



Save the Diversity Statements and Address Diversity Issues in Your School

By Educator Barnes – June 9, 2020

If you are Black, like me, you are probably getting tired of all of these diversity statements. You probably have seen a statement that even offended you because of your experiences or experiences of Black people you know with the organization that released the statement. But even considering the hypocrisy of corporations, some of the worst statements I've seen were written by school leaders.

I'm sure you've seen them too. Statements like, "We are inclusive" or "We have a diverse staff." Really? School leaders with Black students couldn't find the courage to write the word "Black" in their statement. The focus is on Black Lives Matter. Period.

Some didn't even acknowledge what is happening in our country. Others included the word "peaceful" in front of the word protest. Clearly, these leaders don't understand the history of protests in America or the purpose of protest infiltrators. The worst offense is the misuse of Dr. King. Day after day Dr. King's children have to come out and speak about the misuse of his quotes and the misunderstanding of his speeches and actions. Honestly, quoting Dr. King shows the school leader doesn't really know any other Black leaders to quote.

Although, I have seen some strong statements like the one from my twin sons' principal. I want more. The reason I could support Mrs. Parquet, my sons' principal, is because I have seen her work in action. It is the reason why my sons still attend school in Washington Township even though I have been highly critical and publicly critical of the district.

Today, I want to share a glimpse of the atrocities I have faced as a student in Indiana, an educator in Indiana, and as a parent in Indiana, so it is clear why I am demanding more than written statements from school districts and school leaders.

Kindergarten – I attended kindergarten in 1988. My classroom had a huge coat closet, and it was big enough to fit a table. The teacher decided I was dumb. I had to attend class with struggling students in the coat closet. When my parents discovered this, they showed off my intelligence. They asked me question after question to show the teacher how smart I was. I showed up to kindergarten reading and writing. I could also do some math. In Indiana, kindergarten was only half-day in 1988, and most of that time was playtime. You didn't have to leave kindergarten reading during that time which means I showed up ahead but was automatically put in the low group without the teacher assessing my knowledge.

Early elementary (2nd or 3rd grade) – I was visibly frustrated that my first name got mispronounced again. When I told the art teacher, she told me when I turned 18 I could legally change the spelling of my name so it wouldn't get mispronounced. She even showed me how to spell my name differently. In art, I started writing my first name as Shawntay instead of Shawnta just as the art teacher showed me. Then, my artwork was included in a school festival. I went with my parents and younger sisters. My dad was pissed when he saw how my name was spelled. I got a long lecture on the car ride back about why this was wrong

and to correct people instead of changing my name to make it easier for others. Yes, my dad had some words for the teacher, too.

Fifth grade – We had to research a hero or someone who did something significant. By this time, I had many lessons from my parents about being proud of being Black and the importance of learning about Black people. I decided to research Harry Belafonte. This led to ridicule from my classmates. I was told he wasn't a real hero and didn't do anything worthwhile. The teacher said nothing.

Seventh grade – My white social studies teacher told me that my mom misspelled my name. She started correcting my name on the papers she returned to me. She would put an accent over the second 'a' in my name so my name would be written, Shawntá instead of Shawnta. After my mother noticed I hadn't shown her any of my social studies work, I finally told her what was happening. My mom called the teacher and gave her a piece of her mind. The teacher stopped 'correcting' my name, but she moved my seat to the back of the class. I didn't tell my mom about my seat being changed until I was an adult. As a child, I feared more retaliation from the teacher if my mom got involved again.

Eighth grade – I had classmates who repeatedly called me a white girl in science class. The teacher was aware, but the students received no consequences. Instead, the teacher moved me to my own desk. I worked completely alone the rest of the school year which led to me getting ahead and finishing all the science labs for the year. The teacher would allow me to work on other work since the teacher had no assignments for me to do. I used this time to do homework for other classes which led to nerd being added to the white girl insult. Every time I asked the teacher to do something the teacher said, "Ignore it."

Ninth grade – Yes, another story about my name. I was taking swimming during gym class. The gym teacher kept mispronouncing my name. I gave her a piece of my mind. She kicked me out of the pool and said she was going to call my mom. I replied, "Call my momma!" She did. The next day, she apologized and never mispronounced my name again.

Tenth grade – A teacher recommended that I be switched to the Academic Honors diploma track. After my parents were informed, I knew I wasn't going to have a say and be allowed to stay in the regular classes. I ended up being the only Black student in most of those classes. I earned a C in AP composition and was devastated. I felt stupid. I now can see that I wasn't stupid. It was just hard to get to the level when I had been excluded from these advanced classes until then. Why was I the only Black student in most of these classes? Why was I

admitted late? I did earn the Academic Honors diploma, but it could have been easier if I was put in these classes early like my white peers.

College – I majored in English education. Of course, I was going to take African American literature. I even had a Black professor. I quickly learned that it didn't mean much. He allowed a white student to go on a rant about how ugly Black people are among other points. When I realized the professor wasn't going to say anything, I knew there was no point in reporting it. Trauma is sitting in a class about Black people with a Black professor where white people are given the ability to say offensive comments about the Black people.

College – I had professors and classmates assume I was there on some Black scholarship many times. I would tell them that my dad earned the Purple Heart, and that's how my tuition was getting paid because he fought for our country...not that they even deserved this explanation.

College (senior year) – We had to write a letter about ourselves and then we would get picked by teachers. I was supposed to student teach under two different teachers at the school. One of the teachers refused to allow me to work with her. She wouldn't give me an explanation. She never spoke to me in the building. The school librarian told me she had researched my background and didn't find anything concerning. Did she research the other student teachers?

First year as a teacher – I worked in a suburb of Indianapolis. I went to get my school-issued items from the school secretary before school started. She mispronounced my name. I corrected her. She mumbled, "You people have..." Then, I interjected, "Excuse me." She said, "Nothing, here's your stuff" and shoved it into my arms. The first week, a colleague told me I had stolen the job from her friend. I was the only Black teacher in the school. The only other Black employee was a classroom assistant that got fired. I was also told I was an affirmative action hire. My biggest offense was refusing to teach "To Kill a Mockingbird" to the high ability English class. This class had two English teachers. They would have me a few days of the week and have the other English teacher on my team, who was my assigned mentor which I had to have as a first-year teacher. My mentor told me that I was depriving the students of a classic text and that I ruined her scope and sequence because she would have to teach the book now, so the students would be prepared for the future. Shortly, after that, the principal told me she didn't think I was a good fit and suggested I find a new school; I did.

English Department (at another school) At this school, I wasn't the only Black teacher, but I was the only Black English teacher. I constantly got reported about what I was doing in my room. One offense was not having students read "Anne Frank's Diary." During this unit, we had to use a historical fiction or a nonfiction novel. I chose to use "Chains" which is about a Black enslaved girl trying to figure out which side of the American revolution would gain her freedom. I chose this text because I knew students had already covered the American Revolution in social studies class. I knew that would save me time on teaching background knowledge. I was later confronted by the social studies teacher for teaching alternate facts. The teacher was also mad because students were asking why some of the information I shared was not covered in social studies class. Then, there was the English department meeting where it was shared that not all students had exposure to enough Holocaust content. Clearly, this was aimed towards me. I learned that day that we had a choice, but we really didn't. Actually, 1/3 of my students read "Anne Frank's Diary" because I did a book talk. All of my students read some excerpts. I know what the real problem was. I was supposed to do excerpts about Black issues instead.

English department – I was asked to sit on a committee to ensure more Black students were getting into high ability. The vote still had to be unanimous. Every Black student I suggested was found problematic and was not recommended to the program. At least the school could say they had a Black person on the committee when parents asked questions.

Literacy coach – I was told to make a boot camp for students who were behind academically. These students who were mostly all Black didn't have science or social studies class. Instead, they had extra reading. The students who didn't participate got a second recess. I worked with a small group. I had to close the blinds so the students could not see the other students playing on the playground. When I raised concerns, I was told this is what we are doing and the school was not deviating from this course.

Literacy coach – I attended a racial equity training. My school was part of a pilot group. I listened to a white participant read Dr. King's "I Have a Dream Speech" as proof that racial equity was not needed. He also explained that Black people just needed to work harder like *legal* immigrants.

Kindergarten (my sons) – One of my sons' teachers told him that Dr. King was colorblind. She even had the class sing a song about it. I had to teach him the truth and have a conversation with her.

Kindergarten (my sons) – One of my sons was constantly kicked out of class. I only found out the extent because a parent volunteer told me. When I confronted the teacher, most of the offenses were subjective. For example, she said he was disrespectful because he was not walking in a straight line but besides the line.

First grade (my sons) – My sons showed up to school reading just as I did. They were ahead. I told the teacher that my son was in the wrong reading group. She refused to retest him or move him. I had to get the principal involved. The NWEA MAP test showed his level as well as the running record that was eventually done. Even though I ended up being right (honestly I would know because I was a literacy coach), she decided not to move him because it was May and school was ending in a few weeks.

Third grade (this school year) – One of my son's accommodations was not followed in his 504 as a punishment. The crime: my son defaced (her words) the calm corner. She put, "You are important." My son wrote the word 'not' in between the words 'you' and 'are.' This led to the principal getting involved. My son's 504 was updated, and we had a meeting with the principal, the teacher, and even had our son present. She neglected to mention she had somewhere else to be until she left the meeting before it was over.

Here's what you need to know. These are only the incidents I feel like sharing today. I could write at least one incident of racism and white supremacy being upheld for every year I was in school, for every year I have been in education, and for every year my sons have been in school. If you have read my writings, you know there are some incidents I didn't mention today.

When I say every year, I also would include this year. As many Black commenters have written on my Indy K12 colleague's piece, "[Educators, Don't Be Loud in the Streets, and Silent in the School](#)" on various places where it has been posted online, it is not safe to always speak up. I know there are schools that won't hire me because of the pieces I have written for Indy K12.

When I say, I don't give a damn about these statements. I really mean that. I have had too many experiences that have proven to me that those statements are only words. No real change has happened in most of these schools. It's a real shame because we are the place of learning and if educators can't or won't push back on the racism in their schools, how will society change? Most people are not homeschooled. They go to a school building to learn. Most of these schools uphold the white supremacy in our society. Until we change our schools, I don't see how society will change.