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OPINION

Principal: I Spoke Out Against Racism Too Late. I Won't Make That Mistake Again



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What does an anti-racist school look and feel like?

By Eric Juli

June 24, 2020

After a long career in urban schools in impoverished neighborhoods, I've just completed my first year as the principal of Shaker Heights High School in Shaker Heights, Ohio. For the first time, I'm an administrator in a racially integrated school in a relatively well-off community. I knew it would be a year of learning. I just didn't expect a pandemic, school closure, and a national reckoning on race brought on by institutionalized violence against Black people—all of those occurrences requiring a direct response from me.

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Shaker Heights High has a diverse population, reflecting the demographics of the first-ring Cleveland suburb that it serves. Black and white people coexist in our school hallways and our community, but we remain mostly separate, too. Racial issues are evident daily but not always explicitly or overtly. We have an almost all-white dance team and an almost exclusively Black cheerleading team. Our Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate classes are predominately white, and our "core" courses—at a lower level—are predominately Black. We have one of the largest high school bands in Ohio, and when the band practices, the segregation is particularly evident because our class scheduling accommodates the mostly high-achieving, mostly white kids who make up the band.

This year, I committed to learning about my new school. I made my focus caring relentlessly for my community and getting to know everyone. I talked about race openly because I'm comfortable doing so. But I wrote and spoke about racial issues at our school from the perspective of an observer and a learner and not always as a leader.

When the pandemic happened and my amazing team figured out how to become a virtual high school almost overnight, I spoke publicly about the class of 2020, our plans for a virtual graduation, and my sadness about the events the students were missing. But I didn't speak out about the incidents happening nationally to the Black community. That is, until our school was graffitied with anti-police and anti-Trump slogans as Black Lives Matter protests and anger exploded across our country.

"Black and white people coexist in our school hallways and our community, but we remain mostly separate, too."

When our school newspaper asked me for a response, I wrote this [letter](#) and recorded this [video](#) expressing my deep regret that in my earlier communications, I had played it safe by not discussing the impact racially motivated murders are having on our community and the steps I intend to take to make Shaker Heights High an anti-racist school. The letter and video have been published widely, and their publication led directly to me being invited to write this piece about who I am and where I want to take our school.

I am a white, Jewish male. I am aware of my privilege. I'm also an educator who has spent more than 20 years working in schools in poverty-stricken communities. I've learned about extreme poverty and its impact on families. I've learned what covert racist policies and institutionalized racism do to my students and their families.

Violence has surrounded me in my career. An understanding of how much has to change to exit a life of poverty, easier access to guns than fresh fruit, and substandard health care all contribute to increased violence in communities where many families subsist on \$12,000 a year. I've lost seven students to gang violence. It's difficult to articulate how painful it is to attend so many teenage funerals. The anguish I feel when saying goodbye to murdered students is indescribable. I lost count years ago of the number of times I've been threatened or had to physically break up a fight. I've been in real danger and I've left school covered in other people's blood. I know I'm a privileged white man. I also know a few things that other white men and women may not.

I know for sure I'm far from an expert on being anti-racist. So many educators have devoted their careers to this important work. White educators need to take the time to find them. Don't ever allow yourself to believe that a white male like me, even though I have been offered a platform to write in this space, has the expertise that so many educators of color have spent years developing. Having this space to write is also an application of my privilege. I am acutely aware of that. I'm focused on reading and listening and learning every single day to grow my own knowledge and practice.

I am an expert in imagining how school can be different. I'm good at articulating that vision and leading change over time. I often describe school change as trying to move a mountain. My greatest strength is knowing how to persist in that work. We may not be able to see the mountain moving day by day, but year after year, changes do occur. And

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yet our students urgently require change. Finding the balance between the time it takes to truly change and not wasting a moment on behalf of kids in need is the challenging work that lies ahead in becoming an anti-racist school.

As a principal new to the school, I prioritized observing, listening, and collaborating. I wanted to discover all that is amazing about Shaker Heights High and find our opportunities for growth. Now, it's time to honor what is great and, at the same time, blaze a new path. It's time to say to my community, "Let's go to this new place together." I need to name, for instance, what anti-racism looks and feels like at our school. I need to set the direction and also ensure that everyone is coming along with me. Many great staff members at our school are ready now.

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There are so many questions ahead. How is being anti-racist different from being inclusive? What does being anti-racist mean when considering the daily student experience at our school? The parent experience? The staff experience? What makes an anti-racist curriculum? What is an anti-racist music program, art program, and athletic program?

It's easy to use the word "anti-racist" from my living room, during the summer, in a pandemic, when the stakes are relatively low. But when school resumes, incredibly difficult work faces us. I know from experience what it means to move the mountain and create changes for students and families in an underfunded inner-city high school. This new job is to move the mountain in a wealthier community with lots of opinions about what school should be.

We must develop a clear and purposeful anti-racist system and set of beliefs at our high school. It's time, it's way past time.

Eric Juli has been a public school teacher and administrator for almost 25 years. He has worked in New York City, California, Massachusetts, and Ohio. He is currently the principal of Shaker Heights High School in Ohio.

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