

To the Mill River Unified Union School District community,

The Mill River Union Unified School District (MRUUSD) Board voted 8-1-1 Wednesday, 6/18/2020 to fly the Black Lives Matter and Pride flags at all schools in the 2020-2021 school year. Raising the Black Lives Matter and Pride flags promotes a climate of inclusivity, equity, support, and acceptance at all five of our schools, and tells our students, staff and communities that our schools are welcoming spaces for everyone. A dedicated group, including students, staff, board members, and community members, will be working throughout the summer to prepare an appropriate educational program to accompany the raising of the flags at each of the schools.

We recognize that to some people this is a long-overdue step, and to others it is an uncomfortable surprise. All these feelings spring from a place of caring deeply about the education and safety of our children. Since the vote we have heard from a large number of community members, current students, alumni, parents, and grandparents, some who are supportive of our decision and some who disagree. This letter to our community seeks to address some concerns that have arisen.

It is inappropriate to push a partisan political belief on our students. BLM is like a republican or democratic group. The school board has overstepped their bounds. The school should not be endorsing one view point to the exclusion of others. If they will not allow all groups equal access, then it is only fair no one be allowed access. People can express their views personally but this has no place at our school.

Neither flag is related to a particular political party. The decision of the board to fly the BLM flag was not a political one as it was based on review of local and national data on discrimination, an understanding of past and current students' lived experiences, and best practice recommendations for educational excellence.

How does flying flags contribute to academic excellence? This is unrelated to academics.

Creating a high-quality learning environment requires that we create a culture of inclusion, tolerance, celebration, and understanding. By flying these flags, we are affirming that all our students and all identities enrich our learning environment, and we are recognizing that all of our students benefit from a culture of inclusion, tolerance, celebration, and understanding.

Gay Pride isn't an appropriate subject for our schools. It is enough to teach children to be kind.

We have many representations of heterosexual marriage and families in our school literature and materials without mentioning reproduction and we do the same with representations of LGBTQIA families. We speak of partnerships, love, and families in all respects. All children should have the opportunity to feel their family system is respected and valued by their community.

What is the difference between equity and equality?

Equality implies that everyone has the same access to the same opportunities. Equity requires that everyone is equipped to take advantage of them.

I am very disappointed that one person can ask for this and the board can make a unilateral decision.

This may seem like a sudden decision, but in fact the district has been moving deliberately toward this point over the past several years. We have had a district equity committee working on making recommendations to the MRUUSD administration and contributing to the board's efforts to create an equity policy. MRUUSD leadership has been preparing its multi-year equity plan that was also approved at the last meeting. When a student came before the board with a proposal for the flags to be flown, an action plan to be created, and restorative justice to be implemented, there already had been a significant amount of work and review that had led up to our vote.

If you raise these flags, everyone will want a flag and have reason to fly it.

If someone would like the district to raise a certain flag, they may come to a School Board meeting and present their case, including an example of the flag and its significance, for our consideration.

How will a flag supporting one group challenge racism against other groups? BLM and Pride are excluding other groups. Identifying people by race just divides us further.

From a fellow community member: "By flying these flags, our school district is communicating to our Black (and by extension, others of color) and LGBTQIA students, families, and employees that they are seen, heard, respected, and protected in our schools. I respectfully disagree with my fellow community members who say that this is a political issue, an exclusionary act, or that it is not the school's place to expose our children to these concepts; on the contrary, one of the most important aspects of the work our schools do is cultivating in our students respect and compassion for one another no matter how facets of their identities differ. This action communicates to those near and far that MRUUSD schools aspire to be welcoming places of opportunity for all."

Saying Black Lives Matter is not saying that no one else matters, it is saying Black lives matter as much as everyone else's.

Pointing out racial differences is racist/I don't see race or color difference.

White people saying they don't see difference denies and devalues people of color's experiences of racism and prejudice. Research has shown that most of us hold some kind of racial bias, whether consciously or unconsciously.

*By bringing up the subject of racism you are creating a problem that did not exist before.
Does Vermont really have a problem with racism?*

Yes.

- Here is a video produced in Vermont by the NEA, with the personal experiences of Black students and parents and the assumptions other people have had about them and acted on, solely from reactions to appearance:
I Am From Here <http://www.racialequityvtnea.org/watch-now-video/>
- This is a project that shows the everyday experiences of people of color in Vermont:
<https://www.vpr.org/post/i-am-vermont-too-project-exposes-microaggressions#stream/0>
- This Mill River Schools podcast episode, released June 10, 2020, features conversation with Ronnie Holcomb and Brad Rideout, two Black men who work in our district.
<https://www.podbean.com/media/share/pb-9si5q-df656a>

BLM wants to "disrupt the idea of the western nuclear family."

BLM seeks to challenge the idea that the "western nuclear family" is the only and best way to raise our children. It does not seek to eradicate it.

From Black Lives Matter LA, here's another version of what the "Black Villages" guiding principle means: "We make our spaces family-friendly and enable parents to fully participate with their children."

You are creating conflict by talking about bad actions taken by a very small group of people. "Every group has bad apples."

The intention of flying these flags is not to target or vilify any group, it is to bring attention to our support for equity and for a welcoming and inclusive school environment.

We want everyone to unite under one flag: the American Flag.

The American flag will continue to fly at our schools. It has been a relatively small fraction of United States history that Black people have legally had all the rights and protections that the flag represents, and the LGBTQIA community still is not completely protected under the law.

How will my conservative kids feel safe at school?

All of our students, staff, and families deserve to feel safe at our schools. If you feel that your child has been targeted in any way please contact their teacher.

We are committed to providing our students a safe and welcoming environment in which they can explore, discover, and thrive. As stated in our District Policies, our students' success should not be predicted or predetermined by characteristics such as race, ethnicity, religion, family economics, class, geography, ability/disability, language, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, or initial proficiencies.

Everyone who has spoken up, whether supportive or not of the flags, shares our conviction that racism and discrimination have no place in our schools. Raising these flags is only the most publicly visible part of the work that our district is carrying out to disrupt inequitable practices and create inclusive multicultural school environments for adults and children (from Policy F2, District Equity Policy), and is directly related to our foundational belief #1, that all students feel respected, cared for, and loved.

The MRUUSD School Board welcomes further questions and comments about our decision, the better to respectfully engage with our community, dispel any misinformation, and build mutual understanding. The Board Community Engagement Committee is looking at ways for the MRUUSD Board to take part in less formal conversations with our community members over the coming academic year, please keep an eye out for announcements about this and feel free to get in touch with us via email at communityengagement@millriverschools.org.

Sincerely,

MRUUSD Board of Directors