

*An email message from Jon Sills, Superintendent of Schools
sent at 8:01 pm on Thursday, May 28, 2015*

Dear Bedford School Families,

Tonight we expect that Fox News will be airing a story about a video that was shown yesterday morning on BHS Live, the student run morning news program at Bedford High School. An African-American senior posted an unapproved video that attempted to educate her peers by satirizing the often unintentional, but nevertheless racially offensive, comments that she and some of her fellow African-American students have heard during their years at BHS. Comments like, "may I touch your hair" were featured in a video take-off of the YouTube phenomenon, Sh*t White People Say.

Unfortunately, the video, whether intended as satire or not, projected a generalization that White people in general behave in this way, and this was offensive to many of our students.

Dr. Turner, in his typically courageous and proactive manner, addressed the entire school community and invited any interested school members to join him for a conversation during the activity block that was scheduled for the end of the day. Approximately 150 students attended and engaged in a respectful conversation about race, airing disagreements and different perspectives on the day's events. Some parent responses captured the range of opinions that exist in the society at large, so it is no surprise that they were echoed by students in school as well.

Parents have written that they are proud to have children in a thought provoking community that is willing to tackle hard issues, or that their child had the best and most educational day of her high school career.

Other parents have written that they feel that the school puts too much effort into being diverse and politically correct and that Caucasian students are discriminated against.

Respect for diversity is a core value in Bedford and one that we are proud of. That includes a respect for a diversity of opinions as long as those opinions do not demean or objectify others. Students who felt offended by the video need to feel safe to voice their feelings. And as educators, we sometimes have to provide sanctions when students break rules and cross the line. But our biggest challenge is to turn difficult moments into educational ones. This is not easy, and I suspect that most adults find it difficult to have respectful, educational interactions in their workplaces when issues of difference emerge. One technique that we are training our staff in, and that we hope to equip our students with, is the ability to ask curious questions when difficult issues arise- before jumping to conclusions. Curious questions related to the video incident might include, "what experiences led the student to post the video?" or "what is it about the video that offended you?"

The school administration has recognized, through this experience, the importance of having a clear policy regarding adult oversight of aired videos. Adults hopefully have a deeper understanding of the importance of context, of explanation, of audience. And we have a responsibility to help our students understand these important conditions.

I suspect that Bedford may make the news in the future, just as it has in the past when we experienced a spate of anti-semitic hate incidents.

Bedford is no different than any other community in that it is home to a diversity of opinions, and that real world, messy, and sometimes painful experiences impact the lives of our students, our teachers and our families. But we strive to have the courage to air our issues and confront them with honesty. So we will not shy away from addressing these issues, nor will we abdicate our responsibility to provide our students with the skills that they will need to participate openly, actively, respectfully and thoughtfully in our complex democractic society.

We operate in a glass schoolhouse, and we believe that, with the exception of individual student privacy and discipline issues, our community rightfully expects transparency. At the same time, we know that some people like to throw stones, to call the nightly news, and/or to spread rumors. We can only hope and trust that reasonable citizens can read between the lines and appreciate the thoughtful teaching and learning that their children experience daily- and remember these experiences when hyperbole, finger pointing, and rumor threaten to hold sway.

Jon

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