which the district has not lived up to its commitment to equity in the past.



Conversely, there may be some in your community who perhaps believe that issues like systemic racism are overblown. They may feel your statement or comments represent overreach or the taking of a political stance. These stakeholders may speak out publicly—often on social media—and could challenge the school district's position on equity and related issues.

District leaders and board members should be prepared for all types of responses, including those from stakeholders who feel you have fallen short and those who think you have gone too far in your comments.

If you find yourself facing this pushback, reinforce the message in your original statement and affirm that you are acting in the best interests of all the students the district serves. Mitigate the back-and-forth on social media with those who may criticize your approach by not engaging, beyond the affirmation response. Remain firm in the commitments you have made and allow your statement to stand as your committed message.

Phrases To Consider And To Avoid

When communicating equity-focused messages to our district stakeholders, there are some words and phrases that you should incorporate and those you should seek to avoid. Below are some common examples of inclusive and non-inclusive language.

Use:

- Equity
- Diversity
- Inclusion
- Systemic racism
- Antiracism
- Addressing disparities
- Black lives matter
- Persons/students of color
- Individuals/students with disabilities
- Sexual orientation
- Marginalized individuals/groups
- Protests
- Achievement gaps and Opportunity gaps
- Affirmed
- Sense of belonging
- Culturally responsive
- Gender identity
- Intersectionality

Avoid:

- Equality
- Minorities/minority students
- All lives matter
- Handicapped
- Riots
- Sexual preference/lifestyle



Do you have questions? Would you like further guidance on communicating about these important issues in your school district community?

Contact the PSBA Urgent & Crisis Communication Service:

1-833-PR4-PSBA
Hotline@PR4PSBA.org

School communication experts from the Donovan Group are ready to assist!

