

Date : 9/27/2017 5:15:43 PM

From : "Jodi Rhoden"

To : "Shaunda Sandford"

Cc : "Shaunda Sandford" , "Martha Geitner" , "James Lee" , "Patricia Griffin" , "Joyce Brown" , "Denise Patterson"

Subject : Re: Bree Newsome Event

Hi Shaunda,

First, let me express my sincere condolences for the grief and tragedy that the ACS community has suffered since yesterday evening. It is going to be a long road of healing and I know the community will come together to wrap around this family with love.

Secondly, I thank you for your response regarding the Bree Newsome talk. Your words shed some clarity on the situation, however, they don't fully address my concerns. Can you please address these concerns more specifically:

-You seem to say that Ms. Newsome was never invited in the first place, but it seems that she was actually very recently dis-invited. If you found out late in summer that Bree was the one coming, why were you unable or unwilling to create an event that was "correctly structured?"

-Can you give me more details on what "correctly structured" entails?

-It seems in this case, that the policy against "advocating illegal acts" has been racially selectively enforced. NC Senator Terry Van Duyn, who is white, actively advocates civil disobedience, and has been arrested for illegal acts in the name of justice (as have many of the people in the AWTT project), and she has been a visitor and speaker at AMS with no consequence. There is no reason to assume that Ms. Newsome, who is African-American, would vocally advocate breaking the law any more than Ms. Van Duyn would. Furthermore, why not discuss these concerns in advance of the event with Ms. Newsome?

For me, these issues come on the heels of several years as a parent and PTO board member at Hall Fletcher Elementary, where I was frustrated beyond belief at seeing the school board make decisions and institute policies that support structural racism. Whether motivated by money or a desire to avoid controversy (indeed, it is controversial to stand up for students of color when the wider society is structured against them!) I have sadly witnessed up close policies that disadvantage kids that are already the most vulnerable. Examples include the detrimental restructuring conversation, the reversal of the balanced calendar, racial bias in disciplining students as well as handling of staff and parent relations, lack of communications in Spanish, barring of undocumented parents from volunteering, the broken promises of the Outdoor Learning Center, lack of direct communication from the board regarding these issues, and the list goes on and on. It seems to me that, while the ACS Board expresses a desire to act in racially just ways, their actions are the opposite. It seems to me that there are policies and procedures AS AN INSTITUTION (I don't doubt the sincere intentions of the individuals involved) that reinforce racism even when the desire is to begin to institute equity. I believe that the board of Asheville City Schools needs to do some serious soul-searching to acknowledge the damage that has been done, be open to discussing the unhealed wounds of the recent, local past in regards to racism, segregation, the mismanagement of desegregation, and the problem of ongoing institutional racism, and discern which side of racial equity they are truly on. Hopefully this process will lead you to re-evaluate and reform policies and procedures to reflect a consistent commitment to racial justice.

I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,

Jodi Rhoden

www.jodirhoden.com

On Sep 27, 2017, at 2:43 PM, Shaunda Sandford <shaunda.sandford@acs@gmail.net> wrote:

Dear Jodi,

Thank you for taking the time to express your concerns. We value your feedback and we understand how this contributes to strong school communities as well as the success of our students.

As part of its collaboration with Asheville Middle School ("AMS"), Americans Who Tell the Truth ("AWTT"), a project that, through portraits and narratives, highlights citizens who address issues of social, environmental and economic fairness, informed AMS that the author of *Hidden Figures*, Margot Lee Shetterly, would be available to speak with the eighth-grade class on September 29, 2017. *Hidden Figures* is the non-fiction, biographical novel and recent motion picture which chronicles the lives of three African American women working at NASA during the space race in the early 1960s.

In preparation for Ms. Shetterly's visit to AMS, eighth graders attended a screening of *Hidden Figures* and copies of the novel were purchased for eighth graders to read. In addition, using *Hidden Figures* as its primary text, AMS aligned its curriculum with AWTT to implement a Paideia project. The project resulted in students learning about active citizenship and their future selves. Additionally, several students created portraits of local heroes that will be displayed at the YMI Cultural Center in Asheville.

Late this summer, AWTT notified AMS that Ms. Shetterly had a scheduling conflict and would not be available to speak at AMS on September 29th. As an alternative to Ms. Shetterly, AWTT invited Bree Newsome; she was not invited by Asheville City Schools. Ms. Newsome is a filmmaker, speaker and activist from Charlotte, North Carolina. In July 2015, Ms. Newsome was arrested in Columbia, South Carolina for removing the Confederate battle flag that was on display on the grounds of the South Carolina State House.

School Board Policy 3535 states that the involvement of any visiting speaker regarding citizenship issues must be “correctly structured” by the school’s professional staff. The policy also states that the advocacy of illegal acts by a speaker is not permitted. This Paideia project was specifically based upon Ms. Shetterly’s novel and its themes regarding citizenship. The policy strikes a balance between the vital role of our schools in exposing students to differing viewpoints with the need to present those viewpoints within the school curriculum. Given these considerations, the Asheville City Schools declined the offer of Ms. Newsome to participate as an alternative to Ms. Shetterly.

Thank you again for passion and commitment to Asheville City Schools, and I hope we can all work together to ensure the success of each one of our students.

Best,

Shaunda

On Tue, Sep 26, 2017 at 6:24 PM, Jodi Rhoden <Jodi@jodirhoden.com> wrote:

Dear members of the school board,

I am the parent of an Asheville Middle School student. I was very disheartened to hear that activist Bree Newsome’s scheduled appearance this week at Asheville Middle has been cancelled. I am writing to urge you to reinstate the talk and align yourself and the school with the ongoing movement for civil rights and racial equity, rather than against it. My 6th grade son recently wrote a biography of Bree Newsome as a school assignment about someone he admires. He spoke of her bravery and her act of justice in taking down the Confederate flag from the State House of South Carolina. What must he make of his hero being barred from entering his school? (I’ll tell you what he makes of it: he’s confused, disappointed, and frustrated). I have heard that you feel that she would be an “inappropriate” speaker for the school since she has been arrested. Would Martin Luther King be considered “inappropriate?” Rosa Parks? Gandhi? Nelson Mandela? Desmond Tutu? Susan B. Anthony? Dorothy Day? The faces and stories of these heroes line the halls of your school. You cannot, in good faith, stand before the students and praise those activists while repudiating the one among us who walks in their footsteps in every way.

Civil disobedience is an effective, time-honored human tradition and a sacred obligation. Bree Newsome’s actions at the State House that day ultimately lead to South Carolina removing that symbol of slavery, racism, and hate from their grounds permanently. She is changing the world. Her example is exactly the kind of brave leadership our children are called upon to exhibit in these fraught and tumultuous times.

I’ve also heard that there was a concern about white supremacists showing up to the event. Cancelling the event because you’re afraid of hate groups is absolutely acquiescing to their agenda, letting them control the narrative, and essentially “negotiating with terrorists,” which ultimately always gives them more power.

Please do the right thing and reverse the decision to cancel the Bree Newsome event. Our kids are watching.

Sincerely,

Jodi Rhoden

www.jodirhoden.com

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"We worry about what a child will become tomorrow, yet we forget that he is someone today."

