



Progressive
Education
NETWORK

A Statement from the Board of Directors

July 2020

Dear PEN Educators:

Less than one year ago we gathered in Minneapolis for the Progressive Education Network's biennial national conference, "Educating for Democracy: Navigating the Current and Channeling the Future of Progressive Education." Several weeks ago on those same streets, George Floyd was murdered by police officers after eight minutes, forty-six seconds of ritual abuse emblematic of four hundred and one years of our history. As we speak, protesters' calls to action hang in the air outside the conference spaces you traveled; one of our site visit schools, Gordon Parks Academy, stands damaged from the uprising that ensued.

A movement born in recent years of the centuries-long fight against racism and anti-Blackness, catalyzed primarily by the leadership of Black women, has become part of our national consciousness. A torrent of statements has been produced by public officials, corporations, and educational institutions affirming unapologetically that Black Lives Matter & declaring commitments to advancing the pursuit of racial equity and justice within their institutions. How long this commitment will last, and how deeply it will transform those institutions, we do not and cannot know. This transformative work requires continuously vigilant commitment over time. Charges do not always lead to convictions; words do not always lead to actions; rhetoric does not often become reality.

Thus we stand in skepticism with those who've witnessed flurries of such 'position statements' in the past to have been followed, almost inevitably, by inaction. We stand in skepticism with Cornel West, who recently affirmed that "We don't need lukewarm folk. We don't need summer soldiers. We need all-season love warriors."

The Progressive Education Network's vision has, for some years now, been underpinned by a commitment to "promote a vision of progressive education for the 21st century that engages students as active participants in their learning and in society," "advance critical dialogue on the roles of schools in a democratic society," and "promote diversity, equity, and justice in our schools and society." You have worked hard, with us, to determine what the enactment and expression of these commitments might look like in our schools in the years to come. As a board, we have tried to center this work in recent years by reframing our vision, mission, and principles to foreground our commitments to equity and justice; ensuring diverse representation in our board composition, and explicitly focusing on these commitments in our biennial conferences, NIPEN Institute, and publications. We will continue to do so in a spirit of solidary and radical hope.

First, we recognize that anti-racist action requires the deeply personal work of examining one's own racialized identity and its implications in the personal and professional spaces we travel. For our white colleagues in particular, this includes deep reflection on the conscious and unconscious ways our own behaviors, dispositions, choices, and words perpetuate white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Upon that foundation, white people--the beneficiaries of institutional and systemic racism--must commit themselves to action as accomplices and co-conspirators to BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, and People of Color) colleagues, students, and parents in the spaces we travel. We stand in skepticism with those who've seen "allies" declare their public solidarity but retreat into complicit silence.

Second, we recognize that racism is not defined narrowly by the abhorrent actions of individuals; it is the product of systems, structures, and institutions that perpetuate racialized inequities and oppression. As others have suggested, events such as George Floyd's killing are not symptoms of "bugs" in the criminal justice system, but intentional features of its design. Anti-Black racism is the product of 401 years of socially accepted marginalization and state-sanctioned violence.

Third, we recognize the degree to which white supremacy and anti-Blackness are embedded in and perpetuated by our school system through education policies and practices such as punitive school discipline, grossly inadequate funding, the segregation of the communities in which schools are located, testing and accountability policies, and a narrowing of the training, support, role, and agency of teachers. All of these disproportionately impact students, families, and communities of color and threaten our democracy as a whole. Yet there seems some ambiguity, in certain corners, whether the interrogation of these issues is the "proper" business of schooling. We insist that it is the necessary business of schooling.

Fourth, we recognize that the history of progressive pedagogy is inextricably intertwined with problematic racialized ideology. Our narrative was born in whiteness and in many corners continues to center on it. Great experiments in progressive pedagogy in the public sector have been undermined by inadequate funding and the relentless neoliberal transformation of the public school system to serve the imperatives of our economy over the needs of our society. Progressive schools in the private sector have in many instances provided outstanding educational programs to communities of privilege, but have not done the hard work of examining their own "color-blind" racism and its perpetuation of racialized inequity, exclusion, and oppression in their schools and in our society.

As we said in 2016, the PEN Board of Directors implores progressive schools and progressive educators to acknowledge the urgency of addressing racial justice inside and outside our classrooms. In addition, we believe the work of conscientized progressive pedagogy carries with it an imperative to examine the complicity of our own institutions in racial bias and inequitable representation in our curriculum and pedagogy, and in our institutional systems, structures, and rituals. A progressive pedagogy must ensure that Black Lives Matter not only generally in our society, but more visibly in our schools. Our schools must ensure that inequity, bigotry, and white supremacy in all its forms are interrogated and mitigated in our classrooms and in our boardrooms. Our students deserve, and increasingly demand, no less.

As the Board of Directors, our role is to lead, to serve, and to listen. Rather than to provide prescriptions, templates, 'resources,' or recipes incrementally or transactionally to improve your schools, we continue to invite you into the perpetual, vexing, passionate, messy, and demanding work of educational and social transformation. To that end, we ask you what you need from us to support you in the continued work ahead. As we all reframe the systems, structures, and rituals of online, hybrid, and on-site schooling during this unprecedented time, we have an imperative to examine them through the lenses of diversity, equity, and justice. To build and support our network, we will host a series of online "PEN Conversations" to learn what you need from PEN and to consider how we all can enact our commitments to equity and justice at this historic moment. [You'll find times and dates for these PEN Conversations here.](#)

The obligations and imperatives of this work are ours to share. As Bettina Love recently declared, "The impossible is becoming possible. As we all stand in the midst of a world crisis, those of us who can dream must dream. And after we dream, we must demand and act. In the face of that racism and resistance, it may seem pointless, but this is the perfect time to radically dream."

We look forward to dreaming, demanding, and acting with you.

With respect and love,

The PEN Board of Directors

Sven Carlsson, Theresa Collins, Ayla Gavins, Sung- Joon (Sunny) Pai, Heather Schilling, Dan Schwartz, Chris Thinner, Kavan Yee, Andrew Williams