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**Achievement First Bridgeport Academy**

**Board of Directors Meeting**

September 17, 2020, 5:30 pm

Zoom Video Conference

I. Call to Order and Attendance

The meeting was called to order at 5:32 pm by Dick Kalt. The following board members, constituting a quorum, and Achievement First Staff were in attendance:

Dick Kalt - Yes	Samantha Lucky, AFBA School Leadership
Marlene Macaуда - Yes	Petrina Hospedales, AFBA School Leadership
Debra Hertz - Yes	Annedrea Coleman, AFBA School Leadership
Kimberly Bruce - Yes	Domonique Marshall, AFBA School Leadership
Michael Strambler - Yes	Christina Ellington, AF Network Support
Ruben Felipe – Yes	Michael Hendricks, AF Network Support
Ebrima Jobe - Yes	Sarah Blanton, AF Network Support
Rajeev Lakra - Yes	Ken Paul, AF Network Support
Dewey Loselle - Yes	

II. Open Session for Public Comment

There was no public comment.

III. Approve Minutes

RESOLVED, the AF Bridgeport Academy Board of Directors hereby approves the meeting minutes from August 12, 2020.

Motion by Debra Hertz

Seconded by Marlene Macaуда

All in favor

IV. Discussion and Business

A. Principal Reports

Ms. Samantha Lucky, AF Bridgeport Elementary School Principal, shared how the start of school has been going as the school is fully remote at this time. Attendance has been strong – last week averaged at 93% and today was 95%. Ms. Lucky has weekly town halls every Friday with families. Feedback from families was very positive about their experiences.

Ms. Lucky is giving a survey next week to get feedback from staff. Feedback from scholars about

their experiences and their teachers has been positive.

32% of families are planning to come back for in-person instruction in October. There is a four day model, Monday – Thursday. The scholars who will be coming to school in-person will stay with the same teacher throughout the day.

Staff were invited to state their preferences for returning. Currently, 22 teachers will come back to teach in person. Ms. Lucky will review with each of the 22 teachers the safety protocol and hear their concerns.

Parents and teachers will express their preferences (in-person or remote) for each “chapter,” each of which is approximately six weeks long.

Petrina Hospedales, Director of School Operations, gave an overview of safety measures in the building including signs about social distancing, where it is safe to be, and where to walk. Ms. Hospedales reviewed teacher retention, which is strong. All teachers who are not certified have submitted their applications. They are looking to build a buffer in enrollment anticipating that some families may leave or move out of the area. The school is actively working on bringing in new families and has made offers to 24 new families.

Ms. Annedrea Coleman, AF Bridgeport Middle School principal, shared that the start of the school year is going well. The school is doing a lot of family outreach and hosted a virtual back to school night. They are planning a Latin Dancing and Trivia night. In addition to academics, they are offering enrichment and social-emotional learning (SEL) programs for scholars.

Ms. Coleman shared snapshots of different Zoom classes and the use of technology like Jamboard and Nearpod. She also shared quotes from comments and feedback from new teachers. New teachers have been paired with returning teachers as mentors.

Ms. Coleman shared the way in which she’s ensuring that AF’s Lead for Racial Equity core value is an active part of the work and development the staff is doing.

Pulse surveys for staff are given every 4-6 weeks. Ms. Coleman shared the initial results of the first pulse survey (up from last spring).

63% of families plan to remain remote and 24% wish to come in-person (four days) with no more than 15 scholars per advisory. All entrances to the school building will be used to support a different grade level. Breakfast and lunch will be delivered to classrooms. There are

designated staff areas for work and breaks with extra classrooms used as teacher workspaces.

The school is still determining the number of staff who will return in person. All leadership team members and operations staff will be in the building.

Ms. Coleman reviewed teacher retention and certification. There is a plan in place for every teacher who is currently not certified to meet the deadline for certification. Attendance is 96% which exceeds the goal for September which Ms. Coleman credits to the operations team's hard work. Ms. Coleman reviewed enrollment and Domonique Marshall, Director of School Operations, noted that some families are opting for Bridgeport Public School which are already providing in-person instruction.

#### B. Finance Committee Report

Victor De La Paz reviewed the budget amendment presented to the board noting line items that have been eliminated due to changes as a result of COVID, as well as some line items which may be cut or reduced in the future.

Mr. De La Paz also reviewed the balance sheet which shows a strong cash position and the updates to the PPP loan.

RESOLVED, the AF Bridgeport Academy Board of Directors hereby approves the amended budget as recommended by the Finance Committee and prepared by Achievement First for the 2020-21 fiscal year.

Motion by Rajeev Lakra

Seconded by Dewey Loselle

All in favor

Ken Paul gave a brief philanthropy update noting the PCLB match challenge.

#### C. Joint High School Committee Report

Dick Kalt gave the Amistad Joint High School Committee Report. The target enrollment of Amistad High School is 700 students.

New teachers are paired with returning staff, in a mentoring relationship.

84% of families will continue with remote instruction for the six weeks following the reopening (10/5). All scholars have Chromebooks and MiFis. Mr. Obas, Amistad High School principal, shared lessons learned from last year's remote instruction and the ways they have made

improvements both around instruction and operations.

The college counselors are meeting with seniors as they work towards college application deadlines. Professional development for teachers and special education services are continuing without disruption.

The board discussed the two AP science classes that are not offered this year, the approach to special education and the overall class sizes of the remote classes.

#### D. Board Chair Report

Dick Kalt reviewed the following resolutions.

RESOLVED, the AF Bridgeport Academy Board of Directors hereby renews the updated Cooperative Arrangement Agreement by and between Achievement First Bridgeport Academy, Amistad Academy and Elm City College Preparatory for a term to commence July 1, 2020 and end on June 30, 2025.

Motion by Dick Kalt

Seconded by Marlene Macauda

All in favor

RESOLVED, the AF Bridgeport Academy Board of Directors hereby approves the facial covering (mask) policy as presented by Achievement First.

Motion by Dick Kalt

Seconded by Michael Strambler

All in favor

The board had a discussion about the Lead for Racial Equity commitment that the board is considering adopting. The board supported a redrafting of a resolution that addresses the nuance and complexity of bigotry and discrimination beyond anti-racism. Michael Strambler shared a letter with the board of his thoughts (Exhibit A) and reservations about the recommended resolution. He noted the lack of specificity of the definition of a) the terminology in the resolution, specifically anti-racism, and b) the goals and outcomes associated with the proposal.

Debra Hertz made a motion not to support the Lead for Racial Equity resolution as presented. Marlene Macauda seconds the motion to reject the recommended resolution. The board unanimously supported the rejection.

The board requested that the resolution be rewritten incorporating the board's feedback.

Ruben Felipe thanked Mike Strambler for his leadership in guiding the discussion with his original letter and thoughtful comments during the meeting.

Dick Kalt reminded the board to submit their conflict of interest disclosure statements.

V. Adjourn

The meeting was adjourned at 8:04 pm by Dick Kalt.

Motion by Rajeev Lakra

Seconded by Marlene Macaуда

All in favor

## **EXHIBIT A**

September 15, 2020

Dear AFBA Board Members and Dacia,

I realize that this will come as a surprise to most, if not all of you, but I cannot affirm the Discrimination Resolution as written. I've thought long and hard over many years about the issues expressed in the statement, and several years ago I would have enthusiastically embraced the statement. But my current views don't allow me to support this. I want to share some of my current thinking on why I object to a statement that many may think is completely undeserving of criticism. Sorry for the length!

### **Personal Background**

I'm not one for sharing personal background stories, but in this case, I think it matters for context, so please bear with me.

I'm a Black man born in Camden, NJ where I was raised by a single mother for most of my childhood. Camden is a high-poverty, high-crime community that for years had the unfortunate distinction of being the most dangerous city in the country. I'm also a graduate of Morehouse College, an Historically Black College/University (HBCU). I've also been through numerous predominantly white institutions. I attended a New Jersey Quaker school for nearly all of my primary and secondary education and my graduate school tenure began at Stony Brook University and ended at UC Berkeley. At both institutions, I have served on diversity committees, often in leadership roles and at Berkeley I taught African American Psychology. Now at Yale School of Medicine, part of my work involves understanding social psychological contributors to racial [achievement gaps](#) and I often work with schools to improve educational policy and practice.

I've also always been politically liberal and have exclusively voted for liberal candidates. I'm familiar with the tenets of structural racism, white supremacy, anti-racism, microaggressions, white fragility, and other related concepts. I am also a father of a young Black and Latino boy, and I worry about the world he will inherit as a young man. I say all these things not because I believe my background says anything important about my racial authenticity or authority to speak to racial issues, but to preempt any potential interpretations of my objections as me not "getting it" or not caring enough about social justice. I get it, personally and intellectually.

With that out of the way, I'll get to the substance of my concerns.

### **The movement**

Anti-racism is attached to a movement that has gained steam due to numerous injustices over the past several years. While I have been encouraged by aspects of this movement, I am dismayed by others. I love the energy and intent behind attempts at creating a more just world. On the other hand, I worry that the movement ignores too much evidence (see my bulleted points below) and is overly focused on advancing an ideology at the expense of solving the problems. On this second point, I believe solving complex social problems requires: (1) an accurate and nuanced assessment of the problem; (2) use of reason and evidence to guide its direction; and (3) a clear rationale for what it aims to accomplish and how. I find the current movement lacking in all of these areas and this concern runs through all of my points mentioned below.

The other problem with being linked to a movement is that one has less control over the meaning and interpretation of one's focus. As prominent actors in the movement define, re-define, and use concepts like "anti-racism" on their own terms, they would also be doing so for AF—whether it's our intention or not

since many will interpret our concepts based on how they are popularly defined. It's better to anchor AF's values and approaches in *principles* that are clearly defined by AF itself.

### **What is anti-racism?**

For me to affirm something, I need to know what the thing is. So, when I am asked in the resolution to affirm "implement[ing] an anti-racist approach", I need to know how this "approach" is conceptualized. This is especially the case given the many ways in which anti-racism is used. Some use it as a generic term to express a value opposing racism and others use more specific definitions proposed by [Ibram X. Kendi](#) and other proponents. The former is not an approach at all and I find the latter [simplistic](#) and unrepresentative of reality.

### **Why anti-racism? Why racial equity?**

The anti-racism definition is only a small part of my concern with the resolution. Assuming a clear definition is offered, a question remains about why AF should prioritize race and racism over other forms of disparities or social injustices. For example, when it comes to academic achievement, our very namesake, strong evidence shows that socioeconomic status (SES) and poverty is the main driver of the racial achievement gap, with the income gap being [twice as large](#) as the Black-White gap. So why choose race over SES/poverty? We could just as easily say we're "anti-poverty" given the population we serve. A common counterargument to this point is that poverty among Blacks is a result of racism, which certainly holds some truth. But it is unclear how focusing on anti-racism is the solution to the disadvantages that our students face.

Another limitation of focusing on racism concerns how inclusive it is of our Latino students and the issue of linguistic diversity. (I deliberately avoid using the "Latinx" term used in the resolution, as the majority of the community from Latin America do not [use](#) or [prefer](#) it and I view it as an illiberal imposition). The gap between Latinos and Whites is sizeable and concerning, as is the gap between English Language Learners and their English-fluent counterparts.

One rationale I heard for the focus on race at the meeting where the AF values were shared, was that racism is the "original sin" that we need to address. I disagree with this claim. If there is an original sin, it runs far deeper than racism. It has more to do with our human tendencies to create artificial us-vs-them boundaries, which limits our circle of compassion, empathy, and tolerance towards others outside of the circle. All forms of oppression and discrimination flow from this human flaw. Racism is but one egregious way our species has found to treat our fellow humans inhumanely. And it is as universal as numerous other forms of mistreatment like sexism, ageism, ableism, homophobia, xenophobia, religious discrimination, etc. I think we're much better served by addressing the foundation and common features of these problems.

### **What's a better approach?**

I don't want to be critical without offering alternatives. However, I think the first thing to acknowledge is that in a very important way, AF is already an example of an approach to reduce racial disparities. What better way to serve students of color than to provide them with a high quality academic and social-emotional education in a healthy learning environment? AF can certainly do better in this regard, and I have been a critic of AF at times. But generally, I am proud of what AF has been able to accomplish, especially at AFBA Elementary, where we compete with the best public schools in the state. What could be more anti-racist than engaging mostly black and brown students who are disadvantaged due to no fault of their own and giving them the knowledge and skills to successfully compete with those possessing far more

advantages? It's doing this well, and continuing to improve upon it, that makes AF a force for social justice. It's not clear what anti-racism approaches would add to this.

The other approach that I think would be more productive, and which I alluded to earlier, is more of a focus on fairness, justice, and equity in a nuanced and broader sense. Causes of disadvantage do not neatly break down to individual identity characteristics like race. And race itself, is not neatly defined. I think it is far more productive, and more inclusive of the community we serve, for us to consider the multitude of interactive factors, in addition to race, that relate to disparities, especially socioeconomic status, language diversity, and special needs. And this should be driven by evidence within and beyond AF. Some may view this approach as diluting the work of social justice. I see it as honestly engaging complex problems as they present in the world.

### **What is our goal? What are our strategies to get there?**

I am not optimistic that my concerns will change the direction of AF, which is okay, and I want to be clear that I do not begrudge anyone who supports the resolution. However, one thing that I will insist on is for AF be clear on what its goal is for adopting anti-racism. Namely, I want to know what short- and long-term outcomes we'd like to see manifest in our students as a result of anti-racist practices and how we will know whether we're making progress towards these outcomes. If AF is making anti-racism central to its mission, it is critical to have measurable indicators of this.

In laying out AF's goals and strategies, I offer some cautions regarding some of the common strategies that are sometimes referred to as anti-racist approaches.

- Many approaches focus on reducing implicit biases. Implicit racial bias is real, but there is [scant evidence](#) that it is linked to behavior (e.g. discrimination). And it's the behaviors we really care about.
- [Anti-bias interventions](#) have small effects on implicit bias and hardly any on explicit attitudes and behavior.
- Similarly, the effectiveness of diversity training is [mixed](#) at best and there is some evidence of it having [counterproductive](#) outcomes under certain conditions.

Again, if AF is serious about addressing racial disparities, I hope that this evidence is carefully considered.

### **The bottom Line**

I'm all for creating schools that provide opportunities that help students overcome the unfair barriers in their way. But I don't believe that the current form of anti-racism, despite its popularity, is close to the best way of accomplishing this. In short, I'm not convinced that current anti-racism perspectives accurately describe the complex nature and scope of biased behavior. Nor am I convinced that anti-racist approaches show promise for solving real problems faced by the students we serve. Because I think we can do better, I respectfully decline to support the resolution.

Sincerely,

Michael J. Strambler, Ph.D.  
Achievement First Bridgeport Academy, Board Member