



A Message from the Head of School

Wednesday, September 2

Park School Alumni and Parents —

I hope this message finds you safe and well. We began the new school year today — virtually — but with a special on-campus, physically-distanced gathering of the members of the Class of 2021! They will certainly help lead us through this year like no other, with resilience and tenacity. I just announced yesterday that we are looking forward to a phased reopening of the Park campus in the coming weeks as conditions allow. Believe me when I say I can't wait to welcome our students back in our buildings and experience their enthusiasm and positive energy first hand. Many of you have reached out to share expressions of support and appreciation for our efforts over the past many months as our students and teachers adapt and rise to the challenges of the ongoing pandemic. Your words of encouragement have meant a great deal — thank you.

While we enter the year with great optimism for the experiences we will create for and with our students at Park, I must also acknowledge injustices that envelop us, nationally, locally, and even within our own community.

An Instagram account (@blackatparkschoolbaltimore) was launched by Park alumni this summer as a space on social media for alumni, students, parents, and employees to share their experiences of being Black at Park. The experiences they have shared in many instances made them question their place at Park, and worse, some of the experiences made them question their worth as human beings. The challenges for Black students at a predominately white school are real, and Park is not immune from having created and perpetuated those challenges for Black students. Our alumni accounts inform the work we must do to address racism in its many forms. I assure you that I have been listening to the community members on the site and to other messages about the Black experience at Park, including a thoughtful letter from the Class of 2020 and other communications with alumni, parents, current students, and employees.

Wednesday of last week, a group of alumni identifying themselves as the Black at Park Organizing Collective reached out to me and Park's other senior administrators with a letter, also published to the Instagram account. I responded to the letter on Friday, August 18, acknowledging the **magnitude** and **urgency** of the work we need to do at Park in order to address past and current failings and to create a safe, loving environment for Black students. I further confirmed that the school is committed to taking action — we have been preparing a detailed anti-racism action plan that we will be sharing with the community in the coming days. The plan reflects our ongoing work, outlines the guiding steps forward, and ensures accountability.

Yesterday, an online article was published that focused on a troubling aspect of the letter written by the collective. While the reporter of the online piece suggests that the school failed to address anti-Semitic references within the letter, I assure you that this is untrue and that, in fact, the references did not go unchallenged. Here is a portion of my response to the Black at Park Organizing Collective from last Friday, August 18:

...As the leader of this school, I take seriously my responsibility for dismantling the way that white culture, white systems, and white individuals have worked to harm Black people and damage positive Black identity. I would challenge you to consider, though, whether or not your intention in the letter was to include language and imagery that is, in its own right, rooted in hatred. Specifically, I am referencing the use of pernicious anti-Semitic tropes that have been applied throughout history — and you now apply to Park's history — including "wealth hoarding," "tolerance for Zionism," and "parasitic relationship." We want, and need, to engage our entire community as we break down our own prejudices. We must create actions that bring the community's full strength to bear on anti-Blackness. Dr. Bettina Love made it clear for us when she met with all Park employees this week: Allyship is not good enough; we need to be "co-conspirators." We need to be in community with one another. I would ask you to consider the fact that we need everyone's help in this effort — we cannot afford to exclude anyone. Anger and discomfort are part of this work. Hate is not.

Just as I take seriously my responsibility for addressing individual and institutional failures to affirm and support Black members of our community, I also must address language and actions that challenge the identity of Jewish members of our community. Only when we call out injustice and seek reconciliation across racial, religious, and many other lines, can we fully realize the Park School all of our children deserve.

This morning, I was inspired by the leadership of our Upper School Principal Patti Porcarelli and Dean of Students Traci Wright. At the Upper School's virtual opening assembly, they helped us navigate the challenges we are facing as a community.

Patti called for both intellectual and personal examinations to lead us to action: "What we know is that students of color are speaking and they are telling their stories. It's imperative that we listen to these experiences...for white people to listen...to reflect on our involvement directly or indirectly, and on our actions to combat the racism around us."

Traci dug deep into the intersections of injustices, with the clear understanding that none of what we face exists in a vacuum: "Through the experiences and correspondence from the architects of the Instagram page, we are wrestling with difficult and racist experiences while also grappling with the seeds of anti-Semitism. As we are holding race under a microscope, images of anti-Semitism, xenophobia, classism, and heteronormativity are also showing up. We are on the precipice of something powerful — something soul-changing — that could have an impact on all of us as we grapple with these important topics."

Together, Patti and Traci presented a personal and powerful way forward — engagement in the work ahead with eyes, minds, and hearts wide open. This engagement is not separate from life at school, but, rather is life at school — what we learn, how we learn, and, at its most basic, if we learn — with one another, in community.

As you will read in further communications about our work in creating an anti-racist school, we reference and respect what the late John Lewis referred to as the "Beloved Community." "Democracy is not a state," Lewis said, "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."

We owe the very existence of Park — our own aspiring beloved community — to a group of families that responded to injustice — the failure of the public school system at the time, and the abject discrimination practiced by private schools prohibiting access to Jewish children. In creating Park School, a community came together to right a wrong. And they set us forth on a path that, while imperfect, bends toward justice. The principles on which Park School was founded must continue to guide us even as we are challenged to live and practice them more fully by each successive generation. We will not be deterred in our efforts to ensure our community is safe for all identities. We move forward with our commitment to create an anti-racist school and combat prejudices with moral certainty; and, in doing so, we will leave no one behind.

Park alumni, I welcome your continued engagement in our important work. *Anger and discomfort are part of this work. Hate is not.*

Sincerely,
Dan Paradis, Head of School