

UMBLM MEETING NOTES TRANSCRIPTION

Date: Wednesday, July 1st | 6:00 PM - 7:30 PM
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SLIDE 1 | Title

SLIDE 2 | Centering Black Voices

Before we get started, Trinity and I want to express our main concern leading up to this presentation: the fact that we are not centering Black voices in conversations with the school administration. Having the chance to present at the Equity Meeting is such a huge step, but as non-Black POC the space we are taking up would be better filled by Black community members, especially Black students who have been excluded by administrative communication. We were trying to find a Black student representative for this meeting, but timing has not been on our side. Our collaborators, Sarika and Soni, withdrew in response to the fact that Black student voices have not been centered. And moving forward, we want to continually stress that as co-authors of the letter, we come from a place in *support* of the Black community and not *on behalf* of.

SLIDE 3 | Grounding Principles

Books and resources are great and so important in education, and I am really proud of the support that you are showing with initiatives. But books are objects - they aren't alive, and they can't talk and act - the point is that YOU can.

Reflecting on why Sarika and Soni aren't here, we want to emphasize that actions speak louder than words. The decision to ignore our initial requests and concerns without any reasons for rejection was a hurtful action that does not show support for the Black community and especially for Black student voices. Moving forward, as administrators you need to take actions that match the sentiment of your words. Valuing diversity, tolerance, and inclusion should not only materialize in kind statements. Anti-racism must define every action moving forward, from the smallest gesture to the largest initiative. We can no longer uplift diversity and inclusion - we must call for equity and justice.

We are coming from a place of respect and compassion for all of your incredible work. We ALL want diversity and equity, and we're ALL working towards diversity and equity, which we believe is the reason this meeting is taking place. That being said, all non-black people have been complicit with systemic racism - including us - and we are here to recognize our faults, take responsibility, and to build a sustainable future together. The Upper Merion school district has been proactive in spreading change, but we can all do better, and we're here to help.

Legacy of Anti-Racism

We recognize that we are part of a movement spreading throughout the country right now in response to police brutality and anti-Black racism. Though this is certainly an urgent matter, racism is not a new issue in the district, and this will not stop being a problem when the news cycle moves on. We must address the long-term, systemic errors in the school system and create a sustainable solution that will last beyond us and have a positive impact on future generations of UM students.

SLIDE 4 | At a Glance

Introduction → common trends rooted in the issue, an overview of our letter and its contents, as well as the valuable insight we've gained from faculty in the past week

Actions → macro level goals that rest on the infrastructure of how we choose to build this community

Next Steps → micro level goals that ideally can be implemented in the immediate future

Q&A → open it up to the audience for Q&A

SLIDE 5 | Disconnect

The key focus of our letter was to respond to the disconnect between what our school district claims to be and what it actually is. We parade challenge day, diversity day, and cultural clubs as accomplishments - and they are. But they are far from enough. Students are experiencing blatant racism and microaggressions not only from peers, but also from faculty, and taking Eurocentric curriculums that sugarcoat the truth of this country and render POC students invisible in discussions of history. We know that you are making initiatives. But the "progress" that some faculty have been telling us about is absent from actual student experiences - one student, for instance, learned a racial slur IN A UM CLASSROOM with no attempt for explanation or substitution. Furthermore, there is a huge lack of transparency in what diversity and inclusion plans are. According to the district website, the diversity and inclusion plan is just a picture of an award.

SLIDE 6 | Quote from the Letter

This quote from the letter describes our perspective:

"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." At UM, we are not taught about these crucial real world issues, and we are not prepared to advocate for ourselves and others against racism.

SLIDE 7 | Letter Statistics

In the past week, over 450 students, parents, alumni, and community members read and signed our letter, which featured over 100 testimonials of witnessed accounts of racism, personal experiences, and dissatisfaction with the system.

SLIDE 8 | Student Experiences

Priya and Aryana, both Upper Merion students, created an Instagram featuring these personal testimonials. We bring up one in particular that sparked a strong public response, which focused on an 8th grade social studies activity that had students pick cotton in class. Not only was the exercise unrewarding for students, it is evident from the comments people felt uncomfortable and contributed to negative learning, with no explicit recognition of the mistakes being made. In fact, people weren't even aware of the racial implications this activity had which is an issue in itself. We must do better.

SLIDE 9 | Faculty Response & Insight

Over the past week, we spoke to multiple faculty members, both within and outside the school district and were able to get a better grasp on current and past school initiatives. We've had several exchanges with Robert Jarvis, Director of the Penn Coalition for Educational Equity. He has over 17+ years of experience working with the Upper Merion School District and informed us of the district's participation in the Delaware Valley Minority Student Achievement Consortium, which serves as a collaborative network to promote proactive leadership responsibility among teachers.

Furthermore, he's helped lead two in-service sessions this past year that featured leadership equity and diversity training, with a focus on developing "Social Justice Standards" for K-12 curriculums from Teaching Tolerance. We also learned that in the past, staff participated in a summer workshop called Power, Privilege, and Perspective. Upper Merion meets state standards and exceeds expectations compared to other neighboring districts, which we recognize.

For instance, we have the Choices course, nestled under the Teenage Issues and Health section in the handbook, which features the African American, Asian American, and Native American experience. Students watch videos about each culture and learn about the hardships these individuals face throughout history, connecting to their present-day experience through open-conversation. However, less than 10 students take this class per semester. In fact, Trinity and I did not even know this course *existed* until a student reached out to us. This is an issue.

In terms of classroom resources & representation, there has been a huge push in the past few years to increase diversity of the reading curriculum and to deliver a personalized educational experience for students, amounting to over \$30,000.

We recognize your efforts, and we're grateful for the significant changes that have been made since we graduated.

However, as we reached out to members of administration, we found this common trend: the first instinct of shifting the narrative to defend UM accomplishments instead of acknowledging community experiences. It's important to realize what we have, but equally if not more essential to emphasize what we lack. Consider the distance between your personal experiences and those written down in the personal statements, and ask why.

For instance, diversity training - we recognize that faculty are made aware of racism and discrimination, but the connection between actions, microaggressions, and classroom activity and ACTUAL anti-racist initiatives is missing. And students aren't taking classes on diverse experiences and history because they are not pushed towards them or made aware of them.

SLIDE 10 | Communicative & Administrative

Our school district is systemically racist. It discriminates by design. Students have noted UM schools disproportionately punished students of color, disproportionately applied the dress code to women of color, that white students held up xenophobic signs at a mock presidential debate and no one was held accountable, and that middle school teachers allowed kids to harass and bully other kids because of their ethnicity and race - the same teachers who had students picking cotton in the classroom.

This is absolutely unacceptable.

We need to reform the system from the ground up to truly enact equity and justice. Anti-racism needs to play a role in the school district from planning to implementation. Without extreme attention on the foundation, all execution efforts will fail.

1. Anti-Racist Infrastructure
 - a. Equity and anti-racism should inform ALL decisions made at the administrative level. Meeting invites → plan
2. Reformed Curriculum, Policy, & Training
 - a. curriculum
 - i. You must reform the curriculum to explicitly address anti-Black discrimination from history to present, police brutality, hate speech, and more in all subject areas. Furthermore, we need to dismantle the Eurocentric focus of the current curriculum.
 - ii. We realize the current curriculum is more diverse than most - but it is not enough, and the content is not being provided with explicit enough context or enough care.

- iii. Spending time on anti-racism education does not have to take away from traditional classes. All subjects intertwine with systemic racism.
 - b. policy
 - i. The school should use restorative justice processes in cases of harm that aren't just mere violations of school rules (i.e. fights, carrying weapons), and publish racial demographics on detentions, suspensions, Vantage, etc. for transparency with the community and statistical analysis of implicit bias.
 - ii. Faculty must address the racism of previous classroom activities and stop overlooking the brutality against Black people that defines the entire history of this country. Training has to emphasize that this is our district's problem, and that EVERYONE's actions are crucial in shaping our community.
 - iii. Furthermore, teachers must discuss relevant news as it happens and take responsibility for microaggressions. Avoidance is being complicit.
- 3. POC Hiring/Representation
 - a. We need to hire more POC teachers. I had no teachers who looked like me, and only two Black teachers in my entire UM K-12 career. There are POC candidates who are more than qualified for these positions, so the hiring process has to change. POC teachers are essential not only for holding faculty accountable, but also for making students feel welcome and represented in the classroom.
- 4. Student/Community
 - a. Clearly there is a HUGE disconnect between the vision of administration and faculty and what students and the UM community actually experience. You need to be more receptive to public feedback, and especially more supportive of Black student voices. We are already disappointed with how the communication was handled going into this meeting - again, we emphasize that we are ALL complicit of systemic racism. However if we are going to work together, the communication needs to be clearer, and you have to be more transparent about the facts. I will get more into this later.

SLIDE 11 | Penn Grant, POC Staff, Public Transparency

As with the emphasis on working towards increasing POC staff, we plan on collaborating with you to apply for the Penn Grant. This community grant covers materials, transportation, equipment, publicity, facilities, fees, as well as event-related expenses for an open-ended use of up to \$1,500. Applications are being accepted and reviewed on a rolling basis, and for timeline context, they should be submitted at least 3 weeks in advance to allow for sufficient time to transfer funds. We bring this up to you because we think this is a great opportunity for students to be involved, such as the students leading protests and activism in the community.

It's great that this meeting is being published - but we need more. Racial demographics on payroll, punishment, and enrollment must be published and made accessible. Furthermore, all

plans should be published, and any information on past initiatives should be made available as context. We are collecting records of student experiences - on your end, you should be developing records of administrative initiatives and data that demonstrates whether they are effective at truly enacting change.

SLIDE 12 | Student Representation, Open Forum

Grace and I are alumni who graduated two years ago. Though we both have experiences that we can reflect on, having all the communication go through us is ineffective because we cannot enact any changes in the school system itself. Furthermore, we are non-Black POC and benefit from the model minority myth, and our voices should not be the center of this conversation. We need a CURRENT Black student representative for these district equity meetings, and we need to make that position permanent as a part of the student council for the future to keep bridging the gap between student experiences and administrative initiatives.

As we conclude our thoughts, we want to reiterate that Trinity and I are not supposed to be the ones talking right now. This is not about us. We understand that as co-authors of the letter, this outreach comes from a place of good intentions, but this should *only* be the first step. Representation for the Black Community comes first and must be better later on. This is a community effort and an open conversation with the Upper Merion community, and we hope to see some changes moving forward. Thank you.