

Good afternoon,

This is going to be a fairly long email that I am asking you to read to the end as it might be one of the most sensitive messages I have had to send. I also want to be clear that decisions surrounding some of these more sensitive topics are not necessarily reflective of my own beliefs, they are based on the best information that I have gathered by those that deal with these situations regularly, specifically from a legal standpoint.

I have a huge favor to ask, which may go without saying. Given the sensitive nature of this message, I feel like it should be said that any section of this communication in and of itself could easily be taken completely out of context on its own. This has been done in other districts with negative outcomes to the students, staff, and district as a whole. Understand that I do not think anyone would intentionally do anything to cause disruption to our district. As you all know, as important as decisions are, the “why” behind them is equally important.

I want it also to be known that my best interest and number one priority is with our students and staff in mind. This message should not be seen as a lack of support for any of our students or staff. Our goal is to ensure all our students feel like they have a safe place to learn and be supported.

Again, our number one priority is to support and educate all our students. Our students and families are fortunate to have adults in our district who are committed to what is best for them. As you are all aware, we live in divisive times, more divisive than ever before. School districts are being put at the center of many contentious and political topics. That being said, it is important that we move forward based on what is within our legal right and give staff the tools to make sure that we support and protect our students and our school district.

Some of these contentious and political topics are related to the First Amendment, which can get messy very fast, which is why we reached out for guidance from the attorneys that represent Education Minnesota (staff) and the school district. Involved in the conversation with the attorneys was an AEA Union President representative, HR, and myself. The intent of this process is to do this the right way. Involving these stakeholders is not intended to cause strife and discord among staff, in fact the opposite. By getting those together that represent all of us and coming up with solutions that we all agree on, giving all of you the “why” behind the decisions, feels better than just simply dictating what can and cannot be done.

District Wide Work

Had the pandemic not occurred, we know that given what happened almost two years ago in Minneapolis surrounding George Floyd, all districts in the state and likely the nation would be focused on Cultural Responsiveness. It is time for us to move in that direction and after several conversations and meetings I feel the place we need to start with this is educating our staff; not changing their beliefs, but educating to better equip. There are so many situations in our day to day interactions with students that have us questioning what we can and cannot say and not have it end up on social media or being used against us. We need to give all of you the tools you need to relieve this pressure that you face all too often.

To this end, we have used and will continue to solicit Flint Consulting, who specialize in this area. Not only are they exceptionally knowledgeable in this area, but having been a past educator for us, co-owner Jessica Murphy, knows our story. She knows the work we have done

and can help us through this process. You will be getting more information about this in the coming months. You should know that we will be gathering information this spring to help organize our efforts in the fall for workshop week.

There are several components to the work that we need to do as a district. However, there are two areas that we felt needed to be addressed today. When it comes to what we post in our buildings and what we wear, case law has shown that we, as public school staff, must be very careful. There are two things to consider when posting material in our buildings and staff attire while working with our students. One, will what is posted or worn be seen as indoctrinating our students to believe or think in a certain way. Two, would we allow anything that represents the opposite viewpoint of what is being posted or worn to be posted or worn.

What do we know now? We know that according to legal counsel, staff cannot post or wear anything that is deemed political in nature or that would cause a disruption to the learning environment for our students.

What is considered political? Again, according to both legal counsels, anything affiliated with any governmental party - including names and/or slogans, Black Lives Matter, Blue Lives Matter, rainbows, the specific word PRIDE when used to describe a political perspective or belief, religious symbols or sayings, to name a few.

What is considered disruptive to the learning environment? According to legal counsel, if one student feels offended or uncomfortable with what is posted or worn, that is considered a disruption to the learning environment.

What can and cannot be posted in our buildings? Having something posted in our buildings may not seem like a big issue or concern. Please understand that I do not believe anyone is posting anything in our buildings with negative intentions. When considering what goes on our walls we need to ask if it is related to the curriculum and does it fit within the scope of what was mentioned in the above paragraph.

Most recently, the Safe Space signs have been a point of discussion. With this topic, both attorneys recommended that we have one sign that encompasses the support of all students. The Education Minnesota attorney mentioned that she has seen districts use something similar to an "All Are Welcome" sign with school colors. I will be reaching out for help from staff and students in designing what this might look like. **In the meantime those that have these signs displayed may keep them up until the "All Are Welcome" signs are completed.** I should note that this decision is made so as to not cause disruption for our students. Also, the choice to post the new signage will be left up to the individual staff member.

When it comes to clothing, it is similar to what cannot be posted in our buildings. Anything that falls under the category of political, as stated above, needs to be avoided for the reasons stated.

In summary, it is with good intentions that this message has been sent as we felt you need to be aware of the direction that we need to move on some of these very sensitive issues and topics. You also needed some clarity on where we are right now and what we can and cannot do to be in accordance with the laws that are in place.

Please reach out with any questions or concerns.