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December 15, 2023

Dear South Orange and Maplewood School District Families and Staff,

This week, antisemitic graffiti was found in a Columbia High School restroom. Because of this incident, we want to make it absolutely clear that the South Orange and Maplewood School District and the Board of Education members unequivocally condemn antisemitism, and we reject any speech or action that incites violence, threatens safety, harasses, intimidates, or bullies anyone.

Acts such as these are in direct opposition to everything our District represents and aspires to become – a school district where all students know they belong and appreciate each other’s beliefs, identities, and humanity. Our school grounds should be a safe, inclusive, and caring learning environment for all students.

As a District and a Board, we are fully committed to fighting racism, antisemitism, Islamophobia, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, anti-Asian hate, and hatred of any kind. It was out of this commitment that the District’s Harassment, Intimidation, and Bullying (HIB) Policy No. 5512 was passed by the Board of Education more than 11 years ago. In addition, the Board of Education passed Policy 8465 Hate Crimes and Bias-Related Acts as well as Policy 2260 Affirmative Action Program for School and Classroom Practices more than 20 years ago. Each of these policies provides a framework for the District’s response to bias, harassment, intimidation, bullying, and discrimination.

The policies were passed because the District recognized that in order for all students to achieve high academic standards, all students must have a safe and civil environment in which to learn. Hate speech on a bathroom wall is enough to deny students a safe learning environment.

This year, the District instituted the New Jersey Bar Anti-Bullying Curriculum. In addition, students take part in the Week of Respect and additional anti-bullying lessons throughout the year in health class. Currently, the District’s Senior Leadership Team is exploring ways to educate students and promote the ideals we uphold through our policies and efforts to become a fully integrated and equitable school District.

Any student who is experiencing harassment, intimidation, bullying, or any bias incident should contact their school’s principal or use [the District’s reporting tool](#). (Click on the “Reporting HIB Allegations” button.) Any student who faces discrimination in a classroom setting should contact the District’s Affirmative Action officer, who is the Acting Superintendent, Dr. Kevin F. Gilbert. Please contact his assistant, Robin Curry, at (973) 762 - 5600 ext. 1822 or [rcurry@somdk.k12.nj.us](mailto:rcurry@somdk.k12.nj.us) with any concerns.



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We are committed to working with our students, family, and community to create an inclusive learning environment for all students. To help support this vision, and continue this conversation at home, we offer the following resources:

[Empowering Young People in the Aftermath of Hate](#)  
[Talking to kids about discrimination](#)

Our hope is that as we move forward from these incidents, we all unite in teaching our students the ideals we express as a District that celebrates diversity. Let us build in them the understanding that words matter, and they can hurt. Let us appreciate one another, and work to understand each other's feelings and perspectives.

And let us begin by saying that hate has no home in our schools.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Kevin F. Gilbert". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Dr. Kevin F. Gilbert  
Acting Superintendent of Schools  
The School District of South Orange and Maplewood

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Kaitlin M. Wittleder". The signature is cursive and somewhat stylized.

Ms. Kaitlin M. Wittleder  
President  
South Orange and Maplewood Board of Education