

PIEDMONT UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

M E M O R A N D U M

TO: Governing Board

FROM: Randall Booker, Superintendent

DATE: May 19, 2017

RE: School Climate, Healthy Relationships, and the Recent Incidents of Harassment and Discrimination at Piedmont High School

Over the past several weeks, Piedmont Unified has issued multiple communiqués to all educators and families in the district informing them of recent incidents of anti-Semitic, racist, homophobic and other hateful speech and conduct at Piedmont High School. We know these incidents are deeply hurtful to students and many members of our school community. Since we sent these letters, there has been an outpouring of community support for coming together to stand up against any hateful speech and conduct, and for this we are grateful.

At the May 24, 2017 Board of Education Meeting, the Board will review and discuss updates from district staff on the recent incidents of harassment and discrimination at Piedmont High School. Additionally, district staff will provide information on both current and future steps to support an inclusive school climate and healthy student relationships across the district.

As a school district, a primary concern is the social and emotional health of our students. We are always available to students, staff, and families who need our support, and I want to reiterate this now, during this especially difficult time. As educators, we are dedicated to confronting difficult situations by embracing them as opportunities to teach, with a goal of making our students and our community stronger. We have reached out to religious leaders and community-based organizations, including the Piedmont Appreciating Diversity Committee, the Anti-Defamation League, and the NAACP for support and guidance on how to encourage inclusion and promote tolerance, while forcefully responding to incidents of bias, discrimination, and bigotry.

The recent high school assembly was a first step in a longer process of education and healing. The assembly was designed to provide a forum where student-leaders read letters from their peers about their experiences with bigotry and hateful conduct. The purpose was to explore how individuals and groups have been disrespected, harassed, and marginalized in our school community, and convey that such conduct is simply unacceptable.

Many in the community have asked for more detail about incidents discussed at the assembly that resulted in suspensions. These incidents, all of which occurred on campus and have been corroborated, include: verbal comments incorporating “n**ger,” “f***ing Jew,” “dumb Jew,” and “burn in Auschwitz”; students mimicking a “heil Hitler” salute; and a group of students forming a swastika with their bodies as they sat or lay on the floor. The District will not disclose any information that could identify or violate the privacy of the students involved. Also, it is important to note here that some students who have been the target of hateful behavior did not wish to participate in the assembly by sharing their stories, and other students shared stories but did not notify the administration of the incidents they described. Administrators are currently following up on all allegations of mistreatment.

Following the recent incidents in our school community concerning hateful speech and conduct, there have been confirmed reports of one student kicking a fellow student in retaliation of their alleged involvement in the anti-Semitic incidents and a separate incident of verbal and written threats against a student. The District and Piedmont Police Department are working together to investigate these allegations, which are deplorable. These incidents must stop as they do not reflect the general tenor of respect, civility and inclusiveness that we try to foster within the schools and the greater Piedmont community.

Over the past few days, high school and district administrators have visited every high school English class to meet with all students. Their message was to address our expectations of compassion and respect for all, and discuss the importance of acting with honor and compassion for others. We have reiterated District resources for reporting harassment, hate-speech, bullying, intimidation, discrimination, or violence. Also, we have introduced a newly developed incident reporting link (<https://goo.gl/forms/vp3OEgPbrSRPoFqu2>) where students can make these reports directly from their Chromebooks.

Furthermore, we introduced the District’s Title IX Coordinator to all students, Dr. Cheryl Wozniak, and defined her role as an independent support for students and staff who feel they may have been discriminated against, harassed, intimidated, or bullied based on their actual or perceived race, color, ancestry, national origin, nationality, ethnicity, ethnic group identification, age, religion, marital or parental status, physical or mental disability, sex, sexual orientation, gender, gender identity or gender expression.

The Board of Education recently developed a letter that was emailed to all PUSD families expressing their dismay at the recent incidents and their commitment to work together in crafting solutions to address the issues of bullying and hate, and leveraging teachable moments to help us to build a community in which we honor each other and hold each other accountable.

Dear Piedmont Community,

Our board has been profoundly and deeply disturbed, saddened and affected by the hate-related incidents in our school district.

Our educational community—extending from board members and district staff to teachers, students, and their families—has a long-term, demonstrated commitment to providing a learning environment that is safe and secure for all students, built on compassion and mutual respect, and celebrates the richness of our diverse identities. The recent incidents clearly demonstrate to us that, in spite of our best intentions and efforts, there is more work to do.

We recognize the courage of the students who have reported their experiences. These issues cannot be addressed without their voices to re-start conversations, and to serve as the impetus for better and more effective immediate and long-term approaches. We recognize, too, that this is particularly challenging for all involved students and their families, and that the impact is felt throughout our community at large.

Some form of the Golden rule—treat others the way you want to be treated—occurs across cultures and religions. Our expectation is that our community will apply that rule here to those who have been harmed, to those who spoke up, to those who committed or witnessed these actions, and to those who have been affected.

We are grateful for the work of the district staff and teachers. They have demonstrated real concern about these issues, and have worked with students and members of the community to craft the first steps to address them. As important, they are demonstrably committed to partnering with various support groups, religious and civic leaders, and others to implement longer-term strategies to make sure we build and sustain a safe, nurturing and respectful educational environment where every student can learn and grow.

We are committed to addressing the incidents of these last weeks. As community members we are inextricably linked; what happens in one part can have a profound impact on another. This is an opportunity for us to model the behavior we want to teach our children. We will work together, respecting myriad voices, crafting solutions to address the issues of bullying and hate, and leveraging teachable moments to help us to build a community in which we honor each other and hold each other accountable.

Respectfully,

Piedmont Unified SD Board of Education

Sarah Pearson, President

Amal Smith, Vice President

Doug Ireland, Member

Cory Smegal, Member

Andrea Swenson, Member

Additionally, the high school administration and counseling team have recently emailed all students inviting them to lunchtime forums to discuss the recent events on our campuses as well as to discuss ways to help make PHS/ MHS a better place.

On May 17, 2017, the district facilitated a planning meeting with representatives from PADC, PPN, and the PHS Parents Club to discuss the recent incidents and share strategies for education and student support. I am grateful for these partnerships and look forward to continuing these planning conversations to address the systemic issues and create opportunities for honest dialogue that promotes compassion and respect. This may be in the form of curriculum, assemblies, educational speakers, professional development, and parent outreach. We will continue to collaborate with the Piedmont Police and the City of Piedmont, as well as our parent and community support groups.

During the May 24, 2017 Board of Education Meeting, district staff will provide additional information on the current and future partnerships and programs that will take place across PUSD.

RECOMMENDATION: INFORMATION AND DISCUSSION

Review and discuss updates from district staff on the recent incidents of harassment and discrimination at Piedmont High School. Provide direction to district staff on both current and future steps to support an inclusive school climate and healthy student relationships across the district.