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Message from the Principal

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Thomas Jefferson HS for Science and Technology



Dear TJHSST Students and Families:

While the world has been quietly hibernating in quarantine the past few months, we recognize the personal isolation, health fears, and academic challenges you have endured. Our homes have been familiar yet bustling enterprises of work and school as we awaited our world to return to normal.

However, disturbing and painful actions in our country have jarred us from our COVID-19 slumber. We are awakened to see that our country's normal continues to be laced with racism that has plagued our nation since its founding. The recent events in our nation with black citizens facing death and continued injustices remind us that we each have a responsibility to our community to speak up and take actions that counter racism and discrimination in our society.

I implore you to think about your own journey and discovery of race and economic advantage in America. My parents never had to teach me about what it means to be white. I never have had to worry that someone would look at the color of my skin and think I either may not be smart enough to learn or I should be exceedingly smart in a certain subject. No one has surveilled me in a store while shopping, or locked their cars or front doors out of fear when seeing me in their neighborhood. While I did not come from a family with economic means, the color of my skin has given me privileges that others do not have. Please think of privileges you hold that others may not.

As we engage in self-reflection, children and adults can experience a range of emotions including hurt, anger, confusion, discomfort, defensiveness, hopelessness, humility, resolve and advocacy. These feelings are normal.

Our teachers, too, are processing everything while continuing to create classrooms that are safe and welcoming spaces. We encourage students to connect with teachers, counselors and administrators, particularly if they are struggling with how to cope with their range of emotions and ideas. Also, FCPS has several resources on countering racism and stigma you may [find here](#) on the district website.

Thank you for taking time to personally reflect. Give yourself the gift of feeling vulnerable as you process emotions individually and collectively. Reach out to trusted professionals and access resources that will help you.

During this reflection period, I would like to simultaneously call the TJ community to action in three areas.

First, our school is a rich tapestry of heritages; however, we do not reflect the racial composition in FCPS. Our 32 black students and 47 Hispanic students fill three classrooms. If our demographics actually represented FCPS, we would enroll 180 black and 460 Hispanic students, filling nearly 22 classrooms. The most recent TJ admissions trend, unfortunately, does not close the equity

gap. Do all FCPS children who have high interest and aptitude for STEM enjoy the same privileges that put them on a path to TJ? Do the TJ admissions outcomes affirm that we believe TJ is accessible to all talented STEM-focused students regardless of race or personal circumstance?

Second, consider colonialism's role in our country's history where certain classes exerted power over others as a means to economically exploit, oppress and enslave them. During the Colonial period, there were leaders who believed those with black or brown skin were uncivilized and not capable of being educated. I speak for us all when I assert this is not a value we share as a TJ community. Yet, our mascot is a Colonial. Can our community support dismantling a symbol that perpetuated racism in our country?

Finally, the heart of public education is in the classroom. This is where students learn to become ethical and global citizens as espoused in the FCPS [Portrait of a Graduate](#). Our students learn to understand and accept, not merely tolerate, diverse cultures and perspectives. Curriculum will need to be adapted to better equip our TJ students. As expressed by TJ alumni who have written to me, "STEM alone is not enough." Can our community support the new conversations, lessons and activities that will need to be infused across our entire TJ program of study in all content areas?

I acknowledge some of the questions I am asking may not equally resonate with everyone as we examine our school's place within FCPS and the world. I also know that my words may not always be eloquent, my ideas may miss the mark, and I will make mistakes. I also know that I have enjoyed growing with you these past three years and have immense trust and faith in our community to pull together and do what is right, particularly for those in our community experiencing the most pain right now.

By evaluating the racial equity at our school, dismantling a long-held symbol of racism, and embracing curricula to better prepare TJ graduates for a truly diverse and culturally responsive world, you will play a role in how TJHSST continues to lead the nation as a public school that prepares students for the shared interests of humanity. Thank you for joining in this important work.

Sincerely,

Ann N. Bonitatibus, Ed.D.

TJHSST Principal

6560 Braddock Rd, Alexandria, VA 22312 | Main Office: 703.750.8300
Attendance: 703.750.8315 | [Web](#) | [Twitter](#)

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