



Dr. Teri Staloch, Superintendent
Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools
Prior Lake American/Savage Pacer
Column run date: December 11, 2021

My professional purpose has always been to provide life chances for all students. As Superintendent of Prior Lake-Savage Area Schools this means I am committed to ensuring all students have what they need to be successful; each student feels a sense of belonging and all students and staff are respected and valued. These foundational elements to a safe, healthy and productive learning environment were severely impacted when a racist video of (now former) students was shared on social media.

I acknowledge the trauma, pain and stress the horrific video has caused many in our community, especially to our BIPOC community. The video, and the conversations and events that followed, has challenged us to lean more deeply into the equity and inclusion work we have already done, and has amplified areas of racial equity that need continued and heightened attention.

As a district, we do not tolerate racism or hate speech. We believe everyone in our schools needs to be accountable for their words and actions. We will continue to take action when we hear racial slurs or hate speech, or when an incident is brought to our attention.

Our strategic plan includes educational equity and excellence goals and stakeholder engagement to strengthen a culture of respect and inclusion. One year ago our School Board approved an Equity and Inclusion Resolution, created in collaboration with stakeholders. This was a clear and public statement that the board not only supports this work, it expects it. The resolution was an example of what can come from elevating voices and it reminds us, at times like these, to continue to seek multiple perspectives, to acknowledge diverse lived experiences and to amplify voices. This is our continued commitment to our community.

Since the horrific video was shared, we have remained focused on all of our students - especially our Black, Indigenous and People of Color students - and what they need as they process what happened. Our Coalition for Teachers of Color held healing circles for Prior Lake High School (PLHS) students of color and our counselors remain available. Administrators have held meetings with all PLHS and middle school students to promote conversations about school culture, we have listened to student ideas about what they need and are empowering them to help us drive change. We have revisited our harassment and student discipline policies and procedures, held a community engagement meeting and have prioritized professional development for leaders and staff to confront racism.

On November 22, the School Board prioritized community voice by moving the public forum portion of its study session meeting to the beginning of the agenda. They heard from concerned families, students and community members. After public comment ended, an outside group took

over the meeting, making it impossible for the School Board to do their work, part of which was to hear an update on our district's ongoing equity work.

This work has centered on closing achievement gaps, implementing culturally responsive teaching strategies, engaging with families and providing professional development for staff. We have focused on serving the social and emotional needs of students and have empowered student voices.

We know our work to date is not enough. Our students have reported they are not feeling the impact of the work we have been doing to date. Our staff have also shared they need more training to be better equipped to handle racially charged issues.

We have also heard from students, families, staff and community members with two primary topics they would like to be updated on including:

- the investigation surrounding the racist video, and an understanding of the policies and procedures followed when racist language is used; and
- steps the district will take to provide a safe learning and work environment that promotes antiracism.

In response to the racist video, we have conducted a comprehensive investigation and action was taken according to Board policy. The district partnered with Savage Police who are conducting their own investigation. While many want to know what specific disciplinary action was given, I hope you will understand that data privacy laws do not allow us to divulge more details.

What I can tell you is this incident and racism of any kind requires decisive action. It has called on us to ensure our reporting systems, investigation structures and range of consequences enable us to apply discipline according to the seriousness of any situation.

I am dedicated to being an anti-racist leader and to focus boldly on the needs of all students and staff. I remain committed to creating a district culture of respect, love and support for each student and staff member, ensuring racism is not tolerated and it is addressed consistently in our schools.

It will take our entire community to make changes that truly impact the lives of our students. On December 16, PLSAS along with the Cities of Savage, Prior Lake and Credit River are joining together to host a Community Coffee and Conversations event. Anyone in our community is welcome to attend this event from 6-8 p.m. at Club Prior, 16210 Eagle Creek Ave. SE, Prior Lake.