

Dear Mr. Ragsdale, et. al:

It is with deep sadness that I resign from the Cobb County School District in an act of protest against the recent ban on antiracism and DEIJ as well as the district's longstanding mistreatment of Black families who have been ignored while demanding solutions to the ongoing racism in your school system for many years. As we know, Black children and parents stood often at the microphone during school board meetings sharing their lived experiences of race-based trauma in schools while you fidgeted with your cell phone, Mr. Banks rolled his eyes, and Mr. Scamihorn denied that their experiences even occur. These are but a few among a host of other forms of dismissiveness.

Despite this ever-present anti-Blackness, we did make incremental progress. Caring, informed, diverse groups of educators and community members have achieved measurable, albeit insufficient, systemic change over the last several years. Our consistent advocacy for marginalized students in South Cobb has resulted in some excellent culturally relevant programs and department initiatives. I will not name those departments and programs publicly. Based on history, those advocating only for white students will certainly launch an attack to eliminate such curriculum, pedagogy and resources that benefit *all* students. I will not name the associated teachers. Based on history, those advocating only for white students will attempt to strip them of freedom to implement best practices and will tie them erroneously to Critical Race Theory (CRT). Nonetheless, you know the departments and programs of which I speak.

When the bombardment of contempt from the misled and uninformed occurs toward those particular efforts this year, I hope you will stand strong for students and faculty. Presently, the reactionary and cowardly approach of deploying your executive cabinet to schools to dismantle any effort causing white people discomfort underscores the weight of pressure from a minority group of uninformed people who erroneously

believe they get to speak on behalf of all Cobb families. The quintessential call for leadership is the willingness to withstand pressure and still be bold enough to do what is in the best interest of every single student.

Though I am heartbroken to leave my students who I love dearly and my colleagues, I know I cannot do my job as a school counselor ethically under the current style of leadership which thwarts research and expertise on racism and its effects on mental health. To ensure that I do not cause harm to Black students in my work as a white counselor, it is vital that I study scholarly literature and theory to understand the history of racism and its specific impact on individuals and families over generations. No white mental health professional should be working with BIPOC students without understanding race-based trauma. Failing to navigate this cross-cultural counseling relationship adeptly can cause minoritized students harm. Since the ban on CRT conflates many approaches and practices related to antiracism, Cobb County School District is asking me to violate my school counseling ethics by prohibiting that I prepare myself to be a culturally sustaining school counselor. My students *come to me* with race-based trauma and questions about their identity and experiences. The district is asking me to obfuscate history, ignore my commitment to educational justice and deny these students voice or validation. Paying homage to Nikole Hannah-Jones, I refuse.

I have received only excellent evaluations while at CCSD. I have received national awards and recognition for my work. As a result, you've been unable to penalize me professionally to date. Now, with the introduction of the unclear and undefined "ban," I can be reprimanded for examining and addressing issues that directly harm my students. It has been made very clear that I will be watched closely and disciplined for adhering to my ethical obligations and for implementing an anti-racist framework. Such intimidation and threats against my vocation and

livelihood are toxic. I cannot spend the entire school year justifying my integrity and performance at the expense of serving my students.

My approach has never been about making a Black child feel like a victim or telling a white student that they are inherently racist. Yet, the district and school leadership persist in inventing their own inaccurate definitions of CRT and ascribing them to me. It boggles the mind to consider how Mr. Scamihorn wrote an entire resolution to prohibit CRT and presented it unprepared to define that which he is so adamantly against. When Mr. Hutchins asked the chairman to define what would be banned for clarity purposes, Mr. Scamihorn replied, “Well, having never been asked that question before, I can’t.” As a once proud 7th grade student told you all at the July board meeting, CCSD leadership has become shameful.

Since the bewildering ban, I’ve experienced bullying, harassment and defamation of character. My personal information has been posted online. While my community and colleagues have surrounded me with support, they have also recommended installing a security system at my home. Fear and political allegiance have created this dangerous environment. It threatens my safety and my ability to provide my students with what they are due.

Though I can no longer remain in my job under present leadership without either compromising my values to use a harmful and dishonest approach or being fired swiftly for doing what’s right, I will not abandon students and families. I will persist in my attempts to dismantle systemic racism in CCSD. Committed to antiracism and propelled by the work of Black feminists, Civil Rights leaders and organizers of the past and present, I am obligated to take risks and sacrifice things I love sometimes. In this case, it’s my job. But many wonderful people in our community have demonstrated their support of me remaining in this district. They’ve also comforted me through this incredibly painful decision.

Therefore, as a post 6 resident (and taxpayer!) who is no longer constrained by the suppression and censorship inflicted on employees, I will speak out even more candidly against racism in schools, campaign to flip folks out of school board seats who do not deserve to be there, and organize with Black and brown families as long as they ask me to in their efforts to be heard.

In the meantime, I will share with you the updated position statement from the American School Counseling Association (ASCA) on The School Counselor and Anti-Racist Practices. My “agenda” is not arbitrary or something I created on my own; it is required by the very organization that you celebrate and recognize at your own meetings.

I’ll see you again soon.

Jennifer Susko

The School Counselor and Anti-Racist Practices

(Adopted 2021)

ASCA Position

School counselors work toward cultural competence and engage in anti-racist actions by advocating to change racist policies, procedures, practices, guidelines and laws contributing to inequities in students’ academic, career and social/emotional development.

The Rationale

Racism remains a part of society in the United States and exists throughout all of our institutions. Unfortunately, the education system, as a subset of society, has contributed to the continuation of inequities specific to the school setting (LaForett & De Marco, 2020). The U.S. education system contributes to maintaining systems of oppression through racist policies, practices and guidelines that negatively affect all students but especially students from racially diverse backgrounds, including Black and Indigenous students, who historically have been distinctly affected by white supremacy in the United States (Steward, 2019). By supporting anti-racist policies through their actions and expressed anti-racist ideas, school counselors embrace their roles as social justice advocates and change agents who examine and dismantle systems of oppression (Kendi, 2019). It is essential for school counselors to engage in these leadership roles

to address issues within education that promote inequity in achievement, access and opportunity, specifically for students from racially diverse backgrounds.

The ASCA Ethical Standards for School Counselors (2016) call for school counselors to be systemic change agents who embrace their roles as advocates, leaders and collaborators by providing “equitable educational access and success” (p.1). All educators, especially school counselors, have an obligation to work toward mitigating and/or ending racism and bias (ASCA, 2020) in an effort to lessen the impact of systemic racism on student development. Kohli et. al (2017) recognized the gaps in research related to the mechanisms (policies and procedures) of racial oppression in education. Still today these gaps exist, underscoring the need for school counselors to be intentional in examining and exploring data that uncovers disproportionality and racial inequities. **To actively dismantle racist policies, procedures and practices within education, school counselors must embrace their ethical responsibilities within roles as social justice advocates, leaders and change agents to ensure all students, specifically students from racially diverse backgrounds, develop in healthy and successful ways in their academic, career and social/emotional development.**

The School Counselor's Role

The role of the school counselor in ensuring anti-racist practices is to enhance awareness, obtain culturally responsive knowledge and skills, and engage in action through advocacy. As such, school counselors are called to:

Awareness/Reflection

- Reflect regularly on their cultural worldviews (values, beliefs, assumptions, biases), seeking to understand how these views influence their practice
- Engage in the personal work necessary to identify and acknowledge blind spots, uncover and mitigate the influence of all biases, particularly implicit biases, and act for real change
- Initiate and/or participate in “courageous conversations” that move to discomfort on topics of injustice, racism, privilege, oppression and related issues
- Reflect on feelings and sources of personal resistance that might arise in exploring topics of racism, privilege, oppression, marginalization and bias

Knowledge/Skills

- Participate regularly in school/district, independent and community-based professional development opportunities (ASCA, 2021)
- Consult and collaborate with people and organizations representative of the communities their schools serve
- Participate in supervision to obtain and refine culturally competent delivery and programmatic skills
- Engage in personal study of institutional and systemic racism in credible sources of research such as peer-reviewed journal articles and other scholarly literature

- Consult with professionals and community representatives to identify and engage in immersive experiences focused on obtaining knowledge and understanding in honoring cultures, languages, and traditions (Levy & Adjapong, 2020)

Action/Advocacy

School counselors work to end racism and bias by applying school counseling standards in practice (ASCA, 2020), such as:

- Collect and report data exposing inequitable outcomes
- Deliver lessons in classroom, small-group or individual settings that teach the ASCA Student Standards: Mindsets & Behaviors for Student Success and address racism and bias
- Recognize and respond to incidents of racism and bias among students and staff
- Collaborate with families, educators, businesses and community organizations focused on anti-racism/bias
- Serve on school/district committees focused on anti-racism/bias, including committees addressing academic content
- Present workshops for parents/families on how to foster and support respectful student behaviors
- Lead efforts to challenge policies, procedures, practices, traditions or customs perpetuating intentional or unintentional racist and biased behaviors and outcomes (ASCA, 2021)
- Advocate for policies, practices and guidelines to dismantle racism and bias and promote equity for all
- Advocate for school counseling program resources and practices that acknowledge students from racially diverse backgrounds, and provide equitable opportunities for increased access to resources and support systems (ASCA, 2021)
- Advocate for and present anti-racism professional development opportunities within schools, districts and professional associations (ASCA, 2021)
- Advocate for change in policies, practices and procedures that have historically marginalized and oppressed groups, resulting in injustice, disproportionate outcomes, bias and the perpetuation of racist policies
- Provide appropriate services and supports for students from racially diverse backgrounds and their families who may demonstrate symptoms of racial trauma as a result of racist policies and practices (Atkins & Oglesby, 2019)
- Advocate for learning materials and resources in all content areas promoting diversity and inclusion, addressing ways students from racially diverse backgrounds have been harmed and oppressed, and considering the impact white supremacy and inequitable learning opportunities continue to have on American and global societies (Atkins & Oglesby, 2019)

Summary

School counselors continually work toward cultural competence and address racism and bias through the implementation of a data-informed school counseling program. Guided by the ASCA National Model (2019), school counselors shape ethical, equitable and inclusive school environments. School counselors engage in self-reflection, develop knowledge and skills, and advocate for the equitable treatment of all students through

action to address broader issues of systemic and institutional racism. They seek to address policies, practices and guidelines contributing to the inequities experienced by students from racially diverse backgrounds in the pre-K–12 setting.