Dear Lake Oswego Community Members,

Lake Oswego public schools experienced a racist incident this week. Our utmost concern is always, and will always be for the children in our schools. Our primary focus is on the child who was injured; second, we are focused on the emotional toll that this event has taken on our wider community.

As members of the Lake Oswego School District board, we want to share the broad context in which we are operating in the district and our thoughts on the challenges we face, and most importantly to ask for your support moving forward.

In November, the school board adopted a three-year strategic plan. For the first time in district history, our board agreed that our primary focus will be to deepen our work on diversity, equity, and inclusion. It is no secret that our district has had incidents of intolerance in its past; our commitment to add this to our strategic plan followed the actions the district, schools, and students had already taken and made a clear statement to the entire community that this is our top priority.

The work of identifying our own biases, building authentic relationships with and between students, and developing a culturally responsive teaching stance takes time. But we are committed to the work as the top priority for our children.

The resources and trainings at the district administration level have been led by the National Equity Project. This reflective work is grounded in an awareness of our implicit biases and strategies for combating it. The district is working diligently to prepare our teachers and administrators to support this work. In addition, several of our schools are working with Coaching Peace and other organizations to support teachers and parents in addressing racism.

For the first time, the Lake Oswego School District will be hiring a permanent Director of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. And for the first time, we will create a committee on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in partnership with our broader community stakeholders.

The recent incident in Lake Oswego Junior High confirms that we have more work to do to educate our students about the use of hate speech and to educate our families and teachers and staff about how to respond. Derogatory and racially charged terms are always unacceptable and should never be used. If any student hears these words, no matter the context, parents should notify the teacher or bus driver, and the principal so action can be taken. We can all learn how to have frank and sometimes courageous conversations about race in our homes and community in order to build the norms that do not allow for hate speech and intolerance to exist.

In the recent incident, we make no excuses for behavior and actions of the children involved. Because the offenders are minor students, we will not discuss confidential student information, including any punishment applied as a result of this incident. But punishment alone does not
create opportunities for healing. That is why the Lake Oswego School District, like other school districts (including Portland and Beaverton), uses a restorative justice model to bring healing to the victim and learning to the offenders. In restorative justice, the victim is involved in how the process of restoring the relationship evolves.

This process puts the power of healing into the hands of the victim. With the assistance of trusted staff members, victims participate in the development of a restitution plan meant to make amends and bring genuine healing and closure for the victim. Potential actions could include letters of apology, public apologies, community service, personal discussions, and facilitated learning objectives. It is a process that puts the power of healing into the hands of the victim.

When a victim is empowered in the restorative justice process:

- All parties are included
- All parties are brought together
- The offenders make amends for the harm they have caused
- All parties are reintegrated into their community

Instead of meting out punishments, a restorative approach asks four key questions:

- What happened?
- Who was harmed or affected by the behavior?
- What needs to be done to make things right?
- How can people behave differently in the future?

Our school district takes every racially motivated, bullying, and harassment incident seriously. We embrace our leadership role in helping to change our community’s culture. We are thoughtfully planning several events that will bring the larger community together to listen and learn through our shared experiences. LOJ, whose equity work has been progressing throughout this year, will have its own parent Listen and Learn event on February 13. And, with the help of several experts, LOJ has planned facilitated student events and permanent curricular changes that address these issues.

As we process the hurt that we feel, and we seek to improve the culture of schools for our children, we hope you will join with the school board as we continue this work and this journey.

Sincerely,

The Lake Oswego School Board

John Wallin, Chair
Bob Barman
Liz Hartman
Sara Pocklington
Rob Wagner