

BLACK LIVES MATTER

AT SCHOOL WEEK OF ACTION

FEBRUARY 1-5, 2021



Summary

Prepared for the House Oversight Committee
March 9, 2021

Ames Community School District **Commits to Equity and Access**
that Empowers Every Individual to Reach Their Full Personal and
Educational Potential

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Timeline

Below is a broad timeline of notable events that demonstrate the Ames Community School District's commitment to *equity and access* and critical consciousness training. In addition to direct parent communication, website and social media posts, much of the below content was shared in the District's *Amazing Magazine*, which has a quarterly circulation of 12,000 copies. Links are provided to illustrate how the District communicated publicly on this topic.

2017

- The racial disparity gap in Ames public schools is [publicly acknowledged by the school district](#).
- Ames Community School District officially enters into a three-year commitment with Dr. Daniel Spikes and Dr. Katy Swalwell for Critical Consciousness training for staff.

2018

- [Critical Consciousness: Year Two](#). Expanded staff participation.
- Over 50 Ames staff attended Summit and School Culture and Climate conference (August).
- Guest speaker Paul Gorski addresses teachers at kick-off breakfast (August).

2019

- [Director of Equity hired](#).
- [Equity audit](#) for Ames High and Ames Middle School conducted.
- *Amazing Education Podcast* with Dr. Katy Swalwell on Critical Consciousness. [Part I](#). [Part II](#).
- Building Capacity Teams formed

2020

- Critical Consciousness: Year Three. Over 150 staff members participated in monthly professional development.
- Building-level teams. An example includes Ames High staff participating in implicit bias training.
- Weekly administrative meetings start with equity learning.
- Critical Consciousness class at Ames Middle School.

2021

- Critical Consciousness Family Learning Series.
- LGBTQ+ professional development training.
- *Amazing Education Podcast* with Dr. Anthony Jones on racial inequity. [Part I](#). [Part II](#).
- Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action

Purpose of Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action

Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action is a tangible extension of the equity and critical consciousness work that has already taken place in the District.

Black Lives Matter (BLM) at School Week of Action is our district's effort to answer questions such as,

1. How is the social-emotional well-being of all of our students?
2. In what ways do our schools' instructional practices disregard the histories of our students and prevent them from bringing their whole selves into the learning environment?
3. How are the voices, accomplishments, and successes of Black people uplifted in our classroom lessons, units, and curriculum?

BLM at School provided us with the opportunity during Black History Month to hold true to our purpose statement which states that the *Ames Community School District commits to equity and access that empowers every individual to reach their full personal and educational potential.*

We believe that our students deserve safe, affirming environments where they know that their lives matter and what they are interested in learning matters too. The BLM at School Week of Action provided us with the structure and language to create a context where our students could be inspired, find themselves in the classroom materials, and engage in deep learning.

Data-Informed Decision

The decision to commit to equity and access is based on data. Below are local and national examples that equity work is needed to ensure that our students are successful.

Graduation Rate - Black Students (Ames)

(Source: Educatelowa.gov)

- In 2012, the graduation rate for Black students was 60%.
- In 2013, the graduation rate for Black students was 53%.
- In 2014, the graduation rate for Black students was 88%
- In 2015, the graduation rate for Black students was 70%.
- In 2016, the graduation rate for Black students was 95%
- In 2017, the graduation rate for Black students was 90%
- In 2018, the graduation rate for Black students was 95%.
- In 2019, the graduation rate for Black students was 88%.

Iowa Performance Profile

- In 2018,
 - The State proficiency rate for Black students in Reading was 49.5%.
 - Ames proficiency rate for Black students in Reading was 66.8%.
 - The State proficiency rate for Black students in Math was 46.6%.
 - Ames proficiency rate for Black students in Math was 60.9%.
- In 2019,
 - The State proficiency rate for Black students in Reading was 40.27%.
 - Ames proficiency rate for Black students in Reading was 45.64%.
 - The State proficiency rate for Black students in Math was 39%.
 - Ames proficiency rate for Black students in Math was 44%.
- In 2020 - State and local proficiency rates for Black students were NA due to COVID.

Equity Audit - Ames CSD (2019)

The three-year equity-focused critical consciousness professional development resulted in a series of equity audits. In December 2019, the results of the Ames High School and Ames Middle School audits were released to the public. This series of external equity audits for the 2018-2019 school year revealed concerning outcomes for many students of color (and students from other historically marginalized groups) in regard to discipline, extracurricular participation, and participation in advanced placement or lower tracked courses. Here are key findings:

- *Discipline* - Students of color experienced disproportionate disciplinary outcomes compared to their white peers. The suspension rate for Black students was four times higher than their white peers at Ames High School.
- *Extracurriculars* - Overall, white students had disproportionately higher participation rates across more extracurricular activities than almost all of their peers of color (particularly Black and Latinx students) at both Ames High School and Ames Middle School.
- *Academic Tracking* - “Lower” track courses were more likely to have disproportionately high rates of Black and Latinx enrollment while “higher” tracks were more likely to have disproportionately high rates of white and Asian students at both Ames High School and Ames Middle School. Black students had disproportionately low rates in AP-level courses and were less likely to be in “accelerated” courses with their white and Asian peers.

Panorama Culture and Climate Survey (2020) - Ames CSD

- Only 14% of our 6-12 grade students responded favorably to the question, “How often do students at your school have important conversations about race, even when they might be uncomfortable?”
- Only 24% of 6-12 grade students responded favorably to the question, “When there are major news events related to race, how often do adults at your school talk about them with students?”

The Trevor Project’s 2020 National Survey on LGBTQ Youth Mental Health Key Findings

This survey represents the experiences of over 40,000 LGBTQ youth ages 13-24 across the United States and is the largest survey of LGBTQ youth mental health ever conducted.

- 40% of LGBTQ respondents seriously considered attempting suicide in the past twelve months, with more than half of transgender and nonbinary youth having seriously considered suicide.
- 68% of LGBTQ youth reported symptoms of generalized anxiety disorder in the past two weeks, including more than 3 in 4 transgender and nonbinary youth.
- 48% of LGBTQ youth reported engaging in self-harm in the past twelve months, including over 60% of transgender and nonbinary youth.
- 1 in 3 LGBTQ youth reported that they had been physically threatened or harmed in their lifetime due to their LGBTQ identity.

LGBTQ+

- In perhaps one of the most methodologically-rigorous studies, Balsam, Rothblum, and Beauchaine (2005) surveyed LGB adults and their siblings and found that LGB participants reported 3-5 times the rate of suicidal attempts before age 18 compared to their siblings.
- Black LGB youth were more likely than their White heterosexual counterparts to report suicidal thoughts (Mueller et al.).

Emergency Taskforce on Black Youth Suicide and Mental Health (a Report to Congress)

- As of 2018, suicide became the second leading cause of death in Black children aged 10-14, and the third leading cause of death in Black adolescents aged 15-19.
- Over the past decade, increases in the suicide death rate for Black youth have seen the rate rising from 2.55 per 100,000 in 2007 to 4.82 per 100,000 in 2017.
- Black youth under 13 years are twice as likely to die by suicide and when comparing by sex, Black males, 5 to 11 years, are more likely to die by suicide compared to their White peers.
- The suicide death rate among Black youth has been found to be increasing faster than any other racial/ethnic group.

Iowa State Codes

Iowa Department of Education [Nondiscrimination Statement](#)

It is the policy of the Iowa Department of Education not to discriminate on the basis of race, creed, color, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, sex, disability, religion, age, political party affiliation, or actual or potential parental, family or marital status in its programs, activities, or employment practices as required by the Iowa Code sections 216.9 and 256.10(2), Titles VI and VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (42 U.S.C. § 2000d and 2000e), the Equal Pay Act of 1973 (29 U.S.C. § 206, et seq.), Title IX (Educational Amendments, 20 U.S.C. §§ 1681 – 1688), Section 504 (Rehabilitation Act of 1973, 29 U.S.C. § 794), and the Americans with Disabilities Act (42 U.S.C. § 12101, et seq.).

Iowa Code [280.28 Harassment and bullying prohibited--policy--immunity](#)

Purpose--The state of Iowa is committed to providing all students with a safe and civil school environment in which all members of the school community are treated with dignity and respect. The general assembly finds that a safe and civil school environment is necessary for students to learn and achieve at high academic levels. Harassing and bullying behavior can seriously disrupt the ability of school employees to maintain a safe and civil environment, and the ability of students to learn and succeed. Therefore, it is the policy of the state of Iowa that school employees, volunteers, and students in Iowa schools shall not engage in harassing or bullying behavior.

Iowa Code [280.3 Educational Program](#)

The minimum educational program shall be the curriculum set forth in subsection 3 of this section and section 256.11, except as otherwise provided by law. The board of directors of a public school district shall not allow discrimination in any educational program on the basis of race, color, creed, sex, marital status, or place of national origin.

Iowa Code [256.11. Educational standards](#)

The state board shall adopt rules under chapter 17A and a procedure for accrediting all public and nonpublic schools in Iowa offering instruction at any or all levels from the prekindergarten level through grade twelve. The rules of the state board shall require that a multicultural, gender-fair approach is used by schools and school districts. The educational program shall be taught from a multicultural, gender-fair approach.

Iowa Administrative Code [281 \(12\).1. General standard to be accredited](#)

Each school district shall take affirmative steps to integrate students in attendance centers and courses. Schools and school districts shall collect and annually review district, attendance center, and course enrollment data on the basis of race, national origin, gender, and disability. Equal opportunity in programs shall be provided to all students regardless of race, color, national origin, gender, sexual orientation as defined by Iowa Code section 216.2.

Iowa Code [216.9. Unfair or discriminatory practices — education](#)

It is an unfair or discriminatory practice for any educational institution to discriminate on the basis of race, creed, color, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, national origin, religion, or disability in any program or activity.

Governor's Office / Department of Education Guidance on Equity

The Ames Community School District's commitment to *equity and access* aligns with the work and guidance of the Governor's Office and the Iowa Department of Education.

[The Annual Governor's Conference on LGBTQ Youth](#)

This year's conference includes engaging workshops on topics that impact LGBTQ youth ranging from bullying to drag 101. It also includes a panel for parents, keynote speakers, and networking opportunities.

[The Iowa Department of Education Social Justice and Equity in Education Series](#)

Below are titles of webinars offered from the Iowa Department of Education and the corresponding principles they align with from the Black Lives Matter at School program.

- ["Let's talk about Justice"](#) - Restorative Justice, Loving engagement, Globalism
- ["It's Okay to be Uncomfortable: Moving Toward Racial Equity in Education in Iowa"](#) - Diversity, Empathy, Collective Value
- ["Brown Faces in the Classroom"](#) - Diversity, Loving Engagement, Unapologetically Black, Collective Value, Black Women
- ["Inclusive Schools and Communities for Queer Youth"](#) - Queer Affirming, Collective Value
- ["Know Your Rights: Supporting Trans Students"](#) - Trans Affirming, Collective Value
- [Numbers Don't Speak for Themselves: Interpreting and Critiquing Data from a Social Justice Lens](#) - Globalism, Restorative Justice, Loving Engagement
- [Youth Voice, Education, and What Actually Works](#) - Intergenerational
- [Creating Restorative Schools and Classrooms](#) - Restorative Justice, Globalism, Loving Engagement
- [Viewing Homeless Education through an Equity Lens](#) - Diversity, Black Villages, Collective Value

[Iowa Department of Education Equity Review Process](#)

Both federal and state laws require that there be no discrimination in educational programs or in school hiring practices on the basis of race, national origin, color, religion, creed, gender, disability, age, sexual orientation, gender identity, and marital status.

[Iowa Department of Education state board equity committee.](#) ([November 9th, 2020 meeting notes](#))

Dr. Lebo press release. [Equity: It's past time to ensure all students can succeed:](#)

Thursday, October 1, 2020

- "Every student deserves an equal opportunity to be successful in the classroom regardless of their circumstances."
- "The benefits of inclusive and equitable classrooms are many: improved academic achievement, positive effects on social-emotional-behavioral health, feeling connected and having compassion toward others are well documented."
- "...it is so important that we work to ensure that our schools are places where differences are welcomed, different perspectives are respectfully heard, and where every individual feels a sense of belonging, inclusion, and contribution."
- "This is an opportunity for our educational community to challenge our mindsets and teaching styles to ensure equity is woven throughout our education system."
- "Doing the right thing means not only listening and respecting everyone's voice but also looking at ourselves and the roles our biases have contributed to inequities in our educational system. Acknowledging that barriers exist in our schools is necessary in order to break them down and set our students up for success."

Iowa School Districts

A number of other school districts across Iowa have begun work in equity. Although not an all-inclusive list, here are some notable Districts:

- Des Moines School District
- [Cedar Rapids - Anti-Racism Initiatives](#)
- Ankeny - hiring of a Director of Equity
- West Des Moines
- Waterloo - Equity professional learning, African-American history courses.
- Storm Lake
- Pleasant Valley - high school diversity committee
- Clear Creek Amana
- [Mount Vernon](#) - projects related to equality, social justice, implicit bias
- Holy Family Catholic Schools (Dubuque) - diversity, equity, and inclusion climate study.

Iowa Association of School Boards (IASB) Equity Task Force

The goal of the task force is for board members who are working in districts that are leading on equity to help the IASB learn how to help other boards begin and manage equity work. The task force is answering questions posed by the IASB such as “What initiated your district’s focus on equity?”, “What have been the successes?”, “What have been the challenges?” **Districts involved include Ames, Danville, Denison, Iowa City, Sioux City, Storm Lake, West Des Moines, and Western Dubuque.**

BLM Week District Communication / News Coverage

Leading into the week, family and community District-level communication are outlined and linked below. Individual schools also sent building-level communication with examples of how the week will unfold.

District Communication

- School Board Work Session Data update (December 7, 2020)
- All Staff [Equity Newsletter](#) (January 1, 2021)
- School Board Work Session Equity Plan Response to Data (January 11, 2021)
- [Website / Parent Communication / Social Media](#) (January 22, 2021)
- [School Board Presentation](#) (January 25, 2021)
- [Amazing Education Podcast](#) (Post-event - February 11, 2021)
- [BLM 13 Principles Explained](#) video (Post-event - February 19, 2021)

Based on our District communication, we generated a lot of traffic on the District social media and received several media requests to talk about the week. We value being responsive and collaborative to the media. Outlined and linked below are articles from local news outlets leading up to the week.

Local News Coverage

January 27, 2021

- [KCCI Des Moines w/ video](#)
- [Ames Tribune](#)
- [Channel 5 Des Moines w/ video](#)

January 31, 2021

- [Ames Tribune](#)

February 1, 2021

- [WHO-TV Channel 13 Des Moines w/ video](#)

February 3, 2021

- [KHOI Radio](#)

February 10, 2021 (post-event)

- [KHOI Radio](#)

February 25, 2021 (post-event)

- [WHO-TV Channel 13 Des Moines w/ video](#)

Teacher Entry Level

The Equity Department created a “sliding scale of entry” into this work for our staff. Teachers had the freedom to choose the lane from which they would enter. This allowed our staff to embed this learning into their lessons and days throughout the week at a level that they were comfortable with and also allowed for all students to learn about the 13 guiding principles.

Novice	Emerging	Experienced
<p>If hearing the phrase Black Lives Matter makes you uncomfortable</p> <p>OR</p> <p>You have not begun learning about different systems of oppression.</p>	<p>If you have begun learning about systems of oppression and the guiding principles of Black Lives Matter at School</p> <p>BUT</p> <p>you have NOT engaged in conversations around these topics in your classroom(s).</p>	<p>If you have begun learning about systems of oppression and the guiding principles of Black Lives Matter at School</p> <p>AND</p> <p>you have engaged in conversations around these topics in your classroom(s).</p>
Action Steps		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> BEFORE planning or implementing, read this: Ending Curriculum Violence Fill out this google form to receive daily emails during the week of action to further your own personal learning around the BLM movement, race, racism, and other forms of oppression. Reach out to your building equity team, Learning Leads, or the district equity department for a coaching session on planning and/or delivering your BLM at School lessons. Co-teaching these lessons is also encouraged. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> BEFORE planning or implementing, read this: Ending Curriculum Violence Set up your classroom environment. Here are some resources you could use to do this. Reach out to your building equity team, Learning Leads, or the district equity team to support you in planning your BLM at School Lessons. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> BEFORE planning or implementing, read this: Ending Curriculum Violence Look over the linked resources and begin planning your week of action. Reach out to your building equity team, Learning Leads, or the district equity team if you would like support with your lessons.
<p>Resources</p>		

Classroom Lesson Examples

Elementary

Preschool/Kindergarten



Students were introduced to the Intergenerational principle using kid-friendly language: "It's important that we have spaces where people of different ages can come together and learn from each other." Students then engaged with a read-aloud story either from their teacher or from a recording. An example of a book read in one classroom was *A Chair for My Mother* by Vera B. Williams. Students were then given a family survey to complete at home and bring back to school and share with their class in the upcoming days.

1st/2nd

One teacher began by sharing the Diversity and Globalism principle posters with their class. The teacher shared what both of those principles meant and the class watched a video of a read-aloud of the book *Just Ask* by Sonya Sotomayor. This teacher used two guiding questions for class discussion; "What are some ways you are different from your friends?" and "What do you hope for other children and families around the world?"

3rd/4th/5th

Several teachers worked together to create a slideshow for the BLM at School Week of Action. One slide would share the guiding principle, its definition, and some guiding questions for a class discussion. Then the students would consider a statement or comment while they listened to a read-aloud. In the example pictured below, students were talking about the Collective Value principle and listened to the book *Pink is for Boys* by Robb Pearlman.

<p><u>Day 3: Collective Value</u></p> <p>All Black lives, regardless of actual or perceived sexual identity, gender identity, gender expression, economic status, ability, disability, religious beliefs or disbeliefs, immigration status or location, matter.</p> <p><u>Essential and Guiding Questions:</u></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Who are some of the people you love?2. How do you feel when someone tells you 'what boys should do' or 'what girls should do'?3. What are some things you can do to help your classmates feel appreciated and safe?  <p>"Everybody is important, and has the right to be safe and happy, no matter what they believe, where they are from, or who they love. Another way to say that is collective value."</p>	<p><u>Pink is for Boys</u> by Robb Pearlman</p> <p>How is this message true: Life is not color-coded?</p> 
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Middle School

6th/7th/8th

At the middle school, staff utilized their homeroom time to teach the 13 guiding principles during the first week of February. Teachers were given videos and discussion questions to use during this time. On Friday of that week, students learned about two of the thirteen guiding principles; Black Women and Unapologetically Black. Students then watched a video titled *Black is Beautiful* and either completed a written reflection or participated in a class discussion. Below is an image of the document that was shared with staff. You'll notice the different entry levels for the teachers across the top. Each of the videos for that day were the same for each group of teachers. The difference was the discussion format and questions for discussion or reflection.

Ames Middle School Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action 2021

	Novice	Emerging	Experienced
Day 5: February 8th Black Women and Unapologetically Black	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Play video 2. Students independently write reflections*. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Play video OR go through slides with your class. 2. Discuss questions 1 & 4. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Play video OR go through slides with your class. 2. Discuss all questions.

High school

9th/10th/11th/12th

Science

This science teacher asked their students “How do you describe a chemist? What do they do? How do they dress? What language do they speak? Who do they talk to? How do they share information?” The teacher then went on to share demographic data and discussed what representation and underrepresentation means. They also discussed Dimitri Mendeleev and his work to create the Periodic Law. Students were asked to reflect on why diversity matters.

Math

“For my Financial Algebra students, I used resources from the *Racism in Finance* course I took last summer with links to the wealth gap and how that has remained unchanged.”

English Language Arts

“This week, my Advanced Creative Writing students are listening to and responding to lyric poetry by Black Teen Poets from across the country as we prepare to write our own lyric poems.”

Art

“In 3D Art, we had students choose an artist from a padlet of Black Artists. They researched artists using the links we provided, reflected on their impression of the artwork, the materials it’s made of, why they like it, interesting facts they learned about the artist, and shared pictures of the artwork. Later, students presented what they learned via their slide.”

Music

“Our weekly composer of the week was Scott Joplin. We watched a video about Scott Joplin, read more information about him through a PowerPoint presentation, and then completed a short quiz.”

Social Studies

On Wednesday, one teacher shared a video that explains sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. After the video, there was a class discussion about all lives matter statements and if people should use inclusive language when they speak, and why or why not it makes a difference.

Here is a link to the [Google Drive Folder](#) of ACSD Example Lessons that was posted to our website.

Teacher / Parent Feedback:

Teacher Survey (February 5 - 18)

- 174 responses (of 399 total teachers)
- 95% of ACSD teachers participated in Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action, with 5% “opting out.”
- The “sliding scale of entry” was utilized district-wide, with teachers utilizing the resources as follows:
 - Novice: 21%
 - Emerging: 53%
 - Experienced: 26%
- Responses to the teacher survey trended positive and supportive toward Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action, though some teachers did respond that they hoped for more time to prepare for future events. Below is a snapshot of some of those comments.
 - *The videos were really engaging for students and all of the material was really eye-opening and very well organized.*
 - *Student interest was high! NO parent push-back and I did communicate what I was covering.*
 - *I had outstandingly open, honest, heartfelt discussions with students, parents, and colleagues. We all learn from each other.*
 - *Students enjoyed discussing intersections of queer and Black identities. Students appreciated being seen in ways they hadn't before.*
 - *Everything went well in class. It saddens me that some parents felt the need to keep their children completely sheltered from this knowledge.*
 - *My students were highly engaged during the lessons. We had good conversations during group times. Students loved the coloring pages and had big plans to bring their books home and finish them at their house. I saw a lot of students who made real-life connections and seemed to really enjoy the lessons.*

School Board Meeting Public Forum (January 25, 2021)

The school board meeting on January 25, 2021, saw an outpouring of support for the Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action. In all, 30 community members shared their views on the week with 27 being supportive of the District. Below is a snapshot of some of those comments.

- *When we send our kids to public school we know we all take risks. But the weight of those risks should not and cannot be heavier on our black, brown, indigenous person of color students or on students and families that identify as gender and sexual minorities. I applaud the school board for doing what is right and what is needed to make sure that all kids are safe at school and by extension, in our community.*
- *When the community that is suffering comes up and says this is something we need, this is something that will help us, this is something that will save lives, I feel like we should listen to that and we should agree that this is important. I fully support the school board in this plan and I hope the rest of the community will do so as well.*
- *Engaging our students and teachers in ending the systemic racism that exists in our schools is essential and Ames teachers are lucky to have the framework to support these conversations in a developmentally appropriate manner. This is necessary work, hard work, and uncomfortable*

work. Every single student that attends the Ames schools and lives in our community, deserves to feel valued.

- As a parent of black children, I don't have the privilege of choosing when to talk to my children about their blackness, both how the world views them and what that might mean for them.
- The time is right for this more than ever.
- If we are a community that values equity and diversity, and frankly all of tonight's speakers have said that we are, then I'm not exactly sure what it says about our community that a curriculum focusing on black joy and affirming the importance of black lives is controversial or somehow inappropriate in our schools.

Elementary Parents / Teachers

- "I don't know why but these pictures made me tear up! I'm so proud to be a part of this school, as an employee and as a parent! You guys rock!" - Edwards parent/employee
- "It has been a great week full of powerful and heartwarming discussion!" - Edwards teacher
- "At first this week felt overwhelming and I was worried about my ability to teach it "correctly". Listening and watching my students this week has been simply amazing! I'm excited at the idea of teaching this curriculum every year!" - Edwards teacher
- "The poetry of Amanda Gorman especially resonated with my students. Here are some of their comments responding to: "What does Amanda Gorman's poetry make you think about?"
 - that we treat people with different skin color terrible
 - about how courage, kindness, and black lives matter
 - how bad the world is to others who are different
 - Amanda's poems make me think about happy things, serious things, sad things
 - that we must speak up about race in our country
 - it reminds me of courage and strength
 - it makes me think that there is a way to do better

Community Members / Parents (unsolicited emails of support)

- I am so proud of ACSD to take a role in promoting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion by hosting "Black Lives Matter Week"! I have been so impressed with many learning activities that my children's teachers have shared related to Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion this year! If integrating "Black Lives Matter Week" into the curriculum has raised questions or concerns, I urge the ACSD Superintendent, administrators, and counselor leaders to utilize this as another opportunity for important community education and outreach. - Alison, parent
- "I am a former student of the Ames School district from second grade all the way to high school graduation. My parents selected Ames when moving to Iowa because of the reputation for really quality schools. Education has always been central to my family's value system and my career. As a white woman from a middle-class white family in Ames, whose peers were mostly white, I was not often exposed to race and the way our society has systematically oppressed people who are not white. **I am sad to say that my public education did not provide me with the tools to process what little exposure I did have.** While it may be hard to hear the angry retorts of families who cling to their white privilege, please know that as a former student, my needs were not met and I appreciate your commitment as an educator to begin to address the ongoing needs of your students in this area." - Taylor, Ames alum
- "Thank you for implementing the Black Lives Matter Curriculum at Ames Community School District. Please read the attached letter and let me know if there is any support you need from our organization." - Ames Pride Chair
- "I am writing to congratulate you for your courage and leadership this week. My wife and I supported the Black Lives Matter Week of Action plans when we learned about them. We expect leadership and innovation from our schools and are committed to the plans to address our district's troubling inequities. The decision to embrace and celebrate the Black lives in our schools and community and the modeling for our students of that celebration makes me proud of our district. We are not unaware of the critiques and hostility that this decision has

engendered from within the community and beyond. But we want you to know that our family is celebrating this action and this opportunity for our child, our family, our schools, and our community to grow." - Jeremy, Meeker Elementary parent

- "I just wanted to reach out and share how impressed and delighted I am with the black lives matter curriculum going on this week. I was able to overhear both my 5th and 1st-grade students on their at-home lessons today and it just was beautiful and gave me hope for the future. I know so many of the comments are hateful and disgusting. I just wanted to let you know this mom is extremely proud of ACSD and I heard that you were a big proponent of making this happen so I wanted to send you my sincere and deepest thanks." Ruth, parent
- "THANK YOU! From the moment I found out that the ACSD would be having a week focused on BLM Action I was almost gleeful. Having these important conversations at EVERY age is fundamental to our entire community being better. I applaud ALL of the work that went into the curriculum, presentation for the board/public, and for the full support of the board members. Yesterday after preschool I asked our four-year-old if she knew what the word empathy means. Her eyes got HUGE and she exclaimed "How do YOU know about empathy?!" We had a great conversation about feelings that did my heart a lot of good." - Hannah, parent
- "I'd like to add my voice to those thankful for the efforts of the Ames district in implementing Black Lives Matter at School. I understand you're still getting negative pushback about this program and the content shared during the week. As the parent of a trans child who graduated from Ames High, and a cisgender child currently at the high school, I really, really appreciate the work done to support queer and trans youth. To put it bluntly, Ames High School, its faculty, and its warm support **saved my trans child's life.**" - Ames High parent

Emails from Concerned Parents / Community Members

Just as we received communication of support for the program, we did receive those from concerned parents as well. Here are examples of unsolicited emails.

- "I object to your approval of the BLM School Week programs planned for next week. Parents have a right to stand up for their religious freedom. Many educators do not think it is the school's job to instill social values in children. There is wonderful material available that discusses race relations. Why choose something that is hurtful to people of faith? Why use materials that label people who are religious?"
- "Hopefully, you all teach how BLM burned down, killed, and destroyed hard-working Americans' property and businesses. Disgrace to teach 2nd graders the BLM principles. Teach them to your own children. Must stop charging that we are all racists!! Where does that come from, Only the Left!!!"
- "We are very troubled and concerned regarding Friday's email that mentions BLM week being celebrated in our school district. We would like our child excused from whatever BLM activities are being planned the first week in February and expect to be offered a waiver as has been done in the past when something goes against one's religious or political beliefs. Our family's core values and faith do not align with BLM's principles. We simply teach "do unto others as you would have them do unto you" and that has served our family well. We do not teach our children to judge others based on gender or skin color and find this insulting."
- "We are writing to oppose the adoption of the week-long Black Lives Matter at School event. Adding to our frustration is the way that this movement begins with a statement that we do stand behind - black lives matter - and uses it as a mask to cover and push a more heightened agenda with a topic-set unrelated to racial justice."

Student Response

Ames Middle School Student Survey (February 11- 17)

- 183 responses (of 1,130 students).
- 83% of Ames Middle School students responded positively to the question “Do you think we should participate in the BLM at School Week of Action again next year?”
 - 9% responded negatively
 - 8% responded indifferently or unclearly to the question
- Students were asked “Which of the 13 Guiding Principles meant the most to you? (mark all that apply)”, their responses were:
 - Empathy (74% of students)
 - Diversity (57.9% of students)
 - Unapologetically Black (51.4% of students)
 - Black Women (47.5% of students)
 - Loving Engagement (43.2% of students)
 - Black Families (42.6% of students)
 - Restorative Justice (42.1% of students)
 - Transgender Affirming (37.7% of students)
 - Queer Affirming (35.5% of students)
 - Globalism (31.1% of students)
 - Collective value (27.3% of students)
 - Black Villages (25.1% of students)
 - Intergenerational (19.1% of students)
- Responses to the student survey trended positive and supportive toward Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action. Individual responses to the question “Do you think we should participate in the BLM at School Week of Action again next year? Why? What could we change?” will not be shared without the consent of students and parents, but a significant number of students showed enthusiasm for topics pertaining to:
 - Making school more welcoming for all students (named groups: Black students, students of color, queer students, Trans students, nonbinary students).
 - Discussing these topics throughout the school year, rather than for just one week.
 - Including more activities during next year’s BLM at School Week of Action.

Ames High Student Initiatives

- *“School always teaches kids about straights and cisgender people, and never about the people who do not fall in that category. So I figured that school would be a place to teach kids about this. That not everyone is straight and/or cis. I have been creating a slideshow with reasons why schools need to teach about LGBTQ+ science and History and maybe even more. As a trans guy and a Bisexual, I would love to teach others what I know and what I believe. I look forward to sharing my ideas with you and more details about this project.” - Ames High student*
- Student Photography Personal Statement: *This past summer, the Black Lives Matter movement gained a lot of ground. I wanted to capture part of this movement but due to different circumstances, I was never able to attend a march or a rally. So instead, I decided to ask two of my friends, who are black and woman identifying, to do a photo shoot with me. There is an old abandoned building that I knew would be the perfect spot for this. When we got there we were greeted by a few good surprises added to the building. I knew that I wanted to capture both how the sun kisses their skin and also how light is not always shown to them. **With every bad or dark piece of the world, there is always a little bit of good, a little bit of light as well.***



BLM Week of Action Misconceptions

As stated previously, the Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action is a tangible extension of the equity and critical consciousness work that has already taken place in the District. It is a response to data and community feedback and aligns with work supported by the Iowa Department of Education. There are a lot of misconceptions about what this work represents in the Ames Community School District. Below are some examples:

- We are not trying to convince young boys to be girls or vice versa. It is about accepting how people present themselves.
- We do not want to break up families. We want to have conversations that families can look a variety of different ways and be inclusive of all families.
- We are not stifling the opinions of those who disagree. We are encouraging dialogue to better understand and honor everyone.
- It's not about elevating black lives above white lives. It is about equity and that all students deserve a place of safe learning.
- We are encouraging students to demonstrate and practice empathy, not bullying.

Community Letters of Support

The District received an outpouring of support from the community for the Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action. These included emails from parents (previously included) and formal letters of support from community groups and organizations, both religious and secular. We have included samples from Ames United Church of Christ, United Way of Story County, Bethesda Lutheran Church, the NAACP, and the Ames Jewish Congregation. There are many emails and letters of support that we did not include.

Ames United
Church of Christ

Anthony Jones, PhD, Director of Equity
Ames Community School District
2005 24th Street, Ames, IA 50010

February 17, 2021

Dear Dr. Jones,

When I moved to Iowa in 2015, I was gifted a subscription to the magazine "Our Iowa." Each issue featured stories of agriculture, land, and Amish farming. Its images were like those used in national media to evoke the American heartland: White people in corn, white people working together. Not a single person of color to be seen.

Unlike Iowa itself.

Iowa itself has robust and long-established communities of people of Hispanic, Latinx, Burmese, indigenous, and Sudanese origin and/or heritage, among others. Black, Brown, Asian, and Native peoples have been in this state for generations yet remain underrepresented in media and politics, overrepresented in systemic neglect (see Lyz Lenz's recent Washington Post article on Iowa's pandemic management). And as recently as this week, State Representative Ako Abdul-Samad was subjected to racist slurs and threats of violence at an online town hall with constituents.

The Ames Community School District's participation in the Black Lives Matter in School Week of Action is, then, a necessary and long overdue corrective. A corrective to the stereotypes about who is an Iowan, a corrective to the white supremacy which yet clings desperately to that stereotype.

As a Christian priest and member of the Ames community, I applaud the ACSD's commitment to acknowledging the humanity and equality of Black and Brown students, to ensuring that they do not grow up as an audience to the education of White kids but equals among their peers. Iowa has a good history of being on the side of justice, from the Underground Railroad to marriage equality. Let us continue on that path rather than the degrading, violent, dehumanizing ones that have resurfaced during this legislative session.

Please share this letter with anyone who questions the school district's decision. I, and my congregation, stand gladly and insistently by your side.

Thank you for your good and life-saving work,



The Rev. Eileen Gebbie, MA, MDiv
Senior Minister
eileen@amesucc.org
515-231-7774

217 6th Street | Ames, IA 50010 | 515-232-9323 | amesucc.org

United Way of Story County
315 Clark Avenue
Ames, IA 50010
515.268.5142
www.uwstory.org



February 17, 2021

Superintendent Jenny Risner
Ames Community School District
2005 24th Street
Ames, IA 50010

Dear Superintendent Risner,

United Way of Story County fully supports the Ames Community School District's work in bringing equity and inclusion to the forefront of everything they do. Thank you for bringing Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action to the Ames school district in early February. As a society and community we need to empower our students and teach them about Black experience beyond slavery. That is what the Ames schools is working to accomplish. The Black Lives Matters at School Week of Action lifted marginalized voices and explored many other themes important to the social and emotional well-being of all of our students including empathy, diversity, affirmations for our marginalized youth, and cultivating a welcoming learning environment for youth in our community.

Through our partnership within our community's education collaborative, Story County Reads, we are making progress forward in school attendance, summer learning and grade level reading. We know that embracing the human experience helps to ensure inclusion both inside the classroom as well as in our community spaces. We must do this to collectively demonstrate that every student within the Ames schools is welcomed, valued, and safe. Our work focuses on how to support students and help them succeed, which is especially true of youth who are challenged by multiple barriers to learning. Inclusion should not be one of those barriers.

Through this effort we are unraveling the data, looking at it by race and ethnicity whenever possible. It has clearly shown us that we need to do better. We need to do more. We need to be more intentional in identifying where we are falling our children and families of color. This work must begin with all of us being honest about our world, our history, and our institutional practices. If these conversations cannot happen within the walls of our schools then change will not take place.

To reshape institutions in our society, norms and practices it will take generations of effort – as stated in the book, *Is everyone really equal?*, we must begin with our children. We are not working to make this a better community for us to live and thrive, we are doing it for them. They need to have the information, the tools, and the resources to engage in changing our world. It needs to begin now and as a leader in our community, the Ames Community School District is doing just that.

It has not been easy nor without controversy. United Way of Story County is also embarking on this work. In determining what needs are prevalent in our community, we also seek to understand the gaps in delivering services, and ultimately invest in solutions that are changing lives. Our work in health, education, and financial stability is interconnected. Our partnership with the school district is rooted in the common purpose of engaging our youth. We cannot do it alone and neither can the schools. But together we can.

Sincerely,

Jean Kresse
President and CEO

OUR VISION. TO IMPROVE THE QUALITY OF LIFE IN OUR COMMUNITY FOR INDIVIDUALS AND FAMILIES.

Bethesda Lutheran Church

GATHER...GROW...GO

To the State of Iowa House Oversight Committee,

1517 Northwestern Avenue
Ames, Iowa 50010-5299
515-232-6256
www.bethesdaames.org

"It takes a village to raise a child."

This popular African proverb shares roots with Christian scripture; two is better than one, three better than two. For when one falls the other will lift them up.

When a child is baptized, we ask those gathered to support and pray for them in their new life. This is what it means to live in community; we lift up, care for, and support one another.

Earlier this month the Ames Community School District participated in the Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action. Our children, and the children of many of our members participated.

The curriculum is designed to lift up students that have been historically marginalized, particularly those within the Black and LGBTQ+ communities. These groups have been treated as less than for too long, and as a result often suffer differences in educational attainment, socio-economic status, and mental health, including higher rates of suicide, when compared to their straight, or white counterparts.

The notion of being treated less than runs counter to both the Christian ethic that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves and the American ideal that all (men) are created equal. That the ACSD seeks to teach our children about, and lift these groups up, is to be applauded.

It also mirrors our congregation's efforts to learn about, and address issues of systemic racism and LGBTQ+ discrimination, both locally and beyond.

Ames is a special village, and one we love dearly. We here at Bethesda Lutheran are proud to work alongside the Ames Community School District, lifting up our children, regardless of their race, ethnicity, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, or anything else, helping to make this village to be even better, for everyone, than it already is.

Sincerely,

Tony Woodcock, Council President

Pastor Bryan Simmons

Pastor Ryan Arnold



Church of Living Water



NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE
Ames NAACP Branch #4120
P. O. Box 529
Ames, IA 50010
February 18, 2021

LETTER IN SUPPORT OF THE AMES COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT

The Ames Branch of the NAACP is pleased to write this letter in support of the Ames Community School District (ACSD) and its equity efforts as demonstrated by its Black Lives Matter Week of Action.

Since 1954, when the US Supreme Court voted unanimously that segregation was inherently unconstitutional, and therefore a violation of the 14th Amendment, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) has continued its advocacy for a free, public, quality education for all. In support of this goal, we are dedicated to ensuring access to great teaching, equitable resources, and a challenging curriculum.

As a result, although we as an organization do not support any program specifically, we do support initiatives that help students who are often underserved in our schools, particularly students of color, feel supported and included in the school setting. Educational researchers point to the value of students experiencing a sense of belonging and inclusion in order to achieve academic success. As a result, programs such as the Black Lives Matter Week of Action, which the ACSD implemented in February, hold promise for increasing student academic success.

We see the district's implementation of the Black Lives Matter Week of Action as consistent with their commitment to "equity and access that empowers every individual to reach their full personal and educational potential." We are pleased that in recent years ACSD has been willing to engage in difficult discussions around inclusivity, valuing diversity and creating a welcoming environment for ALL to thrive. We must also point out that this most recent program was delivered in a way that provided options and support to teachers (not requirements) while at the same time it did not compromise the ability of parents to choose whether or not their children participated.

We continue to support ACSD and its efforts to ensure all students reach their full personal and educational potential.

Sincerely committed,
Edna Y. Clinton
President
Executive Board
Ames NAACP Branch #4120



Ames Jewish Congregation
3721 Calhoun Avenue
Ames, IA 50010

February 14, 2021

Dear Supt. Risner, Dr. Jones, and Members of the Ames School Board,

As an Ames religious organization, we write to support the recent "Black Lives Matter Week of Action in Schools" program. We understand that several religious institutions, citing moral and religious reasons, have opposed the inclusive education emphasized by this program. We believe inclusive programming reflects the moral and religious views of many people of Ames. For the record, we applaud your effort to bring racial justice into our schools' curriculum.

We base our beliefs on major tenets of our religion. One of the major precepts of Judaism is *tzedek*, which directly translates to "justice," although its definition is much deeper. It means to do the right thing, particularly for those who are disadvantaged. It includes providing resources for those who need them and working toward institutional equity as well as personal equality. In this, it pairs with *tikkun olam*, another Jewish precept, which means "to repair the world." In modern usage, *tikkun olam* refers to everyone's responsibility to work toward social justice, toward what should be as opposed to accepting what is. Both terms imply collective obligation, not simply individual charity or personal kindness toward others.

From our point of view, public schools, as community institutions, are appropriate places to teach children about their responsibility to all members of their community. Students deserve the right to celebrate all members of their community, including those who are different from them, and to learn about the struggles different groups have faced in their quests for full belonging. In this particular case, all of our children need to learn about Black joy as well as African Americans' struggles for racial justice.

It is only through education, discussion, and acknowledgment of unconscious bias and systemic racism that our children can begin to see themselves as part of systems that are larger than themselves. Once they understand that, they can work to repair those systems in a just manner. To the members of the Ames Jewish Congregation, that is the essence of *tzedek* and *tikkun olam*.

We will be following this up with a physical letter.

Thank you,

Members of the Ames Jewish Congregation (AJC) Board
Members of the AJC Social Justice Committee

Takeaways for Next Year

As we unpack the week and prepare for next year, we have already identified key takeaways and areas of improvement for next year. Below is a brief summary of some of those thoughts with some of the work already beginning:

- 13 Principles Definition Video
- Ames CSD customized resources
- Community & Parent forum and dialogue
- Additional time for teacher preparations
- Continual Critical Consciousness / Equity Professional Learning

Questions & Answers

Who made the decision to teach this content?

A community group brought these resources to the district in January of 2020 and asked the district to consider sharing the resources with all staff. A small pocket of teachers within the district used the resources to develop their own lesson plans and use them in their classrooms. District administration met and the decision was made to use the materials again with a more unified approach.

When did parents know about this week?

We shared information about the Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action on Friday, January 22. This was posted on our website, communication was sent directly to all parents, and shared on our social media channels.

Where did you get the materials?

The materials were taken from the [Black Lives Matter at School website](#).

Which funds paid for the materials?

The materials are open to the public and free for use. They were not purchased. Teachers had the option to use these resources.

Were parents made aware of the content?

All of the national resources were shared openly on our website for parents to browse. Also, many buildings and individual teachers shared plans with how the content would be organized and discussed during the week. Teachers were not required to teach certain aspects or lessons but were asked to embed the principles into their lessons. Some buildings had designated times to teach about the 13 guiding principles, while others could embed this learning throughout the entire day/week/year.

How could parents opt their students out of this curriculum?

Parents could notify their child's teacher or building principal that they would like their child to leave the classroom during lessons and/or discussions regarding the 13 guiding principles. These parent requests were honored at each building. Across the District, 97 students were parent-opted out of 4,829 total students that we serve.

Did you provide other instruction or learning opportunities for students during that time if they opted out?

When parents called to ask about the Black Lives Matter at School Week of Action, our building principals first identified their concerns and talked with them to understand what would take place in the classroom. As noted above, parents have the right to opt their students out of the content. We encouraged parents to send their students to school that day and actively worked with them to identify activities during the opt-out time period. Example activities included free reading for the student or other learning around black history month.

What do LGBTQ topics have to do with Black Lives Matter?

BLM addresses all of the intersectional identities of black people. It acknowledges all the different forms of oppression, including but not limited to, things like sexism and racism.



Ames™

COMMUNITY SCHOOL DISTRICT