

Dear Mercer Island Families,

Recent Executive Orders coming out of the White House from President Trump and his administration regarding education created confusion and uncertainty for Washington's schools, including Mercer Island School District. On Friday, January 24, I sent a portion of this message to our entire staff hoping to help provide clarity about our roles and responsibilities to support students regardless of their citizenship, nationality, or immigration status. These Executive Orders give me cause to draft this communication and expand the audience to our families, students, and community as well.

In a world of soundbites and headlines I am reminded that people want brevity. However, the topics in this letter to you need context and explanations. Even if not all at one sitting, I hope you can give this a complete read.

As a young student at the University of Puget Sound, I focused my studies on U.S. and Latin American history. Admittedly, I am an unpracticed and amateur historian, but I do know enough to recognize Federalism at work. As a quick reminder, Federalism is a government structure whereby some powers are held at the federal level (national government) and others at the state level. In the Federalist Papers, James Madison wrote, "The powers" granted by the Constitution to "the federal government are few and defined," while those granted to "the State governments are numerous and indefinite." Though far more contributed, Federalism was at the heart of The Civil War, perhaps the most obvious challenge to the balance of state and federal rights in American history.

The struggle for power between states' and federal rights over the past eight years has never been more evident during my lifetime. All three branches of government are vying for authority. We even see this between the 295 school districts in Washington and The Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI); we refer to this as state vs. local control. Individual school districts find themselves caught up in these ideological confluences with social, political, legal, and financial consequences in the balance. As people turn to leaders and to me for direction, let me go back to our why as a starting point.

Our Board of Directors hold four core values: Supporting the whole child, providing rigorous and challenging learning, creating inclusive and equitable learning settings, and ensuring our school communities are safe and supportive. The values are further articulated in the Mercer Island School District's policies, procedures, and practices. None of the four values stand above the others nor do they apply to some students but not others. All students are the priority.

When I started as Superintendent three years ago, I challenged us to actualize these values using the work of Dr. Tammy Campbell and her 4B's:

- Broadcast student voice.
- Believe in every student and make sure they believe in themselves.
- Remove Barriers in the way of our students' potential.
- Make sure every student feels a deep sense of Belonging in their schools.

We have made progress but also recognize we have a long way to go toward realizing the 4B's. I want to be clear with our community that we will remain steadfast in our commitment to our values because at the heart of them is the education we want for our students and expect of ourselves to provide regardless of race, religion, national origin, immigration status, gender identity, or sexual orientation.

A value neither espoused explicitly by our District nor in the 4B's but inextricably tied to them is dignity. One of the leading researchers and scholars on dignity, [Donna Hicks](#), helps us understand dignity:

- Dignity is our inherent value and worth as human beings; everyone is born with it;
- Whereas we can gain and lose respect, dignity is neither gained nor lost;
- Dignity is the glue that holds all of our relationships together... it is the mutual recognition of the desire to be seen, heard, listened to, and treated fairly; to be recognized, understood, and to feel safe in the world.

Just after winter break, I had the opportunity to attend a local conference with several of our students and Board members. Like conferences you may have attended, some sessions and speakers were better than others. However, it was the keynote delivered by Tami Pyfer that both resonated and stuck with me.

Education Policy Advisor to former Utah Governor [Gary Herbert](#) and current Chief of Staff and VP of External Affairs for [UNITE](#), Pyfer provided perspective on both education and why we are constantly at odds with one another in our communities today. She co-created [The Dignity Index](#), a tool designed to evaluate how we communicate along an eight-point continuum from contempt to dignity. In her keynote talk several points stood out and are worth sharing with our community:

- The way we think we are coming across may not be how others see us.
- We are winning fights and losing each other/our country.
- People need to disagree as part of a healthy democracy but we lack the skills for dignified disagreement.
- Healthy conflict demands that we move from abandoning contempt for others and embracing the dignity in others.

These may seem obvious, but at the national, state, and certainly local level, our conflict skills have atrophied. I challenge us all to step back and reflect on the way we communicate with one another—in person and most certainly online. *How* we are communicating is overshadowing the importance of *what* we are trying to discuss in the first place to make our schools and community great.

An underpinning of dignity is belonging. When students, staff, parents, and our neighbors feel seen, heard, and valued—when their dignity is affirmed—they experience true belonging. In their book, [Belonging Through a Culture of Dignity](#), John Krownapple and Floyd Cobb contend belonging is not simply a feeling but a result of intentional actions that honor the dignity of all. Here in MISD, mutual respect and making space for our differences should not be aspirational in our classrooms and community but rather the expectation.

In the previously referenced eight point Dignity Index, levels 1-4 are variations of contempt and 5-8 dignity. I expect the bare minimum, the floor if you will, in our classrooms to be level 5 and anything lower is unacceptable.

- Level 4- We're better than those people. They don't really belong. They're not one of us.
- Level 5- The other side has a right to be here and a right to be heard. They belong here too.

So long as our values are not jeopardized, differing political, social, cultural, religious, and ideological beliefs will be lifted up in our classrooms and supported by a dignified foundation. Yes, even ones that may not be consistent with the opinions of the majority or on varying sides of the political spectrum.

I would like to address two of the President's Executive Orders that have members of our community concerned or confused. They further illustrate where our national and state rights, laws, and powers are colliding.

Presidential Executive Order- Protecting the American People Against Invasion

[OSPI's Protections for Immigrant Students in Washington Schools](#) provides a comprehensive roadmap for the rights students have to an education and responsibilities we have to ensure that education happens. I encourage people to read this in full, but I draw your attention to the section titled, Immigration Enforcement on School Campuses:

Washington public schools initiating engagement with federal immigration authorities for the purpose of sharing student information is inconsistent with state and federal constitutional mandates to serve every student. The Attorney General's model policies direct that school district policies prohibit participation or aid immigration enforcement with regard to enforcement activity against students and their families, staff, and volunteers.

If anyone attempts to engage in immigration enforcement on or near school grounds, school staff shall immediately alert and direct the person to the school principal or authorized designee. School staff shall request that any person desiring to communicate with a student, enter school grounds, or conduct an arrest first produce a valid court order or judicial warrant. The principal will forward the request to the superintendent or designee who shall review the court order or judicial warrant for signature by a judge and validity. Additionally, schools shall not permit access to information, records, or areas beyond that specified in the court order, judicial warrant, or other legal requirement.

As such, I have directed our MISD school staff to contact a school administrator should anyone wish to communicate with a student (other than a parent or guardian), enter the school (other than volunteers, families, and approved vendors), or conduct an arrest. This is not any different than our normal practice. The principal will ask anyone other than those who would normally enter our schools to produce a valid court order or judicial warrant. The principal will forward the request to myself and/or Erin Battersby, Executive Director of Compliance, Legal Affairs, & Human Resources, who shall review the court order or judicial warrant for signature by a judge and validity. Additionally, schools will not permit access to information, records, or areas beyond that specified in the court order, judicial warrant, or other legal requirement.

Our registrars and front office teams do an exemplary job enrolling students in our school district. The students in our schools belong here and will not be discriminated against on the basis of their identity or immigration and citizenship status.

Presidential Executive Order- Ending Radical Indoctrination in K-12 Schools

Like the aforementioned Executive Order, this too will put our state's laws and local policies at odds with a Federal order.

Within 90 days, this Order directs the Secretary of Education to develop a strategy that targets the gender and equity inclusiveness laws and policies that currently exist in our state and school district. It is anticipated the U.S. Department of Education will use the possibility of withholding federal dollars to push for compliance unless states and districts comply with the Order. The Order, however, is in direct conflict with Washington State law and our very own district policies, procedures, and values.

From a financial standpoint, the formula for our largest Federal grant (Special Education) is formula driven by Congress, so it is unclear if this is even within the scope of the Department of Education.

At this point, I am concerned with the uncertainty and fear this is creating for many of our students, especially when coupled with the recent rollback of the [Title IX interpretations to 2020](#). Again, I want to root us back in our values. In order for all of our students to realize the benefit of an academically challenging and rigorous environment, they must also feel safe, supported, and included. They must belong. With our state laws and district policies in mind, we will stay the course and ensure our schools are safe places for all students irrespective of how they identify and who they are as individuals.

Belonging is a multidimensional construct, but at its core it is rooted in safety, security, and acceptance. It is our responsibility as educators to create this space for our students, and we should model the same across our Mercer Island community. Educational excellence is achieved by creating the conditions consistent with our values- whole-child focus, safe and secure environments, rigorous and challenging learning, and inclusive schools.

The Federalist fracas will continue for months and years ahead. The best antidote to the chaos and confusion is to remember our values, uphold the dignity of our neighbors, and work together on behalf of the 4,000 students who need us united more than ever.

Amidst all of the challenges that January seemed to bring, I still look toward February with hope. We have exciting opportunities to celebrate our students and community in February.

Black History Month

Black History Month is a time to celebrate the rich history, culture, and contributions of Black and African American individuals who have shaped our nation. In the Mercer Island School District, we embrace this opportunity to highlight the voices and achievements of Black Americans—past and present—through education, reflection, and community engagement. By fostering inclusivity and deepening historical understanding, we honor their impact not only in February but throughout the year.

National School Counselor Week- February 3-7

National School Counseling Week is a time to recognize the vital role school counselors play in supporting students' academic, social, and emotional growth. In the Mercer Island School District, we celebrate their dedication to fostering a positive school environment, guiding students toward success, and helping them navigate challenges. This week, we express our gratitude for their impact on our schools and their commitment to empowering every student to thrive.

This is a great opportunity to remind the community and extend an invitation on behalf of the Mercer Island Youth and Family Services Foundation to the annual [*Giving From the Heart Breakfast*](#). Money raised at this fundraising event goes directly to supporting the MIYFS school-based counselors. Without the community's support, we would not have such a rich, supportive mental health model that is unique to only Mercer Island.

Presidents' Day- February 17

Presidents' Day kicks off our mid-winter break and is an opportunity to reflect on the leadership and legacy of those who have shaped our nation. By learning from the past, we empower students to become thoughtful leaders and active participants in our democracy. The discussion around Federalism is a timely way to contextualize the role of the U.S. Presidency.

Ramadan- February 28 to March 29

Ramadan will commence at the very end of the month and extend through most of March. Ramadan is a time of reflection, fasting, and community for Muslims around the world. We recognize and honor this important month by fostering understanding and inclusivity in our schools as well as throughout the Mercer Island community. By learning about Ramadan and supporting our Muslim students, staff, and families, we strengthen our commitment to a welcoming and respectful community for all.

Rare Disease Day-February 28

Rare Disease Day is a global initiative to raise awareness about rare diseases and their impact on individuals, families, and communities. With over 300 million people worldwide affected by rare diseases, this day highlights the need for research, advocacy, and equitable access to diagnosis and treatment. Our community may or may not know that we have students and families impacted by their rare diseases. We are committed to seeing and lifting up these students each day, but February 28 is a way we can wrap around them with even greater intentionality. The zebra, a symbol of rare diseases, represents uniqueness—wearing stripes or the official Rare Disease Day colors (pink, blue, green, and purple) can show support.

I was able to catch the MIHS Drama production of Puffs this past weekend. It was great. I can see why eight drama students recently won Thespy awards. The IMS Mathcounts team won a competition this past weekend. The students and staff of the MIHS creative arts magazine Pegasus will be receiving recognition for their 2023-24 issue. There are so many great things our students are accomplishing, creating, and learning. We have so much to look forward to in February, even with the contentiousness at the state and federal level swirling.

Sincerely,

Fred Rundle