



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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South Orange Maplewood Moves towards Educational Equity Academic Structure and Practices Must Now Reflect New Policies

Last night the South Orange Maplewood Board of Education took a historic and significant step toward equity by passing an academic placement policy that for the first time directly addresses the exclusion of African-American students from courses deemed critical for college readiness and workforce preparedness. The Board has now set in motion a process that it must complete – ensuring the racial balance of students in advanced level, Advanced Placement and gifted and talented classes and programs in each individual school – and eliminating the segregation of classes in compliance with federal law under the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

For well over a decade African-American children in the communities of South Orange and Maplewood have been denied an equal educational opportunity by the school district's practice of tracking Black children into lower-level classes. This behavior resulted in the district coming under the monitor of the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and having a federal complaint filed against it by the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the UCLA Civil Rights Project. The district has effectively used academic "levels" or "ability

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grouping” to maintain segregated classrooms in which white students, particularly in the district’s Columbia High School where they are the minority, are the overwhelming majority in classes that are recognized as crucial to preparing students for higher education. As a result, the South Orange Maplewood School District was conferring diplomas of unequal value with African-American students the recipient of a credential that does not carry the same weight in the educational marketplace.

In passing Academic Placement Policy 2314 the South Orange Maplewood Board of Education has now declared that all students will have access to a rich and rigorous curriculum. The Board has taken the unprecedented step of committing to the goal of having enrollment in advanced courses proportionately reflect the demographic profile of each school in the district “consistent with governing law and the Board’s commitment to equal opportunity for all students.” The new policy also calls for significant outreach to traditionally underrepresented populations to inform students of their rights under the new policy.

We are particularly pleased that the Board has imposed a deadline for the Superintendent to develop a timetable for the restructuring of the district’s K-12 curriculum to make certain that “all students develop the knowledge and skills fundamental to successful performance in Advanced Placement and advanced level courses by providing the highest levels of academic rigor in all Kindergarten, Elementary, Middle and High School courses.” Combined with the commitment in the previously adopted Access and Equity Policy 5755.1 to provide structured academic support, we envision a cultural shift from a deficit modality of viewing Black children as deficient to assuming all African-American children are capable of excelling at the highest levels. **As the curricular alignment takes shape we intend to use all legal means to eliminate the vestiges of tracking and “levels” that created the inequities in this district.**

Our attention now turns to implementation and we will closely monitor enrollment in classes for the 2016-2017 academic year, and the adjustment in the level of academic supports

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to begin transforming the racial composition of classes in the district. **We call upon all Board members, administrators, departmental supervisors, teachers and staff to embrace and support this new direction.** At the end of each academic year we will issue an **Equity Report Card**, grading the district on levels of inclusion in academic programs, athletic programs and administrator and teacher staffing. We will focus intently on the mathematics and sciences areas as they have been particularly problematic in limiting access to African-American students. In addition, one of our priority areas is reforming disciplinary procedures to address the disproportionate punishment received by African-American students. Going forward we will continue our communication with the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (OCR) and exercise our rights under the law if the district shall fail in complying with its policies or we have evidence that patterns in violation of the law are being maintained.

From the outset we have made clear our willingness to work with the South Orange Maplewood School District to bring about reforms to make equity a guiding principle of the district. As a new year approaches, we commend the school district for taking this courageous but overdue step. We will continue to work with the district and will continue to hold the district accountable for the provision of public education in a manner that benefits all students equally.

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