

Student, Teacher of the Year seek racial equity in education



2018 Delaware Teacher of the Year Virginia Forcucci snaps a selfie with her students.

Editor's note: This guest post is from Jinni Forcucci, a **Sussex Technical High School** English language arts teacher and the 2018 Delaware Teacher of the Year, and one of her students, who wishes to remain anonymous.

A few months ago, my students read a Flannery O'Connor story that explores an anti-hero's inability to love self. The character, ironically named Joy, matures under the scrutiny of a judgmental mother in a gender discriminatory South, where both her physical appearance and unpopular philosophies fail to satisfy conventionality. My students, quickly realizing the woman's need for human connection and acceptance, empathized with her struggle and recognized that many of us spend our lives *needing*. They also recognized that when Joy identifies her differences as her strengths, she can begin healing and embracing a sincere love of self.

O'Connor's story organically opened up class discussion surrounding my students' needs. Highly aware that individual hardship is often a direct result of external factors, factors that are often out of their control, a number of my students enter my room knowing that their needs *have not* and *are not* being satisfied,

that their experiences in our schools and in our communities do not mirror those of their classmates, that they will have to work harder and longer to overcome some of the societal obstacles that most often prevent comfort, achievement, equity.

My students decided to write Open Letters to intended readers who have either helped them defeat these obstacles **OR** to intended readers who represent these obstacles.

What follows is one letter, written by a Sussex Technical High School student, who wants readers to hear her, to consider her, to value her.

To Teachers and Administrators Who Don't Realize How Much Language Can Hurt,

Over my past four years in high school, I've been amazed by the things I've been able to witness. I've encountered some life changing experiences that will alter my perspective of this world greatly. One of which is racism, but it wasn't the racial slurs thrown at me, or the borderline racist comments that shocked me the most. It was the fact that often vulgar, ignorant, and disgusting words could be ignored.

Justice is often an abandoned orphan stranded without anyone to care for her. We need you to address the racist behavior that happens in your school. We need you to care enough to help change situations that can scar someone like me for a lifetime. We need you to stand up for us, for Black people. Once you ignore the actions of others who hurt, demean, belittle and offend, you promote fear.

I shouldn't have to feel scared in my school.

Silence slaps the face of the victim and tells her that she is not worth a reaction. Silence grabs ahold of the tongue, preventing my understanding of how you feel about bigotry. I do not want to believe that your intentions are hurtful, and I recognize the complexity of the system we live in. But, please know - your silence is your consent.

Please do not let the elephant in the room named racism trample all over the opportunity to promote understanding and awareness. You have to let us attack these topics in our classrooms. Stop censoring us. We need administrators and teachers who use their authority and knowledge to inspire growth. I want to understand why it's so hard to be equal. I want to hear from leaders and classmates who genuinely want change. If we don't talk, we can't grow.

Empty your desk full of all those excuses and make room for solutions. Make time to ensure that your kids feel safe in your school. ALL students need to be loved ALL the time, and school staff cannot love only the ones that look like them.

Make your kids want to come to school and learn. We should not look at school as if it were the last crushed up bag of Fritos in the variety pack. Racism should not be the wall that blocks us from receiving an equitable education. We already had to climb over mountains of white supremacy and stereotypes just to walk through our school doors. Just help us learn.

By not speaking up, you are just as dangerous as the person harming your students. We should not be afraid to speak to up about these situations. Our words should not become targets that we have to wear every day. They should be our shields. You should be our shields. You should stand by us through hard times instead of standing across from us. Let us unite.

Your school is a reflection of you. Do you like what you see when you look in the mirror?

Sincerely,

An Aware Student Who Needs Healing Words Instead Of Cold Silence

Aware that this student's perspective speaks loudly, clearly and impressively, I offer one more bit of advice from the perspective of advocacy: If my student is brave enough to stand up for what is right, our administrators and teachers and policy makers should be too.