



FOUNDATION
AGAINST
INTOLERANCE
& RACISM

Via E-Mail

February 5, 2024

Montclair Board of Education
22 Valley Road
Montclair, NJ 07042
Attn: Custodian of Record

Re: OPRA Request for "Increasing Racial Literacy at NE"
and Black Lives Matter Week of Action In School

On behalf of the Montclair chapter of the Foundation Against Racism & Intolerance (FAIR), we request pursuant to the New Jersey Open Public Records Act (OPRA) that you provide the records described below, limited to records intended for use in the 2023-2024 school year.

The first set of requested records pertain to a \$10,000 grant to Northeast Elementary School titled "Increasing Racial Literacy at NE," which featured a discussion on November 16, 2023 of the book *Teaching to Transgress*¹ by an author who goes by the name "bell hooks" but whose given name was Gloria Watkins. Hooks's book contains a dedication by Paulo Freire, who is best known for his book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Freire advocates for "critical pedagogy" in which teaching and learning are considered political acts that serve a political agenda.² His work posits two classes—oppressor and oppressed—and argues that teaching should develop a "critical consciousness" among the oppressed in order to liberate them from their oppression. Hooks's work applies Freire's Marxist philosophy but substitutes identity characteristics such as race and sex for class. In a chapter titled "A Revolution of Values," hooks identifies the source of oppression as "white supremacist capitalist patriarchy," claims "we are living in a culture of domination," and asserts that "biases that uphold and maintain white supremacy, imperialism, sexism, and racism have distorted education" In a chapter about Freire styled as a dialogue between Gloria Watkins and bell hooks "in her writing voice," hooks has herself state that "the colonizing forces are [] powerful in this white supremacist capitalist patriarchy"

¹ <https://academictrap.files.wordpress.com/2015/03/bell-hooks-teaching-to-transgress.pdf>

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paulo_Freire



Without pre-judging the materials used at Northeast, FAIR Montclair believes that public education of elementary school children is not the appropriate venue in which to carry out a Marxist “revolution of values.” Regardless of the merit of hooks’s views on society, we do not believe teachers should serve a political agenda when instructing their students. To the contrary, teachers should cultivate independent thinking, strive for political neutrality, and respect the values their students (and their families) bring to the classroom. It would be particularly inappropriate to politicize the instruction of elementary school students given their young ages. And, in our view, teachers certainly should not teach students that they can be categorized as oppressed or oppressors based on their race and sex.

The second set of requested materials concern the Black Lives Matter Week of Action In School that was announced in a district-wide email of February 1, 2024. Black Lives Matter Week of Action In School is an overtly political organization rooted in a left-wing identitarian ideology. In its Guide For Black Lives Matter at School 2024,³ the group states in a section labeled “Our Foundation” that “our collective is guided by core principles that are grounded in a Black Feminist framework.” It describes its “political views that have brought us together” as including “deep revolutionary transformational politics,” “opposition to neo-liberalism,” and “Black queer feminist anticapitalist politics.”

As discussed above, we believe schools should focus on academics, foster independent thought, and remain politically neutral. It is inappropriate for this District to serve as a venue to promote specific political causes and ideologies. Moreover, there are many other causes that people feel passionately about that are not the subject of such initiatives. In singling out this one political cause for promotion, the District opens itself to accusations of viewpoint discrimination. (Would the District be open to weeks in action to promote Zionism, Palestinian liberation, free speech, abortion rights, border control, saving unborn children, or Second Amendment gun rights?)

In addition, the Action Week Curriculum includes elements that are based on ideological viewpoints with which reasonable minds can and do disagree, and many of which are objectively discriminatory. According to examples collected by FAIR,⁴ the goal of one lesson meant for pre-kindergarten-age children is that: “students will: understand that our country has a racist history that is grounded in white privilege; be an activist and be actively anti-racist.” Another lesson for elementary-

³ <https://www.blacklivesmatteratschool.com/guideforblmas.html>

⁴ <https://www.fairforall.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Black-Lives-Matter-@-School-Examples.pdf>



age students on “Intergenerational, Black families and Black Villages” teaches: “Another way whiteness/ white supremacy shows up in the United States is in the idea of the nuclear family.” A popular lesson plan on being “Unapologetically Black” asks 5th grade students to consider whether because “of the overt and subliminal messages about Black people being bad, ugly, and inferior to White people, Black people feel pressure to assimilate, or throw away their culture in order to become more like White people in the hopes to be more accepted by society.” These lessons rely on crude racial generalizations that could be viewed as creating a hostile environment for students of all races, and that leave little room for individuality and humanity.

The Week in Action Curriculum also includes political content that goes beyond race. On October 17, 2023, BLM@School⁵ released a statement that it “wants to be clear in our recognition that this unfolding loss of Palestinian and Israeli lives is the direct result of decades of Israeli settler colonialism, land dispossession, occupation, blockade, apartheid, and attempted genocide of millions of Palestinians.” Many people—Jewish and otherwise—would strongly disagree with this statement. The same materials provide references to “Resources” titled “Decolonize Palestine,” “Black and Palestinian Solidarity Resources,” and “What Preceded the Killings in Israel and Gaza Was Not ‘Peace’—It Was Apartheid.” The 2024 Guide also includes the assertion that “we live in a society that is patriarchal, that means our systems and government are controlled by men. In the same way that the systems and the government are controlled by White people and racism being a result of it, so is it with men controlling systems and government and messages about women being dumb, weak, and inferior being a result.” It further claims to be “Trans Affirming” and to “do the work required to dismantle cisgender privilege.”

Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools expressly acknowledges in its 2024 Guide that “[m]any items that teachers include in their curriculum are considered to be controversial.” As such, to the extent such content is included in the curriculum, this District’s policies require teachers to “provide relevant information on both sides of the question” and present “a variety of resources that reflect divergent truths/views.”⁶ If the District intends to use Week of Action material in the classroom (which it should not), FAIR Montclair would be happy to

⁵ <https://www.blacklivesmatteratschool.com/teachingpalestine.html>

⁶ District Policy 2240 – Controversial Issues



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provide materials that would enable teachers to make a balanced presentation and comply with this policy.

The specific records requested are: (i) with respect to the MFEE grant referenced above, the grant application, and materials created to implement the grant; and (ii) all curricular materials used in connection with Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools. The records may be sent to the email address montclair@fairforall.org or we would be happy to pick them up. We are more than willing to work with the District to minimize the burden of complying with this request. To that end, please note that these requests are not intended to call for email communications except to the extent such materials can be obtained only via production of email. Nothing in these requests should be interpreted so as to call for the production of individual student work or material that contains personally identifying information of any student. The request does include curriculum, syllabi, reading lists, lesson plans and other materials related to student instruction.

Sincerely,

The Foundation Against Intolerance & Racism
Montclair Chapter