



Joseph N. Meloche, Superintendent  
Malberg Administration Building  
45 Ranoldo Terrace, P.O. Box 5015  
Cherry Hill, NJ 08034-0391  
(856) 429-5600, ext. 4309 Fax (856) 354-1864  
Email:JMeloche@chclc.org

**Testimony Before the Assembly Education Committee**

**Via Zoom**

**Thursday, October 22, 2020**

**By Joseph Meloche, EdD, Superintendent, Cherry Hill Public School District**

Members of the committee, colleagues, and community members, my name is Joseph Meloche; I am the proud superintendent of the Cherry Hill Public School District in Camden County. Thank you to the members of the committee for allowing me time to address you, a special thank you to Assemblywoman Lampitt for her continued, tireless advocacy for public education and for the children throughout our state. I am grateful for the time to address the Assembly Education Committee on the topic Racial Inclusivity and Social Justice in our Education System. It is an honor to speak on behalf of my peers and to provide substance and context to this critical issue. I feel a compelling and imperative responsibility to support the voices of my students as they endeavor to improve the system from within for themselves and for the next generation.

You will also hear today from Ebele Azikiwe, a seventh grader from Beck Middle School in Cherry Hill – hers is one of the many impassioned, informed voices of our children to whom we must listen.

Cherry Hill is an incredible community in which to live and work, and especially to raise a family. Cherry Hill, like most communities in our state, has changed dramatically during the past few decades. The Cherry Hill School District is a wonderfully diverse tapestry of families of so many different cultural, familial, and

religious backgrounds and economic means. Among our 11,000 children, more than 70 languages are spoken at home and more than 2,500 children are bilingual. The children we educate have varied backgrounds, come from diverse homes and carry a rich understanding of the world through the lens of previous generations. These children need to see themselves reflected in our written and expressed curricula, in our choice of primary and ancillary materials, and in the faces of the instructors in our classrooms and the administrators in our schools. Perhaps the most primary of all absolutes in this profession is that we must meet the needs of all our students, in order to prepare them to thrive in an everchanging and diversified world. For far too long, racial inclusivity and social justice have been an academic ideal that has been studied and espoused but rarely sought and achieved. In Cherry Hill, our district and our community have committed to act – now – not just planning for the future but truly acting in deed, not just in word, to make systemic and institutional change.

During the past eight months as life was put on hold in the midst of the pandemic, our nation experienced unconscionable tragedies as we bore witness to the senseless and needless killing of black Americans including Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks and George Floyd, whose brutal death was broadcasted and replayed, leaving an indelible imprint on our collective being. The shock and the atrocity these deaths, galvanized the resolve for us to come together to make real change – to address this virus of racism, this plague that has infected our country for more than 400 years since 1619. Today, and every day forward, we must and will stand up and declare, in our words and our actions, that Black Lives Matter. While we meet the state mandated requirements for content and curricula, we must and will do more. The history that we teach to our students, across the grade level continuum must be an authentic reflection of our history, Black history is our history, and we must and will do more.

This summer, as a school district, we seated a Social Justice Curriculum Committee, to go beyond the framework of New Jersey's Amistad curricula, with expanded requirements for teachers and students, and we must and will continue to do more. This committee is currently focused on the development and implementation of African American History and Social Justice courses, that the district envisions as graduation requirements. Our school district has been recognized as a National District of Character, seventeen of our schools have been recognized as National Schools of Character, and we must and will do more. Cherry Hill has a well-established Cultural Proficiency, Equity, and Character Education Committee, made up of staff members, students, parents, and community members who have come together to develop and implement a five year plan, focusing on eight goals and action plans to advance and achieve each goal. We have seen great success and progress, but it is not enough to admire what we have accomplished in the past while there is still so much that must be done, and we must and will do more. Cherry Hill needs to be recognized as a district and a community that is anti-racist, where people are overt and direct in addressing racist language and racist behavior, where microaggressions and macroaggressions simply are not welcome or permitted, and we must and will do more.

I trust that you will all reflect on the words you hear today, and join in the solidarity that we must demonstrate to act swiftly and decisively to ensure that all the children of our state are seen and heard in the instructional practices and materials that are shared in the classroom. This must remain part of the foundation of who we are as an educational community, as school districts, and we must and will do more. I am counting on our students to continue to be leaders, to use their voices, to embrace their strength to make changes to be a part of the solution – making Cherry Hill better, seizing this opportunity to learn, and to educate beyond what has been accepted for decades. Honoring, reflecting, and including African Americans, Hispanic and Latinx, Asian, and indigenous peoples must be of primary focus. The

whitewashed and commonly accepted core body of knowledge can no longer be the norm. We must listen to our students, we must hear them, we must honor and understand how we can support them to make this change, and we must do more. As the Cherry Hill students who organized a Juneteenth March declared, “Learning Begins Now; Stop the Ignorance.”

Esteemed members of the New Jersey State Assembly, you have the ability to make a real difference in children’s lives, you have the power to drive this forward. Let this be the time. Let today be the day that our journey forward is marked by action, rather than resolve, that our commitment is displayed in a new day for education in New Jersey, where our students’ voices are acted upon to improve our systems, where racial inclusivity and social justice become the expectation rather than the exception. As our esteemed legislators, we need you and we are counting on you to hear our voices and to act on behalf of our children.

Thank you for your time and your willingness to support our children.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Joseph N. Meloche, Ed.D." The signature is written in a cursive style with a large initial "J".

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Joseph N. Meloche, Ed.D.

October 22, 2020

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Date