June 4, 2020

Dear Hastings Families,

Children are seeing, reading, and hearing disturbing messages and images that have had a profoundly negative impact on them. We are committed to providing support, outreach, and assistance to them throughout these troubling times.

This morning, the diversity committee, led by Ms. Jenice Mateo-Toledo and made up of students, community members, staff, teachers, and administrators, met to discuss how we can support and assist staff, students, and families struggling to make sense of the death of Mr. George Floyd and others, the protests and the riots. As the diversity coordinator, Ms. Mateo-Toledo will continue to identify resources for families and make them available on our website.

In addition to the work of the diversity committee, a number of other efforts are underway to provide a safe forum for students to have discussions about racism and social justice. Several parents have shared the negative impact that social media has had on their children. This was also a topic at today’s meeting. In their attempt to understand what is happening, some children are accessing social media only to discover posts that perpetuate hatred and leave them confused, frustrated, and frightened. Some students are also experiencing on-line bullying by other students. If this is happening to your children, please tell your principal, assistant principal, or school counselor. While we may not be physically in school, the New York State Dignity for All Students Act still applies.

While we can’t stop the vitriol and ugliness on social media, we can create a safe space for learning, discussion, and affirmation. On June 16 from 4:30-5:30, Mr. Tesfa Stewart, Assistant Director of Special Education and I are hosting our first student chat for high school students called Time to Talk About Racism. We are not experts or counselors, but we can offer a safe environment for all students to share their concerns, express their thoughts and fears, and feel supported and valued. A school counselor will be joining us. The next student chat will be for middle school students.
In addition, Dr. Karen Hammerness, a member of the diversity committee, and I are conducting a book study for adults on *White Fragility: Why it is so hard for white people to talk about racism* by Robin DiAngelo. The diversity committee was in the throes of discussing this book before we closed in March. A number of other communities have also used this book to launch discussions about racism. The date and time of the book study will be announced shortly. If you are interested in joining this book study, please obtain a copy and start reading.

Independently, no single event or action will scrub the stain of racism from the fabric of this nation’s history. If each of us makes a commitment to start and continue to have honest, albeit uncomfortable, discussions about racism, we have a chance of altering our current pathway.

Thank you for your support.

Warm regards,

Valerie Henning-Piedmonte