

*This letter is addressed to the Administration and Board of Education of the Upper Merion Area School District, and signed by alumni, current students, and others who associate with UMASD.*

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Dear Upper Merion Board of Education and Administration,

Our names are Trinity Pike and Grace Wu. We are 2018 graduates of the Upper Merion Area Public School District system and are currently rising juniors at the University of California San Diego and the University of Pennsylvania, respectively. **We are non-Black women of color voicing our opinion as allies for our Black family.**

As members of this community, we reach out to you in response to the tragic, unjust deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, George Floyd, and the many other Black lives lost at the hands of law enforcement. The deaths of countless Black individuals have not only highlighted the racial injustice in our country on a macro level, but also the microaggressions that normalize systemic racism in our district. We all need to support our Black family. Furthermore, we all need to take responsibility to unite and uplift the community, ultimately creating a brighter, safer, more just, and more sustainable future for everyone. We are all born into a world of racist institutions, policies, government, and various structures that disenfranchise Black people and other minorities for their entire lives. We are all conditioned to be racist by practices ingrained within our daily life.

Upper Merion is a predominantly white community, situated next to [one of the largest malls](#) in the United States. To say that the non-Black community is privileged is an understatement. In a district that is [89% non-Black](#), it is in everyone's hands to fight for justice and equality - especially when political leaders such as [Joe Gale](#) spread hate and perpetuate white supremacy by justifying the blatant, racist violence of police brutality and dehumanizing people who are fighting for the rights they deserve. Abolition and anti-racist work does not fall on the backs of the Black community. **The Black community deserves compassion, understanding and commitment to achieve equity in education, employment and politics after centuries of injustice that continues to this day.** Black liberation is *necessary* for the liberation of all, and as a community, we are not well until we are *all* well.

According to Upper Merion Area School District's demographics, [11% of the student body population](#) identifies as Black compared to [13% of the US population](#). All Upper Merion community members need to be better educated to best serve the critical needs of our diverse school district. During our time in school at Upper Merion, we *briefly* learned about slavery and the Civil Rights Movement, and read *To Kill a Mockingbird* and *The Watsons Go to Birmingham*. Not only did the Black narrative end there, [but the classroom discussions fostered microaggressions and denials of racism](#), minimized the brutality suffered by Black people, and avoided the true extent to which the exploitation of Black bodies built this country. As students, we never received formal teaching of modern-day systemic and institutionalized racism, police brutality, or white privilege. We never heard history from Black voices. **Effective anti-racist education demands a curriculum that speaks to the past, the present, and the future.**

While the [District's June 4 letter](#) came from a place of good intentions, future generations of Upper Merion students need more than an emotional response from the school district. They need a commitment to change through new policies and persistent, decisive actions. They need active anti-racist education, as they cannot wait for the Black members of our community to need support before they give it. As responsible administrators, you need to prevent racism *before* it festers and attacks.

**As leaders in the school administration, you need to train all students and teachers on anti-racism with follow-up lessons throughout the *entire* school year.** Students, faculty, and administrators need mandatory, complete, detailed units on Black history throughout the entire school year. You need to provide every student with accurate information on present socioeconomic disparities, with facts contextualized by discriminatory policies such as redlining, police profiling, and mass incarceration.

By no means is this list exhaustive, but we want to offer some suggestions based on our personal experience as Upper Merion alumni:

### ***Academic suggestions***

1. Discuss current events related to race **immediately when** they occur and foster safe, open dialogue surrounding them in the classroom.
  - a. **This is especially important.** Sheltering Upper Merion students from such important conversations at a [young age](#) will only result in them developing more myopic views of society later on.
2. Ensure that current curriculums do not enforce subconscious prejudices, nor dismiss or underplay the relevance and urgency of modern day race relations.
3. Reform education in order to cover all forms of racism and discrimination towards marginalized communities. As educational leaders, you must encourage questioning of historically Eurocentric narratives of politics. **Every class, regardless of subject focus, should teach about systemic racism from both general academic and subject-specific lenses. Furthermore, class enrollment must make an active effort to be more welcoming to the Black, Indigenous, and Latinx communities, and students of color.**
  - a. For all history courses, **emphasize the Eurocentric teaching of history in the current curriculum** to students and **underline the colonial, imperialist, and white supremacist foundations** that underpin the historical events that students are taught.
  - b. Incorporate more books and material on modern-day institutional racism and white privilege into **all** curriculums (such as reading *Between the World and Me*; *There, There*; and *White Like Me* in English class and emphasizing themes like cultural devaluation, discussing unequal access to health care in Health class, teaching about art and music from Black artists in Music class, raising awareness for racism in the STEM field in Science class, representing Black role models in ALL classes, and more) across all grades and levels.
  - c. Educate students on Black history and highlight Black accomplishments such as Black inventions and Black Wall Street. Key historical events such as the Tulsa massacre, the Rodney King riots, and the shooting of Michael Brown should also be taught in class. Include more minority historical figures and emphasize their rightful place in American history.
  - d. Increase the elective choices for students, particularly in social studies, by introducing courses with a **non-Western focus**. In courses that utilize primary/secondary source analysis or book reports, where possible, **diversify points of view and sources offered to students** such that they are intersectional, inclusive, and representative of diverse cross-sections of existing historical literature.
  - e. Require a multicultural class featuring in depth studies of the many cultures throughout the United States, with **substantial representation for Black, Native American, and Latinx cultures in particular**. Uplift diverse student voices in the classroom and encourage student leadership and input towards the educational content.

- f. Reform the freshman (ninth grade) social studies curriculum (previously called "World Cultures") to cover a more in-depth and relevant analysis of non-European cultures.
  - g. Given that the school must conform to the College Board curriculum for AP courses, and that compared to many of its public school counterparts, it offers fewer AP course choices, Upper Merion should take immediate steps to implement the AP World History and AP Human Geography courses in high school, which **offer more global and diversity-focused views of the world**, as opposed to the fully Eurocentric curriculum that focuses on classes such as AP European History.
    - Provide more crossover between CP and AP humanities classes. While rote memorization may be essential to succeed in the College Board curriculum, it is critical to apply that knowledge to a broader theme and connect real world applications, which CP classes tend to be more keen on doing.
4. End the notion of teaching students to be "colorblind," and allowing teachers to be "colorblind."
  - a. ["Colorblind racism"](#) inadvertently ignores the oppression and suffering that has been experienced by the Black community throughout history and encourages the ignorance of the blatant discrimination in our society.
5. Introduce or increase educator diversity and inclusion training (such as employing the [Harvard Implicit Bias Test](#)), and require it to be repeated multiple times every year.
  - a. We emphasize educator diversity. Teachers have an invaluable role in shaping future generations of leaders. These conversations often begin in the classroom, and diversity in teachers is a critical step.
  - b. A disappointingly small proportion of teachers in the entire school district are those of color, and most students have had a **maximum** of two POC (people of color) teachers during their entire schooling career (12+ years and dozens of different subjects). The school and curriculum should be reflective of the students that engage with them, and UMASD can unquestionably do better on both counts.
    - Make a formal, ongoing commitment to hire more POC faculty. Upper Merion High School has a 41% minority enrollment rate, yet has only a handful of full-time POC faculty. UMASD should strive to reach at least 24% POC faculty makeup in order to match the demographics of Upper Merion Township. In addition, to ensure long-term racial equity, the district must publish racial demographic and payroll statistics of faculty and make both easily accessible to the public.
6. Create and require a course specifically designed to teach students about systemic racism and implement it as a requirement for graduation.
  - a. Supplement this course with events similar to or woven into Challenge Day that push non-Black students and faculty to face implicit biases and white privilege. More importantly, provide a safe space at these events for Black students to be able to share their experiences with racism within the school or community as well as microaggressions they have faced.
  - b. The bigger takeaway is: there doesn't need to be a course on systemic racism - **as long as it is well incorporated into the curriculum**. That speaks and will do volumes.
7. Encourage faculty not to neglect racist comments made by students and to hold students who make these comments more accountable.
8. Receive input from students, faculty, and community members on which language to use when discussing Black history and acknowledging each other. Black students come from a variety of places, and while "Black" is the appropriate word to describe the race for some,

other Black individuals may not be in agreement. Respect these identifications, and adopt them in the classroom. This is a community effort. **Don't use this opportunity to single out Black students.** Instead, encourage voluntary leadership.

- a. In addition, stop using ableist language like "turning a blind eye" "blind spot" "tone-deaf," etc. It's common in conversations about race to use language about ability (vision, hearing), yet those words reinforce the idea that people with disabilities are less aware and capable.
  - b. Address hate speech, racially charged language, and microaggressions in school. Students who are perpetuating systematic racism may not be aware that they are doing so based on silent reactions. Point out mistakes explicitly so they can be fixed and reflected upon.
9. Advocate for education reform **at the state level.**
- a. We recognize that being a public school, there is a limited amount that UM can change to the state-mandated and College Board curriculums. By being a proponent of an anti-racist non-eurocentric curriculum, Upper Merion can help spark change throughout Pennsylvania.
10. Make racial school demographics easily accessible to the public, including but not limited to school enrollment, detentions, suspensions, and AP/honors enrollment.

### ***Beyond the classroom***

11. **Establish a Council for Diversity and Inclusion** to make sure that racial equality is spread throughout the UMASD community. Implement frequent check-ins with clubs like Black Student Union and No Place for Hate to create school-wide campaigns that will mobilize everyone's efforts. Students must be able to attend these Council meetings so they can voice their concerns and suggestions as things change.
- a. In addition, we suggest bringing on a new staff position such as the Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion who will act as a district-wide administrator and work with the curriculum directors, principals, teachers, students, and staff to effect systemic changes.
12. **We highly recommend creating a Student Council position of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion representative** to bridge the gap between student experiences and faculty planning. This representative will receive all materials and insights gained from community conversations on this letter.
13. Invite educational speakers who will increase exposure to these issues and even offer personal anecdotes to truly show how racism still exists today. **This is an invaluable way to supplement in-classroom education and build anti-racist rhetoric in the community.**
14. Added emphasis on after school and extracurricular programs to the *whole* student population. Students who participate in sports and clubs have a greater chance of interacting with peers outside of their social and academic circles.
- a. After school transportation may pose to be a restricting barrier for many interested in these aforementioned activities. UMASD could provide more frequent daily bus rounds to ensure easier accessibility for students.
  - b. Clubs (i.e. DECA, Model UN) should provide **stipends / scholarships** to students in underrepresented groups to promote more inclusivity and eliminate financial burdens.
15. Encourage regular conversations about racism, implicit biases, privilege, and current events at home, and provide resources for families. While the district has already sent some resources to stimulate some discussion at home, we urge you to send reminders on a quarterly/monthly basis to **guarantee that these conversations are not merely seen as**

**recent events, but rather are discussed frequently as structural social issues.** Other organizations have compiled useful resources, which we have linked [here](#).

16. Develop a page on the UMASD website solely dedicated to these kinds of topics with the purpose of better engaging the UM community (rather than sending a one-time email - and promoting this website through an extended email campaign).
  - a. The [current page](#) is not informative. There is no plan provided - just a picture of an award.
17. Utilize parents' corporate donation matching programs (many companies have generously offered to match donations of its employees sent to nonprofits to support relevant causes such as the NAACP) to amplify UM's monetary impact.
  - a. UMASD/Student Councils/etc. can help facilitate residents who are interested in donating to such nonprofits by serving as a mediator between the interested donors and the employees of such companies matching the donations (all would be residents of UM).
18. Support Black businesses by purchasing school resources from Black-owned bookstores, restaurants, and more. Promote Black businesses to faculty and students for school fundraisers and other events.

Every morning, Upper Merion students hear the statement, "we inspire excellence in every student, every day." Kind words are not sufficient to uphold the [Upper Merion vision](#). **At times like this, rather than remain unaffected, all non-Black UM community members must acknowledge their privilege, fight their implicit biases, and be better allies.** While Black communities and anti-racist allies across the United States - and across the world - are mobilizing, signing petitions, donating money, participating in protests, educating themselves, and speaking out, Upper Merion must vocalize and engage more.

The Upper Merion Area School District promises to "lay the foundation for a successful and fulfilling life" by providing "skills, knowledge, and cultural experiences." To instill "a strong sense of self, a deep concern for fellow human beings, a lasting commitment to their community, and a lifelong thirst for learning," UM must open further dialogue between administrators, staff, parents, students, alumni, and residents of the Upper Merion Area School District and have difficult conversations. We want future generations of UM students to graduate as socially responsible, actively engaged citizens of integrity and proponents of anti-racism. Continuous and consistent action is necessary to see a more understanding, inclusive, and racially educated Upper Merion community.

Freedom is not truly free if it relies on the suffering of others. Black lives are being lost every day as a result of complicit silence and inaction. **We must all make a lifelong commitment to anti-racism - justice cannot wait.**

Sincerely,

1. Trinity Pike, Class of 2018
2. Grace Wu, Class of 2018

**417 student / alumnus signatures.**

**32 parent signatures.**

**9 community member signatures.**

***This letter was endorsed by the Upper Merion Black Student Union.***

The Upper Merion student organizations below:

- A. *commit to acknowledge previous acts of racial discrimination*

- B. vow to active anti-racism efforts - in particular, anti-Black racism efforts - for the entire future of the organization*
- C. are willing to undergo review by experts on tolerance and inclusion and participate in school diversity training*
- D. express support of the letter linked above written by Grace Wu and Trinity Pike*

1. Cultural Heritage Club
2. Interact Club
3. National Honor Society
4. Orchestra
5. Student Council
6. Multicultural Music Club
7. Muslim Student Association
8. UM Speech & Debate
9. CAST Club & CAST Teen Advisory Club
10. Underground Players
11. Band
12. CREATE Diversity Club
13. Asian Student Association

#### Appendix

- I. UMASD Demographics (Presented at [State Conference](#); Image provided by faculty)

