



The Park School of Baltimore

CHARGE TO ALL EMPLOYEES — Dan Paradis, Head of School

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We are living in a time of dual pandemics — one that has been with us since this country’s founding and that we need only open this morning’s paper to bear witness to its latest victims. As we grapple with the shooting of Jacob Blake, as we watch white supremacists, emboldened by our president, parade through America’s streets, we must ask ourselves, “how is the work we do every day with our students informed by, connected to, and reflective of the legacy of race and racism in this country?”

Last week I shared with new faculty members my appreciation for an article written this summer by the *New York Times* columnist Jamelle Bouie. The piece was a tribute to the late John Lewis in which Bouie drew a clear line connecting Lewis and [*philosopher, psychologist, and educational reformer — founder of the progressive education movement*] John Dewey. Here, he quotes Lewis’ final essay:

“Democracy is not a state. It is an act, and each generation must do its part to help build what we called the Beloved Community, a nation and world society at peace with itself.”

Bouie connects Lewis’ words to those of Dewey’s 1888 essay, “The Ethics of Democracy,” in which he argued that we should understand democracy as “a form of moral and spiritual association” that recognizes the “infinite and universal possibility” within each person and seeks to foster its expression, not for “mere self-assertion” or “unregulated” desire, but for an “individualism of freedom, of responsibility, of initiative to and for the ethical ideal.”

John Lewis, Bouie forcefully proclaims, was the true inheritor and visionary for today’s embodiment and advancement of this most American of ideals — that democracy as a social and ethical commitment is something that cannot be limited to the “ballot box,” but rather “must be lived and practiced in all spheres of life. Marching, speaking, deliberating, educating, persuading — these are just some of the actions that help make democracy real. They are also the tools we’ll need,” Bouie concludes, “to defend democracy against the looming threat of autocracy.”

(I will only add to Jamelle Bouie’s bestowing of the progressive mantle on the broad shoulders of John Lewis by reminding us of Dr. Bettina Love’s message to us last week: if we as progressive educators don’t view our work through the lens of anti-racism, it’s just “white people talking.”)

The question I ask each of you, and the question I am asking myself today, is this: What will your role be both in creating here at Park a “Beloved Community” and in educating and challenging our students to create that community in the larger world?

The work of creating an anti-racist and pro-Black Park School is everyone’s work. I want to say that again: *The work of creating an anti-racist and pro-Black Park School is everyone’s work.*

We begin this year with that understanding, with an appreciation and full acceptance of our collective responsibility for this work. At Park, we value the idea of individualism, of autonomy — not simply as a means by which our individual strengths and passions can flourish for the benefit of our students, but also as a way to model how the multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and strengths can create a richer and more inclusive community. But we must balance our individual autonomy with our *collective responsibility* — to create clear expectations and understandings for ourselves and for our students that the work of building community at Park will be informed by certain practices, and goals, and expectations for all. It is in this context that we all must engage in the work at hand to build an anti-racist and pro-Black school community.

If we believe that the work of creating an anti-racist and a pro-Black school is our responsibility, we must model, we must call out, we must create the time and space and vocabulary for this work to change ourselves, to change one another, and to change all of our students. We must ensure that our Black students see themselves, and experience that we see and appreciate them fully, in all of their individual and collective worth. We must do this work for our white students, who must appreciate how privilege has enabled them the freedom to live their lives without fear or consequence attached to their racial identity.

We must do this work for our students who identify as LatinX, as Asian, as multiracial, who must see our determination, our commitment to examining identity in all of its manifestations as honoring their identities. And we recognize that our work is not only around intolerance, but it is also around indifference — when we fail to create space to acknowledge, affirm, and understand one another, whether we are talking about racial identity, LGBTQ, differently-abled, Jewish, Muslim, and so many other important visible and invisible forms of difference — we are leaving our students, our colleagues, and ourselves vulnerable to being at best invisible, at worst victimized by our neglect.

I want to highlight work that our Lower School colleagues are engaged in even today — an initiative that I heard last week is called, the “get-to-know-you conference.” Each teacher is meeting with each family in an effort to create time and space to be proximate with one another — to ask questions about identity, to name race and other key signifiers as something that we want to talk about and understand. We want every family, every student, and indeed every one of us to feel that who we are matters. I’m grateful to June and Christina and the other members of the FACA group who looked at transracial adoptive families and multiracial children and families as part of their work this summer. They framed for their Lower School colleagues the importance of starting the year with these types of carefully planned conferences. I hope they can share their work with our Middle and Upper School colleagues, and that we can all build more intentional opportunities for community members to feel known and valued from the very first days of this school year.

This is the charge I am giving each of you today. It is a charge that I am confident is understood and felt by every member of Park’s academic leadership team, and that we will hold ourselves and one another accountable for this year and in the future.

You will hear more in the coming days about specific action items that we as a community will commit to this year. Those actions include deep and sustained training in anti-racist practice — cultural competency, anti-bias training, restorative justice practices, and more. We will engage not only all of us in this work, but also of course all of our students, our families, and our trustees. We will measure progress and introduce metrics — to track both successes and failures in our efforts. All of this work is what I not only ask, but I also require each of you to embrace. I believe in all of you, I believe in our individual and collective dedication and ability to move Park forward. To fail to do so is to fail our students and to fail ourselves. It simply isn’t an option.