

Rest in Peace George Floyd 05.25.20



Artist: Andresito Guzmán

Dear White Educators of the Minneapolis Public Schools:

Like many of you, we fellow white educators, woke up on Tuesday, May 26, 2020 horrified to learn about the merciless public killing of George Floyd at the hands of the Minneapolis Police Department. A video taken by a Minneapolis Public Schools student - one of our own children - recorded this tragedy. George Floyd was incapacitated, handcuffed with his hands behind his back, forced face down into the concrete by a Minneapolis Police Officer - *an officer whose duty was to protect and serve* - whose knee was forced firmly into George Floyd's neck. Floyd's last words were, "I can't breathe." For ten minutes, we watched another human being dying on the street, pleading for help. Tuesday morning was one more piece of an all-too-familiar pattern. We feel disgust, anger, sadness and helplessness that this continues to happen in our nation, our cities, and throughout Black, Brown, and Indigenous communities. We also woke up Tuesday to the realization that *we have not done enough to stop it*, and our silence and inaction allowed this to keep happening. *We are responsible*. To do nothing and continue to do what we always do, is to confirm that George Floyd's life was not more valuable than a potentially fraudulent twenty dollar bill.

As white educators and staff inside the Minneapolis Public School System, we *cannot*, and *will not*, continue to stand by and let this happen. We cannot allow a system that routinely causes harm to Black, Brown and Indigenous communities to continue to perpetuate violence. Intentions without action are empty and meaningless, and serve only to soothe white guilt. We must act, and we must act *now*. We must move from good intentions to solid actions. We must do everything in our power to prevent one more student or community member from dying while we stand by.

We are responsible!

We exist within a culture of white supremacy, one that advantages white people at every turn. This privilege is implicit and designed to go unnoticed by you and me, but it is always present and it is powerful. As white people living in the United States, we have always had collective control and continue to control the narrative of how events are told, reported and perpetuated. Because of this control, we shape what is believable and maintain our own plausible deniability: we can intentionally avoid hard truths in order to protect ourselves from discomfort. Some examples of this privilege include:

- When a white person acts egregiously, that person is looked upon individually and in isolation; everyone else is viewed as being part of a racial collective. The presumption of innocence is reserved for white people and all other persons must prove his/her/their innocence.
- In our communities and in our schools, we see the racially disproportionate impacts of punitive discipline.
- With a simple phone call, we can weaponize public resources to our benefit and gain, from calling a landlord, talking with a store clerk, to calling the police on a perceived threat.
- How our names are pronounced and how they are spelled gives us better access to employment and loan applications.
- Our dress codes are written to reflect white hairstyles, styles of dress, and appearance.
- We see ourselves positively represented in print, visual and social media and are guaranteed to find clothing, health and personal products that meet our needs.
- When we read books, we are represented in the words written and the curriculum that we teach from comes from a white-centered narrative.

We are responsible!

It is past time for us to wake up and take action to address the injustices that our education system continues to perpetrate on our Black community and communities of color, more broadly. We cannot continue to move forward as if we do not see, recognize and empathize with the pain that so many of our students and families have clearly stated and experienced. While it is critical we hold the police accountable in this moment, we must focus on the powerful role we play in combating white supremacy within our own practices and system of education.

Call to Action

George Floyd's death is the most recent in a centuries long history of killing of Black people. If we only show up at a rally after the death of a Black or Brown body, we are showing up too late. It is our responsibility to show up every day and to not stay silent. Our silence is killing Black and Brown bodies. What will we do now? Not in an hour, not tomorrow, but *right now*? What will we interrupt? What will we call out? What are we willing to give up in the name of racism? What will we take responsibility for? What kind of ancestor do we want to be? What cycle will we break? What system will we break? What will we commit to?

As a collective, we commit to:

- Always keep race at the center of the conversation and acknowledge race plays a role in everything.
- Actively question why things are being done the way they are. Whom does this action, policy, statement, process, etc. benefit?
- Speak up, interrupt, and challenge, individually and collectively, when an action, policy, statement, or practice is only or mainly benefiting the status quo, ie. the white power structure.
- Ensure that a full and representative story is told in our teaching, including in our books, curriculum, speakers and tools of evaluation.
- Examine the proportionality of the racial “who” is teaching our students and actively work to ensure that students are being taught and supported by staff to whom students and families relate.
- Center our own position in all that we do and, by doing so, recognize what we bring to the space and conversation, but also what is missing in the story we tell ourselves and in the stories we try to tell others.
- Learn about the cultural, racial, historical, political, social experiences our students, families, and communities bring; what’s more, we commit to being open to letting those learnings open us to deeply appreciate those perspectives which may be different from ours.
- Identify “whiteness” as a system that provides societal benefits to those perceived as white and to be able to identify our roles in benefiting from - and perpetuating - whiteness. We commit to create and maintain a space that challenges that whiteness.
- Lead or attend a series of workshops on understanding and dismantling whiteness.
- Acknowledge the physical manifestation of racism in our white bodies and take the time to understand what those feelings are telling us in order to stay engaged physically and emotionally in the work of racial justice and healing.
- Listen to and trust Black people, Indigenous people and other Communities of Color when they share their experiences in our systems and in our communities.
- Find and create white anti-racist affinity spaces where we can be questioned, challenged and pushed forward in our learning.
- Engage in the community and mobilize to effect systemic change.
- Honor the humanity of Black, Brown and Indigenous people, which has been routinely denigrated and dehumanized, so that we can regain our own humanity as white people.
- Use education as a tool for liberation, understanding that we are students in this work, and that we must remain lifelong learners.

We are responsible!

Honoring the life of George Floyd, and those of all Black, Brown and Indigenous people,

Signed by over 200 white Minneapolis Public School educators and leaders