



The Math & Science Exploratory School

Dear MS 447 Families and Community,

I am excited that MS 447 is once again organizing activities to celebrate Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action. Our BLM week will actually be three celebrated over three weeks: This week, students had lessons in Pack meetings and Advisory. Next week, we will have grade assemblies with some explicit learning about the Black Lives Matter movement as well as student performances. And the following week, we will have closing lessons in Advisory.

While we are setting aside some dedicated time in the week, we also affirm that our work in celebration of Black lives extends through our year, every year. As I have the last couple of years, I'd like to contextualize this week in the work our school has done over the last several years. While many of you are returning families familiar with this context, 447's history and work is useful to know!

MS 447, since its start in 2003, has been a racially and economically integrated and diverse school in its student body. We have many strong foundations in place to be an inclusive and welcoming school, through the ASD Nest program, our Peace and Diversity Conference, our student action committees, and so on.

Eight years ago, when I began as principal at MS 447, a group of teachers and I decided to study restorative justice practices in schools. We quickly realized that our school mimicked a larger picture of racial disparity, but that as adults, and as educators, we had a very hard time discussing that directly. Around that time, as our area of Brooklyn gentrified, our historically diverse school became less diverse, and our narrative of the “melting pot” looked a little less true. Before we could embrace restorative justice, we needed some help talking about race.

We wanted to be able to confront our individual and institutional biases that stand in the way of racial equity. In seeking expert assistance, we worked with Border Crossers (now the Center for Racial Justice in Education). As a full staff, we spent that year in ongoing sessions with our CRJE trainers, exploring the impact of race and racism on ourselves, and its impact in our school and world. Our conversations, though difficult, created a space in which race could be named and examined. It allowed us to move our discussion about our racial identities from theoretical to personal. For me, and I believe for many teachers, it nurtured courage in our interactions with students—courage to question our assumptions and start new conversations.

Through those conversations, we emerged from this chapter with great optimism and deep commitment—but our story is not over. The next year, we established a staff Equity and Diversity Team to consider the possibilities of celebrating our differences and striving to become an anti-racist school. At the same time, (and with the support of the NYC Department of Education) we rewrote our admissions policies—which had shown year after year to be a segregating factor in enrollment—in an effort to reclaim the diversity of the district through a more equitable process. The next year, we brought our anti-racist work to families, and collaborated with the PTA to implement some parent education around topics of race and racism. Last year, the PTA established two vice presidents of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, to help anchor and drive this work on a system-wide level. And now in year two of District 15's new middle school admissions policies, we have a more racially, economically, linguistically, and academically diverse group of sixth graders than we've had in many years.

Behind the scenes, we imagined the ways that we could now bring our work into our classrooms, implicitly and explicitly. Many staff members have attended intensive training in restorative circle practices; others have joined Critically Conscious Educators Rising (CCER) and other professional development through NYU's Metropolitan Center for Research on Equity and the Transformation of Schools/Technical Assistance Center on Disproportionality; still others have attended Teachers College Reimagining Education Conference on Teaching and Learning in Racially Diverse Schools. Teachers and teams began working on curricular changes that encouraged learning and conversation about race, and allowed a broader slice of our students to see themselves reflected in the curriculum. We strengthened and focused our advisory program to become a critical and safe structure to have sometimes-difficult conversations about race in restorative community building circles. We have inspected our hiring practices in an ongoing effort to have a teaching staff that more closely mirrors our student body.

For three years, we have had a full time restorative justice coordinator so we can officially utilize restorative practices as a way of addressing disciplinary matters. We also collaborated with Bank Street College's Center for Culture, Race, and Equity. Their work began by taking a data dive into our school to develop an Equity Snapshot of where we are now. They then facilitated a series of staff and parent working groups to identify areas of focus and next steps. They provided professional learning sessions to help us build capacity as we continue to work towards building an equitable learning environment for everyone. Our work with CCRE led us to set up staff racial affinity groups to explore our own racial identities and relationships with race and racism. Planned and facilitated by our staff, we continue these affinity groups once a month, as part of our work to break down racism that exists within our own school systems and structures, and in our interactions with each other and our students. This year, we have also embarked on a study of Gholdy Muhammad's book, *Cultivating Genius*, to build our capacity to bring culturally and historically relevant instruction to our students.

I say with total conviction that it is through the difficulty and discomfort of our conversations that we are able to learn together, to imagine the possibilities and forge a path of disrupting racism in our school and world. And it is through that discomfort that we can move forward, to see ourselves on a continuum, rather than being finished, and to help teach our students to also be able to speak of race and disrupt racism.

Black Lives Matter At School Week of Action is part of nationwide effort of teachers, parents, schools of education activists and more. You can find out more about the history of this movement, which began in 2018, here: <https://blacklivesmatterschool.com/>. Our commitment for the BLM in schools week of action at 447 is to provide a space for empathetic listening and learning. For us at 447, Black Lives Matter at School is an affirmation and restoration of the humanity of Black students. It is a recognition that unexamined impacts of racism in the educational system in the United States has led to disproportionately harsh consequences for Black students, and that many Black students don't see themselves or their culture reflected in their teachers or curriculum. Our assertion that Black Lives Matter at School is a statement in support of human rights. During these weeks, we will celebrate and affirm Black lives.

I am excited to bring this week of action into our school, and I encourage you to continue the conversations at home. Ask questions (I know, middle school kids are not always so forthcoming with information!), learn about the movement, [explore online resources](#), and join the conversation. We look forward to our fourth year of participation in Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action, and I hope you are excited to be part of this meaningful and loving work we do to provide tools and a sense of justice and anti-racism to our children.

Sincerely,

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