

May 20, 2019

A special meeting of the Board of Education of the Oak Park and River Forest High School was held on Monday, May 20, 2019, in the Board Room of the high school.

**Call to Order**

President Moore called the meeting to order at 6:37 p.m. A roll call indicated the following members were present: Matt Baron, Tom Cofsky, Gina G. Harris, Craig Iseli (attend telephonically), Dr. Jackie Moore, and Sara Dixon Spivy. Also at the table were Dr. Joylynn Pruitt-Adams, Superintendent and Gail Kalmerton, Executive Assistant/Clerk of the Board.

**Visitors**

Mary Case, Kitty Conklin, Colleen H., Andrew and Lanie Hibel, Todd Hansen, Amanda Massie, Jennifer Moore, Clifford Osborne, Stacy Saunders, Dan Sideman, and Ian Silver, community, Sheila Hardin, OPRFHS Faculty Senate; Kennedy Anderson, Lily Moore and Holly Scott, students.

**Public Comments**

Kitty Conklin requested the cost savings that will offset the cost of reprinting so that the net incident is zero dollars to the taxpayers should the yearbooks be reprinted.

Clifford Osborne stated that the yearbook incident is not about a passive voice. Someone made an identifiable mistaken. Whoever is responsible should be called to account for it. It is not the fault of the citizens of Oak Park, and the money to pay for a reprint should not be taken out of general expenditures. It is not the citizens' problem, and he did not believe the taxpayers should be penalized for the "problem."

Anderson Kennedy, photographer for Tabula, read the *New York Times* article, *I was racially taunted on Television. Wasn't I?* by Doug Glanville that opened his eyes. It is about a similar situation about the ambiguity of the OK sign being a white power symbol. He read some of the article. Some people find it offensive, others see it as a game. He was upset that the yearbook staff had no forewarning that the delivery schedule had changed nor the reasons why it was being reprinted before the general public, and the fate of the yearbook would be determined by the administration and the Board of Education. This had been stressful time for him.

Lanie Hibel, photographer for Tabula, noted that the Tabula staff had worked hard to edit out gestures that did not follow the District's guidelines. She did not think it was reasonable to spend \$80,000 to reprint the books because 14 students ranging from African-Americans to Special Education students made the OK sign. She also did not want the teacher blamed for this situation. Students would be happy to get the yearbooks in time for their friends to sign them while they are still in school. If someone does not want the OK sign in their yearbook, give them a refund. This will eliminate the cost of reprinting. This is just as a circle game and it has appeared in past yearbooks. The circle game will not be stopping any time soon, and it existed before these students were born.

Andy Hibel, parent, thanked the administrators and professionals who supported the yearbook staff. Ms. White was inspirational and the yearbook staff deserves praise. If the District is properly trying to be inclusive, it should not marginalize those in the community and it should sympathize with those who worked to cover events of the

school and representing the groups that make OPRFHS an inclusive and diverse community. The administration should recognize and praise their efforts and it should be sensitive to the fact that no more than 2 weeks ago, the staff spent a day celebrating their efforts. The next day a tragedy occurred when the creator of the cover was killed. This community is working to support his family through GoFundMe Account, selling sweatshirts, etc. The yearbook has even deeper meaning this year.

The communication from OPRFHS does not address any of these factors. The same standard of desiring inclusiveness is not applied to this staff as is the underlying pictures in questions: It made this community feel marginalized and excluded. When leadership wants to be inclusive, it does not get to select certain situations to lead—it needs to lead in all instances.

Ian Silver, thanked the people on the staff who spoke. He had the utmost respect for tabula teacher, Mr. Ganschow. He has four children and the circle game has been going on for 20 years. He, too, was punched in the shoulder himself. While this is a tough decision, the District needs to step back and find a simple solution that does not cost money.

Colleen H., a parent of two OPRFHS students, commended Tabula students on their work. She had not seen the pictures, did not have the details of who and how this got reported, who decided it was what it is, nor how a story appeared in the *Sun-Times* that labeled the high school for something that may not have occurred. She asked who determines what? What policies were in place before the school printed 2,000 books? Why is the senior class part of this with little facts? The kids are not guilty. She wanted more facts.

Stacy Saunders noted that this was an important moment in both the kids' and communities' lives. Kids are doing the circle game because they think it is cool and hip. Is the school being reactionary? The school could take back the conversation positively and say there could be symbols which are not known to be symbols of hate. While recognizing the concern about some appropriating the symbol, the school could take it back and say "we are better and different and welcome youth" and put that on Facebook, etc., as well as saying it is cool to do the OK sign.

Tod Hansen thanked the Board of Education members for their volunteer work and for making tough decisions. Not everyone will be satisfied here. Over the years he has watched white nationalism in the White House, on television appearances. The symbol is inappropriate. It is understandable that the intent was not malicious, but these are not the times to be timid about this. It is a serious social threat. As a parent of three OPRFHS students, he thanked them for making this decision. In 20 to 30 years, the students will come to understand why the pictures were taken out, and he supported that decision.

Don Sideman noted that the numbers 88 and 14 are well known Nazi and alt right signifiers and asked if there were plans to eliminate math and history books because they may be misunderstood to be a signifier. He felt a mistake was being made to give the alt right and hate groups the power to modify our language. It is how liberal

became a dirty word. These groups should not have the power to use these symbols in a different context.

Terry Kelleher felt it was important not to assume whether this was deliberate or white supremacy, and it was important for the Board of Education to pause to weight the facts. Regardless of intent, there are impacts here. At this moment, much subtle and overt racism exists and kids pick up on it. He hoped the Board of Education would continue its thoughtful consideration. He would not distribute the yearbooks, as he felt they would create harm.

**Approval of Reprinting The Yearbook** Dr. Moore moved to approve the cost of reprinting of the yearbook not to exceed \$53,794.00; seconded by Mr. Cofsky. Discussion ensued

Dr. Pruitt-Adams noted that the administrative team came to the determination after reviewing several options that the school yearbook needed to be re-edited. The cost of the reprint was \$85,000, which includes printing and shipping. However, since Jostens is a partner with the school they wanted to invest in a solution, by sharing in the cost. The total cost to the school will be \$53,794.00. This is an all-in price that includes a full reprint, picking up the books and reshipment back to the school as a bulk shipment by June 18<sup>th</sup>.

The total cost of the yearbooks is not a budgeted item. Students and their families pay for the books, with approximately 100 paid from the school budget. In seeking a resolution for cover the \$53,794.00 cost, we offer the following. The budget is very close to being balanced for the year. When building the budget, the active learning space furniture budget was not expended because of unknown IMAGINE projects not yet approved by the Board of Education. Instead, funds are only being spent to replace or fix broken furniture. Thus, those funds will be moved to the general budget to cover the cost of the yearbooks, a one-time expense.

Mr. Baron made the following statement, “Over the past four days, I have gone back and forth repeatedly over whether I would support or oppose a contract for a new yearbook. In my mind, although the administration has already indicated that it has decided the original yearbook version will not be distributed, the flip side of that coin is this question: Do I support or oppose releasing the existing yearbook as-is?”

“Some might argue that because the spotlight is burning so brightly on some of the photos contained in this yearbook, we are boxed into a corner---that we now have no choice but to discard this edition of the 2019 Tabula and order a new one that removes these particular photos. But let’s consider the fact that our school has treated this so seriously. We have delved deeply into these emerging, thorny questions that, less than a week ago, I did not contemplate we would face. And we have turned the spotlight brightly on this issue—already making this an extremely teachable moment for our school and the broader community about these particular hand gestures.

“Now we know better. Back in the fall, when these photos were taken, I don’t believe these students did. Only in recent weeks has there been a general awareness of the ways in which this gesture has been co-opted by white supremacy and other despicable groups. This morning, because I am charged along with my colleagues on the board to reach a decision tonight, I met with Dr. Pruitt-Adams and reviewed the photos in question.

“What I saw provided me with the context that so many of us have lacked as this conversation has escalated on social media and in other spaces. Based on my review of the photos, as well as the context of the many facets of this issue that bring us here tonight, here are my observations:

- 1) Before viewing the photos, I fully expected that a certain “type” of student—specifically, white boys—would be overwhelmingly represented among those making the hand gesture. The actual situation encompasses a cross-section of about 50 students from throughout the entire student body – cutting across gender, race, grade, as well as activity or club type. For me, the diversity of those making the hand gestures is a huge distinction.
- 2) The vast majority (if not all) of the gestures that I saw are the above-the-waist and/or traditional upright “OK” version, rather than below-the-waist and / or upside-down “OK” version, which I understand is seen more as something appropriated by white supremacists. Again, context is crucial.

“I credit the leaders in this building for being vigilant and anticipating the harmful potential that could come from these photos. At the same time, I have to be transparent and state that those concerns, for me, are far outweighed by the many other concerns that we have heard from people throughout the community over the past few days.

“One of my biggest concerns: that if we toss out these 1,750 Tabulas, rather than come to the thoughtful conclusion that they should still be distributed, we are playing right into the hands of all the haters whose evil is at the root of this corrosive and divisive angst—and worse—that we are experiencing.

“In reviewing the photos today, and reflecting on them throughout the day, I find it compelling that there is no discernible pattern of one “type” of individual or group of people oppressing or targeting another “type” of individual or group of people. I will vote against approval of this contract with Jostens, and at the same time would urge a reconsideration of the decision not to distribute the Tabula as-is.”

The administration noted that pasting stickers over the pictures was the first option considered, but the printer said the stickers would not be flush to the page. Any attempt to peel the sticker off would destroy the page. It is also not practical because the printer said it would take twenty days with 20 to 40 people with skilled hands working 24 hours a day to be able to replace those pictures on time. Removing the two

“signatures” (sections) of the book would damage the integrity of the book and there is no way to put the pages back into the books.

Before the reprint, Jostens will send over 2,200 autograph books so that seniors can have something for their friends to sign and they can be included in the reprinted yearbook. A reprint of the books was expected to be completed by June 18. While the administration anticipated creating more procedures for next year, this yearbook staff followed protocol. The administration is not accusing the students of anything, it is about the impact on the student body.

Ms. Harris noted that harm could occur without someone being intentional. If one is looking at just how much unintentional harm could be caused and then weighing it against what kind of decisions need to be made for it to look a certain way, her concern is that in 10 or 20 years, harm would still be created. It is not just this community that is having this conversation. The conversation has been about the impact versus the intent. While she was not saying that harm was intended, it could still happen as a consequence of what is being seen.

Mr. Cofsky stated this was a complex issue, and he appreciated the insight, especially from Tabula that the policy and procedures were followed. He was unfamiliar with the hand gesture and appreciated the articles shared by others. The article about the Cubs’ incident was helpful to him: It was not about an individual but a statement that the Cubs would no longer tolerate racial bias. The Board of Education established a racial equity policy just a month ago and much work still needs to be completed on its procedures and elements that will mitigate harm. The difference now is an issue of timing. The photographs were taken in the fall and sent to the printer in March. Now, newer events or changes or takeovers of symbols that are appalling are a factor. Does the District rewind the clock and do a redo or does it move forward? If it is to rewind the clock, the yearbook has to have the same standards. What can be done to go back in time to correct what happened in a different time was challenging to him. He had briefly seen the photos of students taking goofy pictures, in most cases. He did not know the harm now or in the future, but there is much diversity in the pictures. His focus is that the District needs to move forward and that means supplementing the policy with procedures, such as the guidance to ensure that Tabula is not being harmed. He was not in support of reprinting the books and would support having them available to the students.

Mr. Iseli acknowledged the hard work and commitment of the Tabula staff. He did not feel that anything that had occurred was anybody’s fault and he does not want it to appear that way. This is a sensitive time and these are difficult issues. He appreciated Mr. Cofsky’s perspective. He too worried about the harm that might be caused and he reflected on the fact of how this has been handled and what has been done. The harm has already been done. He understood the questions about how to protect the integrity of the book, but he asked if there were a compromise between hurting the integrity of the book and weighing better options.

Ms. Harris’ daughter was a lead photographer on Tabula and she thanked the Tabula students because she is a mom who witnessed deadlines and putting those pieces together. The piece about no blame is very important. For her, the conversation is

what is being done about white supremacy actions in the school. This is a larger issue. It is not about placing blame. At some point an ideology conversation is needed. How will it show up and how does this impact culture? She felt that if the book were not reprinted it would cause harm. This is about taking the racial equity policy seriously.

Dr. Pruitt-Adams noted that she worked for the Board of Education and based on the equity work, the administration made the decision it did. The administration has listened to the students talk about microaggressions and intentional and unintentional intent. Some parents and students said put stickers on, distribute the book as is, and others said thanks for reprinting. The administration knew this was going to be difficult, but whatever the Board of Education decides she will do. Mr. Baron had leaned toward approving this because of what he had thought he would see, not what he had seen—a true diversity across the school. Dr. Pruitt-Adams noted that the administration did not want students to be targeted. Looking at the totality is what caused the recommendation. Mr. Baron noted that he saw true diversity across the board and his point is about impact. He was unsure how much harm would be caused. Ms. Spivy saw the photos too but to see only one student doing this is devastating. She will support the administration's recommendation.

When Dr. Moore first heard about the OK symbol being used in the yearbook, her first concern was for all students and the ignorance of the community did not matter. The OK symbol has been co-opted by a white nationalist group which represents hatred toward people of color, and it has been used in the White House. Racism, fear, etc. have been used to marginalize people. Her intent, as a school board member, is to do what is best for students. She respected the hard work of the Tabula staff. It had been a disservice to Tabula staff not to be at the table to be part of the decision making. She struggled with the fact that she was discussing whether harm could be done to be black and brown students, and the Board of Education that is majority white is deciding this based on cost rather than not being able to rewrite history and no intent. The District has gender and racial equity policies and has talked about looking at its work through a racial equity lens. Institutional and individual racisms exist. She was struck by how much learning there is yet to be done by this Board of Education, Administration, District, country. Her original thought was that she would see pictures that would be innocuous to her and some that would not. While the understanding of this community was not aware, the world does not operate the way Oak Park does. Her son too was on Trapeze.

She heard the comments from the white community members about this destroying their senior year for which the students had worked so hard and that the book must be issued. The administration never said the book would not be issued. If the books came out as is with a disclaimer, it would suggest something was amiss and could do harm. The discussion is void of speaking up about race and racism and that was troubling to her. Integrity matters.

Dr. Moore was dismayed or disappointed to hear that the cost for the reprinting would be paid for through not purchasing furniture. She felt it would have to be paid for in a way that did not impact the students. If she had to weigh in on fiscal costs versus morale costs, she would choose morale costs and suggested taking salaries or raises to pay for it. She was not willing to have any students feel “bothered” because of racism. She was also dismayed that given the equity work purported to be done in the school

that this situation was not caught sooner. She was tired of putting out fires and the administration needed to be more strategic.

Dr. Moore wanted integrity for the student who passed and was the designer of the cover of the yearbook and all students. The narrative that this book was not coming out was always false. She said that all of the voices were not represented by those in the room. In addition, she cautioned those saying that the sign was used by a cross of all demographics. She did not want to give the impression that it was all white males or a rainbow of students. Some pictures gave her pause and there were some that she would have overlooked herself. Ambiguous symbols are used by racists and she was not willing to say AS IS is the way to go.

A roll call vote resulted in four ayes and two nays. Mr. Cofsky and Mr. Baron voted nay. Motion carried.

**Adjournment**

At 7:54 p.m., on May 20, 2019, Dr. Moore moved to adjourn the Special Board Meeting; seconded by Ms. Dixon Spivy. A voice vote resulted in motion carried.

Dr. Jackie Moore  
President

Craig Iseli  
Secretary