

Statement by ERASE Racism on Diversity in Schools

Elaine Gross, President of ERASE Racism, issued today the following statement in connection with issues of racial diversity and equity that have arisen in the context of the May 18 school board election in Smithtown and similar issues in other school districts:

“Long Island is one of the 10 most racially segregated metro regions in the nation, and our schools are becoming more segregated. Yet efforts to advance inclusion and racial equity have emerged as a hot-button issue in the upcoming school board election in Smithtown. There, as *Newsday* reports, the Smithtown Central School District is defending its equity efforts after some in the community accused the district of being prejudicial against white children and laying the groundwork for socialism. The criticisms are, according to Politico, “a microcosm of a national movement against discussions of systemic racism in schools and educators’ attempts to rectify racial discrepancies, which conservatives have painted as a bid to immerse students in liberal values.”

Diversity is an extraordinary strength, not something to fear. An Asian American woman, MiMi Aung, is the lead engineer on NASA’s Mars helicopter *Ingenuity*, the first extraterrestrial aircraft. An African American woman, Dr. Kizzmekia Corbett, has been at the forefront of developing Moderna’s COVID-19 vaccine. And that talent is not something new or rare; it is as old as civilization.

Why then shouldn’t Long Island students be taught about great talent through history – not just white talent? Why shouldn’t Long Island students understand how the same culture that gave rise to slavery has recounted history from its perspective? Why shouldn’t Long Island students understand how policies and practices of our governments, banks, and realtors used racial discrimination to produce racially segregated communities with inequitable school funding that pervade Long Island still? Why shouldn’t all students benefit from outstanding teachers of color?

ERASE Racism has long advocated and worked to implement what is known as Culturally Responsive and Sustaining Education, which exposes students to lessons and materials that reflect the diverse cultures, experiences, and perspectives of people in the region and around the world. It helps students learn complete histories (not half-truths), develop critical thinking skills that can help them challenge misinformation, and feel supported so they can reach their full potential. It teaches empathy and respect for all. It is also the policy of the New York State Education Department, not some wild idea.

ERASE Racism has also long championed and provided opportunities for Long Islanders to come together to understand each other’s perspectives, experiences, and concerns, and learn from them. Long Island’s greatest opportunity lies not in the extremism that can so easily divide us but in the embrace of diversity, equity, and inclusion that will raise us all up. Our schools will be better for it.