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Superintendent's Community Message on Antisemitism

1 message

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Fred Rundle, Ed.D, Superintendent

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Dear Mercer Island Students, Staff, and Community,

Earlier this week, a parent notified our middle school administrators about an antisemitic comment made by one student toward another student at IMS. Upon learning about the incident, Ms. Budzius (co-principal) began an investigation and confirmed that an antisemitic term had, in fact, been used by a student. Ms. Budzius responded quickly to begin addressing the impacts of this incident with the students involved and impacted.

Unfortunately, the same antisemitic comment was used again on Wednesday by one student to another student. Ms. Budzius contacted me immediately and worked expeditiously to gather information and communicate with the students and families in the classroom. I reached out to three community partners this week for guidance and transparency: the Jewish Community Center, Anti-Defamation League (ADL), and the Holocaust Center for Humanity. Because of the timing of the event, when it was reported, and the early release Wednesday schedule, Ms. Budzius and the admin team had little time to respond. She reached out directly to the two families of the students believed to be directly involved and sent an informative letter to the students and families in the IMS classroom where the hurtful comment was heard by several students.

On behalf of the Mercer Island School District, I support and affirm Ms. Budzius's statement to the class of students and their parents impacted Wednesday. We strive to ensure that all students have a deep sense of belonging in our schools and feel seen, heard, and safe. Antisemitism aims to destruct this mission, but we will neither stand idle nor tolerate this or any form of hate. In addition to this letter, [I shared similar thoughts with the School Board last night](#).

Our schools are places for learning and growing. The response from our schools will continue to condemn antisemitism, teach others about its impact, support those negatively affected, and assist all of us to learn forward as an organization and as individual. The commitment to grow and improve starts with and includes me. Just yesterday, I appreciated the gracious and constructive email from a community member who helped my learning when sharing that the correct spelling of antisemitism matters and that it should be written without a hyphen. As the superintendent of schools responsible for the over 4,000 students and nearly 500 staff each day, I will continue to model empathy, curiosity, acceptance, and personal growth. We will

condemn forms of hate such as antisemitism, but we will also value the learning that can come from it when addressed at the student, staff, school, district, and community level.

The ADL produces invaluable resources to support schools and other organizations. A toolkit they published, and shared by a community member this week, identifies four strategies for schools to use when responding to antisemitism.

1. **Ready** - What policies and procedures are in place to respond in the moment
2. **Investigate** - How will the investigation gather information in a way that is accurate and demonstrates to those impacted that their experience is acknowledged and valued?
3. **Communicate** - How will you ensure the accuracy of the information and communicate frequently?
4. **Educate** - What are the next and ongoing steps to educate others?

While each of these are important, I would like to focus on communication and education.

Communication

School and district communication is extremely difficult in matters like this week. The ADL toolkit highlights the need to gather information before determining the right message to share, when to share it, and to whom it should be shared. The Mercer Island community response on social media and emails I received clearly felt we erred in our response. And while I will never claim perfection, I would ask that our community remember that these are students, these young and growing minds are your neighbors and community members, what they share with you and when they share it is not always the same as what is shared at school, and the accuracy of what we share supersedes expediency because these are our kids.

Education

Educating our students about the history, hurt, and anguish of antisemitism is clearly ongoing. On a national level, Kanye West exemplifies the magnitude of the pain with his recent and historic antisemitic comments. Our incidents at IMS and others before at MIHS or even our elementaries illustrate our own struggle. Ms. Budzius, our MIYFS counselor Mr. Brown, and others will be working with students to unpack and heal through restorative conversations and learning.

I would also like to bring to everyone's attention two other opportunities for us all to learn more about antisemitism.

1. On November 10, the ADL will host their annual [summit on antisemitism and hate](#). This all day event is hosted live in New York but available virtually. You may register online.
2. The winter play at MIHS (coming in early February) will be *And a Child Shall Lead*. The play is based on the true story of a group of children trapped in Terezin, the "Jewish city" the Nazis created as a stopping place before Auschwitz and other death camps, *And a Child Shall Lead* is a story of strength, fear, hope, resilience, and human connection. Though these children are fighting to survive, they find sources of hope and beauty to keep them alive, even at the risk of being caught and killed. The text of the found poems are intertwined throughout the play.

Leading up to the performance, Ms. Daniela Melgar will be hosting several student opportunities to broaden the perspective of others about the Holocaust and Judaism. One of these teachable moments is a planned student-led panel focused on the student experience growing up Jewish in Seattle. Ms. Melgar is working with her students to partner with IMS and possibly create a similar opportunity for our middle schoolers.

Through challenges like this week we have opportunities to come together. We are committed to safe and supportive learning environments where students belong, barriers are removed, belief in students is untethered, and student voices are broadcasted. Our schools are committed to the mantra, "No Place for Hate."

Respectfully,

Fred Rundle

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