



## HSE Superintendent Dr. Bourff Misses the Mark When Addressing Black Lives Matter

Posted on February 10, 2021 by Educator Barnes – February 10, 2021

“Hamilton Southeastern Schools, as a forward-thinking school district, provides educational opportunities to ensure the success of each and every student, to become a responsible citizen and to positively influence an ever-changing world community” is the mission statement of Hamilton Southeastern Schools. How does requesting HSE faculty to treat Black

lives matter as a political issue instead of a social issue advance the mission of the school district?

Dr. Bourff, superintendent of HSE, sent an email to the faculty to provide guidance on teaching about Black lives matter. Dr. Bourff stated:

*Before we go forward, let us suspend the argument that Black Lives Matter is a social issue, or concept rather than a political movement ... It is not our place as educators to advance political causes. I said at the onset of this message that there is disagreement as to whether Black Lives Matter is a social issue or a political issue. It is clear that many have moved it to the political arena and contend that teachers should not be promoting it. **I am requesting that if you work with the topic, treat it as a political issue, and as you do with other political issues, teach it without advancing it or promoting your personal views.***

The email shows that Dr. Bourff does not have a deep understanding about Black lives matter. I am a Black woman. My Black life matters. That is not political statement. Data such as academic outcomes for Black students, as well as the disproportionate rate of Black people dying at the hands of the police, and the fact that Black people can be stopped and harassed or even killed for mundane acts such as going for a jog, telling a person to leash her dog, or shopping shows that in America, Black lives do not appear to matter as much as other lives. Stating that our lives matter and having people of all races believe this is true is the minimum. Right now, we are fighting to have the minimum. Instead, it appeared that Dr. Bourff wanted to minimize the importance of Black lives matter due to the complaints from some parents.

Dr. Bourff began his email by stating there were complaints. "I have heard from a number of parents who are concerned that we are advancing the cause of Black Lives Matter, a political movement within the country. They contend that their children are being indoctrinated rather than taught and that this effort has been a distraction from the academic purpose of school." Instead of assuring parents their children are not being indoctrinated, he instead provided guidance to tell teachers to address Black lives matter as a political movement and to not share personal opinions about it.

It is clear that Dr. Bourff did not consider the impact his email would have on the Black faculty members that received his email. Reaction from the public was swift. The Fishers Racial Equity Community Network released a letter in response that partly read:

*All human rights changes in the United States of America (including all the ones cited in the superintendent's email) started from social movements that launched policy changes. The 'politicization' of the Black Lives Matter movement, therefore, is not about choosing political parties, but presents a teachable moment in history for all to learn how social justice movements enter the democratic process in order to help the United States form a more perfect union.*

As it typically goes in these situations, an apology was issued. Dr. Bourff apologized in a follow up email he sent to HSE faculty. The first line of the email was "Black Lives Matter." I wonder if the new chief equity and inclusion officer suggested that as an opening statement or if he came up with that all on his own. Furthermore, what is the point of having this role if emails like the one Dr. Bourff issued an apology for are being sent to the faculty? Dr. Bourff continued his apology by stating:

*The intent of yesterday's letter to the faculty was designed to provide instructional strategies to discuss and teach Black Lives Matter, one of the most significant issues of our time. I understand that the impact was hurtful, and for that I apologize ... I am not requesting that teachers abandon their passion for a social cause, that social issues not be discussed, or that students not be allowed to express themselves. On the contrary, I am requesting that we affirm publicly through our instructional practices that Black Lives Matter, that all humans have value, and that we stand in solidarity against injustice, racism, and violence, at all times.*

The first email did include strategies from the Education Week article "Classrooms Are Political" by Larry Ferlazzo about how to cover politics in the classroom. There is nothing wrong with the strategies provided and they would work for various topics in addition to discussing politics. The follow-up email provided no instructional guidance on discussing Black lives matter as a social issue. This makes me wonder if the strategies were put in the first email to distract from the fact that the superintendent wanted Black lives matter addressed in a certain way. We know that "all humans have value," but the fact that this was included in the apology letter after the words, "Black Lives Matter" makes it seem like Dr. Bourff is pandering to the parents that appeared to influence his decision to send guidance in the first place.

The superintendent is the topic leader of the district and may not be knowledgeable in addressing all issues, but this is why the superintendent's team or cabinet should have members that help support the top leader. When dealing with issues of equity and inclusion, equity and inclusion officers should be consulted or, at a bare minimum, someone should

read the guidance before it is sent to avoid the situation that happened in HSE. As school districts across the country work to improve diversity and inclusion, these issues may arise. Working through them and working towards restoration is important. Dr. Bourff is retiring at the end of the school year, so hopefully, the next superintendent can work towards making HSE a district where apology emails don't have to be sent stating Black lives matter because previous communication made it unclear ... and don't get me started about the fact that this occurred during Black History Month.