

**Bexley Middle School Message to All Parents/Guardians**  
**Friday, Feb. 3, 2023; 3:19 p.m.**

Morning Announcements - Racist Imagery

Dear Bexley Middle School Families:

Ahead of your student(s) arriving home, it's important that we share an issue that arose today at our school. After this morning's school announcements, which featured a historical fact as part of Black History Month, an image of an orangutan eating a watermelon appeared on the green screen background. This was and is highly offensive to our staff and students and does not align with our values as a district.

The use of racist images in any context is unacceptable and goes against the values of inclusiveness and respect for all individuals that we take seriously at Bexley City Schools and at Bexley Middle School. This material has no place in a learning environment and can cause significant harm to students and members of the school community.

We have taken swift action to investigate how this was able to occur and will be instituting further safeguards on all announcement productions moving forward. The background will now be a standard background and additional staff will review the announcements prior to publishing. On Monday, there will be an opportunity for students to further process this during SEL time in facilitated small group conversations.

Again, we understand and acknowledge that this caused significant harm to students. We have partnered and joined in the process of hurting and healing with many of our students today. If your child is struggling with this incident, please reach out to either of us, a school counselor, or trusted adult.

Sincerely,

Jason Caudill, Principal

Racquel Armstrong, Assistant Principal

**Superintendent's Message to All Bexley Parents/Guardians  
Sunday, Feb. 5, 2023; 4 p.m.**

District Update on Middle School Incident

Dear Bexley Families:

On Friday, we sent a message to our Bexley Middle School families regarding an incident that took place during that day's morning announcements. An overtly racist image was shown in the background immediately following a historical fact honoring Black History Month.

The image used, of an orangutan eating watermelon, directly targets and reinforces racist tropes and stereotypes about Black people. We are cognizant of the harm this has done to the entire community, but we specifically want to emphasize the impact of anti-Blackness caused and represented by these actions.

As the superintendent of Bexley City Schools, I am deeply sorry to all students and staff who experienced this on Friday and to our families and community who have felt its impact through their children and loved ones. There is no excuse that this was permitted to happen and I assure you that I, along with our administrators and Board of Education, take this very seriously.

It is my goal that our Black students are welcomed and feel a deep sense of belonging in our community. The presence of racist images in school undermines our important work and we will do everything in our power to rectify the hurt caused in this situation, rebuild trust with our students, staff and families, and create the caring and nurturing environment our students deserve.

We know that as our community learned of this incident over this weekend that many more individuals have felt deep offense, hurt, and pain, as well as a sadness that this happened in one of our schools. The use of racist images in any context is unacceptable and goes against the strongly held values of our Board and administration. It can, and has, caused significant harm to students and members of the school community.

Our district's response to the incident is ongoing. We recognize there is much work to do and it has only begun. On Friday, school administrators launched an internal investigation that is ongoing and they moved swiftly to address the concerns and dismay felt by Black students and staff. Direct communication was made with a number of Black students at the middle school who experienced the incident first-hand and personal phone calls were made to several students' parents who expressed immediate and deep hurt during the school day. A school-wide communication also was issued.

Jason Caudill will address all middle school students tomorrow. He also will help educate our students about why the use of this image was racist, offensive, and wholly unacceptable. You can read the content of his morning announcement at this [link](#). There also will be an opportunity for students to further process the situation in small-group conversations. In addition, Black students will have the option to meet with Racquel Armstrong, Middle School Assistant Principal, and Marcelius Braxton, Leader of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, to identify our students' needs for support.

A full and thorough investigation is currently underway. Further action will be taken following the investigation per Board of Education policies. Until this is complete, we cannot provide further details or

comment on the situation. That said, it is important to understand, too, that some information may not be shared in the future due to privacy requirements.

Our top priority is providing an encouraging and openhearted learning environment for all of our students and that didn't happen on Friday. Our district is committed to our anti-racism Board Policy and our values of diversity, equity and inclusion. In our efforts to provide support in line with those commitments, we recognize how essential it is, especially in this moment, to center the feelings and needs of our Black students, staff, and families.

We appreciate the cooperation and understanding of our school community during this process. Aside from the investigation, we are focusing our efforts on supporting our students and staff throughout the district. Our priorities are providing supportive resources, leading conversations – and taking actionable steps to back up those conversations – and ensuring a safe environment to help heal the hurt that was caused.

It's important that all families and students understand Bexley City Schools offers individual support to students through our school counselors. If your child, at any building, is in need of support, please contact your building principal, building counselor, or a trusted staff member.

Sincerely,

Dr. Jason Fine  
Superintendent

Good morning BMS. Announcements obviously look a little different today.

I am here to acknowledge the harm that was done to everyone, especially our Black students and staff when a racist image was included in the announcements last week. It is horrible that it happened, but for it to happen as we recognize the achievements of Black Americans this month makes it even more difficult to understand.

While there is nothing inherently racist about primates or watermelons, these symbols have long been used to dehumanize Black people. Regardless of the intent in using that imagery, it harms those whom it targets. The impact is real.

It is important this morning to share with you the history of these symbols so that you understand why they are so offensive.

After emancipation in the 1860s, one of the crops that southern Black people grew and sold to earn a living was watermelons. White supremacists of the day were angry to see freed people competing in the financial marketplace and living autonomous lives, including eating whatever they pleased. Once it became more difficult to steal their freedom, labor, and lives, they found every opportunity to steal their joy and dignity.

The media of the time also promoted the idea that Black Americans had a pathological weakness for watermelon. Newspapers were filled with made-up stories about Black fruit thieves who lacked the self control to not steal the fruit. Medical journals even included false accounts claiming Black patients had their intestines clogged by watermelon seeds. The whole point was that Black people could not be trusted and were not fit for society.

There are historical records dated back to the 1600s when Europeans held the stereotype of Black people as apelike. As the theory of evolution began to be taken more seriously, books were published that considered Black people as less-evolved homo sapiens, more akin to chimpanzees. It is believed that it was much easier to justify the horrors that were inflicted on enslaved Africans when people believed they were a lesser human. More recently, racist taunts including monkey grunts have been directed toward African soccer stars, Formula One star Lewis Hamilton, and other Black sports icons in an effort to attack them at the deepest levels.

Because these and other racist stereotypes are so prevalent in society, it is easy for those of us who are not the target of the attacks to be ignorant or desensitized to them. These ideas can be dismissed as jokes or exaggerated for comedic purposes.

However, we must understand that our Black students, staff, and families are constantly made to feel that they are not considered equal to their white counterparts. It is common that they are monitored closely when they go to a store, watch people cross a street to avoid encountering them, or have the police called on them for being "suspicious." Without a doubt, these acts of such blatant disrespect take a toll. I have heard from so many people generous enough to share their feelings with me that they are tired of getting up each day just to face a community that will never genuinely care about them.

The hate being expressed in this school and community is not limited to this one incident, but it must end now. If you are making derogatory statements about others' race, color, ethnicity, religion, gender, abilities, or sexual orientation, it will not be ignored. You can't change the past, but you can make decisions about how you conduct yourself moving forward.

**BMS Announcement**  
**February 6, 2023**

I can't begin to express my embarrassment and sadness over this situation. Clearly I have failed some of you who believe that expressing hatred is an acceptable thing. While I'm certainly not perfect, I do my best to put each student and staff member in a position to succeed. We are still investigating this situation so there are certain things I can't communicate. I ask for your patience and trust, even if I have disappointed you before.

I can share with you that we are changing aspects of the announcements and the approval process before it is published. We considered not publishing the news show this week, but some of our students have worked hard to prepare for future shows celebrating Black History Month. We believe it would further devalue our Black students to not honor their work.

We have an obligation to acknowledge when harm has been done and to improve and repair relationships between individuals and our community. That means that everyone will need to play a role in this process to develop, build, and repair our community. Today, during study hall time, we will have facilitated opportunities for students to speak, listen, and share their perspectives in an environment that we will ensure is safe and fair. We want to support, resolve conflict, and heal from this, but we know we will only move forward through acknowledgement, feedback, responsibility, and accountability.

To those of you who are uncomfortable with speaking up during these discussions, we hope you will listen to how this situation deeply hurt others. When you're ready to share your feelings, you are encouraged to talk with a school counselor or other trusted adult.

Thank you.