



Columbia PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Dr. Brian Yearwood
Superintendent of Schools

Columbia Public Schools

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January 22, 2023

The Honorable Michael L. Parson
Governor, State of Missouri
PO Box 720
Jefferson City, MO 65102

Dear Governor Parson:

It appears that there is an unfortunate amount of misinformation being shared outside of our community regarding the City of Columbia's 30th Annual "Columbia Values Diversity" Breakfast held on Thursday, January 19th. Since you have expressed concerns about the event, I am writing to offer clarification about the morning's program and our attendance at the breakfast.

For the last 30 years, the City of Columbia has sponsored and organized an annual "Columbia Values Diversity" event to celebrate the life and teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Since its inception, Columbia Public Schools has been invited to and has attended these wonderful events. Our role is limited to participating in a single portion of the celebratory program centered on student writings. Along with students from other private and parochial schools in the Columbia area, CPS students submit personal works about diversity themes that honor and reflect Dr. King's courageous efforts in promoting equality in the face of persistent bigotry.

This year, along with students from several other private and parochial schools, approximately 30 students from Columbia Public Schools were among the more than 1,000 attendees at the breakfast.

The program at the breakfast included the singing of our National Anthem, an invocation by Columbia faith leaders, a presentation of student writings, a discussion of Columbia's journey toward inclusive excellence led by Mayor Barbara Buffaloe, and the presentation of awards and recognitions. Former WNBA star Renee Montgomery was the keynote speaker at the breakfast, with her speech sponsored by the University of Missouri's Department of Athletics. The last portion of the morning's program was a 15-minute dance and singing performance by NClusion+.

As is the practice for attendance at an outside event, our schools sought parent permission for students to attend in advance of the event. Of the CPS students in attendance, we have received two parent complaints. Like we do when any parent raises an issue, we have been in direct conversation with both families to discuss their concerns and how we can best meet the needs of their children.

CPS strives to learn from our conversations with parents and improve our best practices around outside events. Although we do not have control over the program at events organized by outside entities and cannot expect to have complete information in advance about what will occur at outside events, we are continuing to review our internal process and how to effectively share the advance information we do have with our students and families.

Outside of our school community, however, misinformation continues to spread. As one example, I recently received a letter from the Attorney General that indicates confusion about the City of Columbia's event. Any characterization of the "Columbia Values Diversity" Breakfast as "child endangerment" or having a "sexual nature" or violating state law is categorically false. Although CPS was unaware what the performance by NClusion+ would entail, their program was not an "adult" performance. This type of misrepresentation is harmful to our students, our staff, and our community.

Given the purpose of the breakfast and the distortions that followed, I think it is appropriate to conclude in the same place where this began. In 1947, Dr. King wrote an essay titled "The Purpose of Education," which included the following thought: "Education must enable one to sift and weigh evidence, to discern the true from the false, the real from the unreal and the facts from the fiction."

Columbia Public Schools values the role the public plays in our decision-making process and we believe that we benefit as a school community when our stakeholders are active participants in the overall life of the district. We invite and encourage our students, staff, parents, and patrons to offer input about our activities to help improve our operations and our schools.

And, I hope that our students can learn from how we as adults model productive engagement within a community, separating fiction from fact so we can maintain focus on what is most important – the success of our scholars.

I extend an open invitation to meet and discuss our common aspirations for scholars to achieve at high levels and for our public education system in Missouri to thrive.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Brian Yearwood". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Brian Yearwood

Superintendent

Columbia Public Schools

c: Missouri Attorney General Andrew Bailey