

Statement of Walter Fields
In response to Community Coalition on Race
April 20, 2019

The Community Coalition on Race has proven its irrelevance in its request to Governor Phil Murphy to review the membership of the state School Ethics Commission in light of the commission's finding that South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education member Stephanie Lawson-Muhammad violated the ethics code.

Rather than engage in serious work to dismantle and reform institutions of systemic discrimination, the Commission engages in 'Mary Kay' advocacy, attempting to conceal the worst excesses of racist behavior by sponsoring 'conversations' and events that preserve the status quo. What does an organization that has existed for 25 years have to show for its work, after receiving taxpayer support? We have two towns that have a racially segregated public school system with a racial achievement gap, one community that has been identified with a police department with the worse rate of use of force against Black civilians in the state, and its companion police department with a less than stellar record, and two communities that are now losing Black residents because they have become exhausted by the work required to have a decent quality of life in these two towns.

On this Easter weekend we must resurrect the truth for the Coalition on Race seeks to bury it in a tomb of lies. When Black youth were assaulted by the Maplewood police on July 5, 2016 the Coalition on Race coopted a program at South Orange Middle School in which young people sought to express their feelings on their mistreatment in the community. We would later learn that the chairman of the Coalition on Race reviewed the police video of the July 5, 2016 incident before it became public and remained silent. The chairman of the Coalition admitted so to me personally. The Coalition on Race has been more concerned with the *imagery* of inclusion than the reality of life for Black children in the two communities.

The Coalition on Race was silent when it was discovered that an ill-conceived lesson on the enslavement of Africans was allowed in our elementary schools. The Coalition on Race was silent when it was discovered through an audit that Black students had been disproportionately harmed by the inappropriate application of the attendance and credit recovery policies at Columbia High School under its former principal. The Coalition on Race has been silent on racial disparities in student discipline in Columbia High School. Did the Coalition on Race respond to Columbia High School students who held an assembly to express their concern over the racial climate in the school? Where was the Coalition on Race when a Black, female Columbia High School student was maligned by teachers for a historically accurate dance performance? Where was the concern of the Coalition on Race when a nationally distinguished, Hall of Fame, Black female high school track and field coach left the district after receiving little support from the Board of Education? Where was the Coalition on Race when it was revealed that a female Columbia High School teacher sexually assaulted five Black male students? Why didn't we hear from the Coalition on Race when a Black child was put in a closet in an elementary school as punishment? Why haven't we heard from the Coalition on Race on the lack of Black teachers in the South Orange-Maplewood School District?

Where are the letters from the Coalition on Race to the governor on these critical issues to building a truly inclusive community? They don't exist because the Coalition is not concerned about eradicating racism. It is invested in window dressing.

Now, when an elected official has been rightfully determined to have violated the state ethics code, the Coalition resorts to a fishing expedition to seek a political favor. What the Coalition does not reveal is that Ms. Lawson-Muhammad has been the Board of Education liaison to the Coalition. This is classic *quid pro quo*. It is a clear conflict of interest. Why does the Board have a liaison to this organization? The Coalition now shamelessly uses 'race' to cover for the worse behavior of an elected official. The Coalition needs to study history because it is obviously ignorant to the real history of civil rights in America. We have examples of Black females who neither cowered or were fearful of the worse forms of racial terrorism in our nation's history. Perhaps the entire Coalition Board needs to see the movie *Best of Enemies* to see the true

powerful representation of courageous Black womanhood in America. What we viewed on the video of April 27, 2018 was not that.

So, is the Coalition on Race accusing the Trustees of the Village of South Orange as being complicit in some sort of racial conspiracy with the state School Ethics Commission? It was the Village Trustees that initially expressed concern to then South Orange-Maplewood Board of Education president Elizabeth Baker over Board Member Stephanie Lawson-Muhammad's behavior on April 27, 2018. The same Board of Education that the School Ethics Commission chastised for not discussing the incident in a public meeting. Is this not the same municipal government that is providing funding to the Coalition?

The Coalition also reveals why history is such an important subject. An organization that has never taken a stand on the school district's failure to implement the state-mandated Amistad Black History curriculum, reminds us why they have not done so. I remind the Commission that the late U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren who led the Court to a unanimous ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education* had prior to his tenure on the Court served as the Attorney General of California and signed the order committing Japanese-Americans to internment camps during World War II. The plaintiffs in *Brown* and their legal counsel, the N.A.A.C.P., did not demand the recusal of Warren from deliberations on the case. They trusted the process, believed in the law and were willing to stand on the truth and strength of their position. I would also remind the Coalition that the United States Supreme Court that rendered the historic ruling in *Brown* on May 17, 1954 was comprised of 9 white males with a Chief Justice who was a noted conservative.

The Coalition on Race now seeks to interject its voice on a matter as a political favor to an elected official. The Coalition is acting with the same lack of ethics and character that Ms. Lawson-Muhammad did on April 27, 2018. Its leadership should be ashamed and taxpayers appalled. As a 22-year resident of Maplewood I will write a letter to my township government demanding that not a penny of my taxes be used to support the Coalition on Race.