



Reprinted with Permission
August 22, 2017

Reflections on Charlottesville,

By AESA member, Scott Menzel PhD, Washtenaw ISD, Ann Arbor MI Superintendent

As the images were broadcast and stories surfaced in major media outlets, the events in Charlottesville, VA brought to light the continuing challenges related to racism in this country. I've taken the time to read articles from the left, the right, and in between. The news coverage is relatively consistent, highlighting the tensions that began on Friday night when a group of white supremacist (they use this language themselves, for those who want to argue that the language represents "leftist ideology") marched through the storied "Lawn" at the University of Virginia bearing torches and chanting hateful slogans. The ostensible reason for the gathering of representatives from the KKK, "alt-right", and a variety of other white nationalist groups was the decision to remove a statue of Robert E. Lee from a park in Charlottesville. Although a proper permit to assemble was secured, many of those participating also made it clear they would be armed in advance of the gathering. In response, counter protestors assembled to take a stand in opposition to the hatred and bigotry of these groups. According to a news report this morning, while numerous groups were represented (including Black Lives Matter, antifa, etc.), their efforts were not formally coordinated. Tragically, one woman was killed and nineteen other counter protestors were injured when a 20-year old from Ohio drove his vehicle into the crowd.

As I read some of the blog comments, I could feel anger arise as the same ideas that prompted the rally in the first place were repeated by numerous individuals—spewing hatred and bigotry—with virtually no acknowledgment or understanding of the deep-seated racism that persists in our society and which must be addressed. As a reminder—white people of European descent, are NOT natives to this land. Our nation was founded on the genocide and displacement of the indigenous population, and built its wealth on the backs of enslaved Africans who were involuntarily transported across the Atlantic and subjected to the most cruel and inhumane treatment at the hands of the white landed aristocracy. After the civil war and the emancipation of those who were enslaved, post Reconstruction, laws were adopted that ensured the racial segregation and unequal treatment. The narrative is long, but the ability of far too many white Americans to ignore the ways in which the system has worked to our benefit and disadvantaged people of color, the poor, and those with

disabilities is alarming.

I also finished reading a book this weekend titled *Just Mercy* by Bryan Stevenson. Bryan leads the Equal Justice Initiative, a lawyer who has worked tirelessly over the past few decades to secure freedom for prisoners on death row who have been wrongly condemned. He also brought forward the Supreme Court cases that resulted in a decision that life in prison sentences without the possibility of parole for juveniles was cruel and unusual punishment and therefore unconstitutional. The stories of how the “justice” system denied justice to the poor and people of color were powerful and disturbing. I am struggling to reconcile the ideals on which our nation is based (e.g. “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal...”) with the reality we see playing out on a daily basis where entire groups of people are subject to discrimination and unjust treatment. When we recite the pledge of allegiance, we say “with liberty and justice for all” and yet, when law enforcement officials are allowed to manipulate evidence in order to secure a conviction, when exculpatory evidence is destroyed, when individuals with mental illness or the inability to pay for competent legal representation are sent to prison for minor infractions (e.g. writing bad checks totaling about \$150 or so but being sentenced to ten years in prison) we are not meeting the “liberty and justice for all” commitment.

The dissonance between what we believe our country stands for and the disturbing and pervasive evidence of what it has actually stood for causes me to lose sleep at night. I do not believe anyone can remain a neutral observer as this chapter of history unfolds. Either we embrace and live out our values reflecting respect for all human beings or we embrace a narrative where the powerful, privileged, and affluent are able to control the narrative and marginalize and oppress those who are perceived as different, inferior, or other. As an organization, WISD stands deeply committed to equity, inclusion and social justice. We stand in solidarity with those who have been historically marginalized and oppressed. We stand in solidarity with those who oppose hatred and bigotry. Most importantly, we stand for the right of every child to have the opportunity to achieve his or her full potential regardless of circumstance of birth. In public education, we have the opportunity to make sure the historical lens is not distorted by those who would perpetuate systems of injustice and discrimination. As we enter the new school year, we now have even more evidence of the defining issue of our time. My question to you is, where do you stand?

Scott Menzel, PhD is the Superintendent of the Washtenaw ISD, Editor of AESA’s Perspective Journal and facilitates the Equity, Inclusion and Social Justice Affinity Group.