

BLACK PARENTS WORKSHOP, INC.

Educational Equity for the Children of South Orange-Maplewood
blackparentsworkshop.org

AN OPEN LETTER TO OUR COMMUNITY

On the End of the Settlement, and the Questions It Leaves Us

August 2026

To the Black families of South Orange and Maplewood, and to everyone who has walked this long road beside us. And a special, heartfelt thank you to all current and former BPW members and advisors.

This August, a chapter closes. The court-supervised monitoring of the settlement between the Black Parents Workshop and the South Orange-Maplewood School District has come to an end. It is right that we mark the moment. It is also right that we tell the truth about how it feels.

We began this legal fight in 2018, in a federal courtroom, because we refused to accept that a district celebrated across the state for its diversity was also failing and devaluing its Black children. In July 2020, we reached a settlement that many called historic, a binding, court-supervised agreement to confront the inequities inside our schools. We brought in one of the nation's leading experts on educational equity, Dr. Edward Fergus, to examine the district's current state of education and how it impacted Black students.

In the years that followed, Dr. Fergus and his team did the patient, unglamorous work of analysis and data collection. They combed through the district's own records. Course placements, honors and advanced-placement rosters, special-education classifications, and discipline files, examined grade by grade and school by school, turned what our families had long felt into what no one could any longer deny. It did not move quickly. Committees convened, timelines were negotiated, and even as the audit proceeded, the changes our children needed were studied, deferred, and studied again.

In 2023, he delivered his findings, and they confirmed what our families had been saying for a generation.

Dr. Fergus found a district whose hallways looked like the future of America, but whose classrooms looked like 1950s Mississippi. He found Black students channeled into lower academic tracks while white classmates with identical scores were placed in honors and advanced courses. He found our children overrepresented in special education and underrepresented in the classes that open doors. He found them disciplined, suspended, removed, marked as “defiant” and “disrespectful,” at rates far beyond their white peers. And he named the thing our children had felt but could not always put into words: a climate of isolation and tokenism, the daily weight of being present but not belonging.

To guard the promise of repair, a retired Justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court, the Honorable John E. Wallace, Jr., was appointed to monitor the district's compliance and to ensure an independent voice was the decision maker whether the work was being done sufficiently or not.

In April 2023, the District stated that it was in compliance with the settlement and that the settlement should end. However, BPW objected and Justice Wallace gave the District a choice: Present your evidence to the federal judge or extend the settlement. The District chose to extend the settlement until August 2026.

We tell you all of this so that you understand one thing plainly: what we won was real, and it did not exist before we fought for it. We made a school district look at itself in the mirror and admit what it saw. That is more than most communities ever achieve. Even the statewide desegregation case has not done that.

A Timeline of the Fight

2018 The Black Parents Workshop files *Black Parents Workshop v. South Orange-Maplewood School District* in the United States District Court for the District of New Jersey, challenging the racial segregation and inequity our families lived inside the district's schools.

July 2020 The parties reach a comprehensive, court-supervised settlement, approved by the SOMSD Board of Education. The district agrees to bring in an independent equity expert and to binding structural reform. The Honorable John E. Wallace, Jr., retired Justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court, oversees compliance under a formal Monitoring Plan.

2020 to 2022 Dr. Edward Fergus is engaged. For the first time, the district begins collecting and disclosing data it had never published, and the equity audit gets underway.

2023 Dr. Fergus finalizes the Equity Audit of Disparity Patterns. Its findings, now known as the Fergus Plan or Rutgers Recommendations, become the district's binding roadmap for infrastructure reform.

2023 The School Board, under Kaitlin Wittleder, creates the Fergus Implementation Committee and commits to public progress updates every six months.

2023 In light of the delayed Fergus audit and certain compliance requirements, which occurred under former Board President Thair Joshua and Superintendent Dr. Ronald Taylor, the Board approves a three-year extension of monitoring, set to conclude in August 2026.

August 2026 The final monitoring meeting convenes and court-supervised oversight closes. Under the settlement, the district's public reporting on enrollment and discipline by race continues for years to come.

The Difference We Made: Before and After

Before the Black Parents Workshop sued, none of the following protections existed for our children. Every item in the right-hand column is a change this organization forced into being.

	Before the lawsuit	Because of our settlement
Data and transparency	No public data broken down by race showed who was placed in advanced courses or who was disciplined.	The district must publish course enrollments by race and gender for grades 6 to 12 every year, and suspensions and expulsions by race, gender, and school every month. These duties continue for years beyond the monitoring period.

	Before the lawsuit	Because of our settlement
Academic tracking	Children were sorted early into rigid tracks. Advanced placement turned on a single test score or a subjective teacher recommendation.	Math courses are being de-leveled, advanced placement must rest on multiple objective measures, and the district must actively identify high achievers from underrepresented backgrounds.
Discipline	Black students were removed from class for vague, subjective offenses such as defiance and disrespect, at rates far above their peers.	Subjective discipline is being curtailed in favor of restorative practices, with the disparities now tracked and reported in public.
Independent oversight	The district policed itself. There was no outside monitor and no enforceable accountability.	A retired Justice of the New Jersey Supreme Court, John E. Wallace, Jr., monitors compliance under a formal plan, supported by a standing Fergus Implementation Committee and public updates every six months.
Equity audit	No independent, data-driven audit of how the district treated its Black students had ever been conducted.	Dr. Edward Fergus's Equity Audit of Disparity Patterns put the disparities on the record and produced a binding remedial roadmap, the Fergus Plan.
Curriculum and Black history	The district's Amistad instruction in African American history was unverified, and the curriculum had never been audited for cultural responsiveness.	The State must verify that the Amistad curriculum fully aligns with its standards, and the wider curriculum is being audited for cultural responsiveness.
Student supports	There was no district-wide system of tiered academic and behavioral support, and the referral process pushed Black children toward special education.	A district-wide tiered support system and a reformed Intervention and Referral Services process are being built to lift children up rather than sort them out.
Teacher diversity	No binding commitment existed to recruit or retain teachers of color, or to train staff on implicit bias.	The district is bound to recruit and retain more teachers of color and to train every educator to recognize and confront implicit bias.
Funding	No enforceable commitment tied these reforms to real money.	The Board committed, by resolution, to fund the resources necessary to carry out the settlement.

Read the two columns side by side and the point is impossible to miss. Not one of the protections in the right-hand column existed before the Black Parents Workshop went to court. They are not gifts the district offered. Frederick Douglass named this truth more than a century and a half ago: **“Power concedes nothing without a demand.”** Every protection in that column is a concession we demanded, and kept demanding, until it was won. They are the difference between a district that can call itself equitable and one that can be made to prove it.

And still, we must speak honestly about the distance between a plan and real life. Compliance came slowly, and where it came, it came grudgingly. Deadlines slipped. Committees met. Reports were filed. And all the while, actual children, our children, moved through kindergarten and middle school and across the graduation stage, spending the only childhoods they will ever have inside a system that was always promising to change tomorrow. For too many of our families, the remedy arrived too late to reach the child it was meant for.

Some of what was offered to us as progress was performative. After the BPW settlement, in October 2021, the district announced a suspension moratorium, the kind of gesture that reads well in a town proud of its politics. Yet when the very data we had forced into the open came in, Black students were being suspended more often than before, not less. The policy changed the press release. It did not change the reality of the child who was still suspended without due process. That is the difference we have learned to watch for: between a district that wants to be seen doing something “equitable”, and a district willing to be measured by what actually happens to its Black children in reality.

We are not the first to taste ashes in a hard-won victory. In a 1967 interview with NBC News, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. admitted that the “dream” he had announced to the nation in 1963 had “in many points, turned into a nightmare.” Not long before he was killed, he confided to his friend Harry Belafonte a fear that had come to haunt him, that he had spent his life “integrating [his] people into a burning house.” Those of us who have given years to this fight have come, painfully, to understand what he meant. We demanded entry into the house. We did not ask enough about whether the house was on fire.

There is a further grief folded inside this one. While we fought for our children's right to belong, this community was changing beneath our feet. Black student enrollment in the district has fallen to roughly 22 percent, down from about 54 percent. But the overall Black population of South Orange and Maplewood has not dropped at such a significant rate. That means Black families that choose to call the SOMA community home, do not have faith the dubious legacy of the school district and are sending their kids to private school in greater numbers year after year. Sadly, too many Black families here simply no longer believe that this district will cherish their children. That belief did not come from nowhere. It was earned, slowly, over decades of broken faith. We will not ask our families to feel a trust they have every reason not to feel.

We would not be telling you the whole truth if we did not say plainly where this fight took place. We did not wage it in Mississippi or Alabama. We waged it in a blue state, in a blue county, and in two towns that pride themselves on their progressive politics and their lawn signs. And we learned, as Dr. King learned before us, that the deepest resistance did not come from avowed segregationists.

Writing from the Birmingham jail in 1963, King wrote that the “Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen's Council or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to 'order' than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.” That is the same peace we disturbed here in SOMA: the comfortable quiet of neighbors who preferred the appearance of harmony to the labor of justice, and who were more troubled by our insistence on change than by the conditions that made the insistence necessary.

Malcolm X drew a similar conclusion. The avowed segregationist, he observed, is a wolf who at least snarls, so that a Black family always knows where it stands; the smiling liberal is a fox. And the fox, Malcolm warned, is the more dangerous of the two, precisely because he bares his teeth while pretending to grin. We do not say this to wound our neighbors. We say it to be honest with our children about the ground they will walk: here (and in other communities) more often than not, the resistance and potential harm, wears the face of a friend.

Some of that resistance carried names and letterhead of its own. Organizations that today present themselves as this community's conscience on race, among them the Community Coalition on Race, SOMA Justice, and PARES, did not stand with us when it counted. As we experienced it, they treated our lawsuit as an overreach rather than a necessity: they raised doubts about whether we were the right messengers, they were quicker to question our approach than to reckon with the harms our families had documented, and they counseled patience at the very moment our children were being tracked and suspended in real time. That is how it felt to us then, and the public record of who said what, and when, is there for anyone who cares to look. And when the settlement was won and the Fergus audit confirmed what we had alleged, some of those same voices were willing to embrace the result, recasting a fight they had not helped wage as a triumph they shared. We do not begrudge anyone's growth. We ask only that the record be plain about who brought this case, who bore its cost, and who was willing to create the tension that justice required. Credit is cheap once the danger and the hard work have passed.

All of this brings us to a question we once believed we had answered for good, the question of integration itself. For most of our history, the goal was clear: to be admitted, to be included, to sit in the same rooms. We do not renounce that struggle; it was noble, it was arguably necessary for that time period, and our children's right to attend any school in this district is not up for negotiation. But we would be failing you if we did not now ask, out loud and without shame, the harder question underneath it. Are our children better served learning in environments where they are the rule and not the exception, where their excellence is assumed, their history is taught as a matter of course, their culture is a birthright rather than a curiosity, and their belonging requires no one's permission? We believe this answer to be an unequivocal yes.

Before integration, Black communities built and sustained schools that sent their graduates into the world with a sense of pride that no test could measure, and desegregation, for all its promise, cost us many of those schools and the Black teachers and principals who led them. That tradition did not die. Our historically Black colleges and universities exist, and thrive, for a reason: generation after generation, they graduate Black students who were supported rather than surveilled, and expected to excel rather than doubted.

So let us say plainly what many of us have come to believe. In a perfect world, our children from kindergarten through twelfth grade would be best served inside that same environment, with the demographics and the system of support that an HBCU provides. However, that is not the reality in front of us right now, but it names what we are reaching for. We do not raise this question in order to retreat from equity. We raise it to insist that equity is something more than proximity to whiteness. It means the freedom to build, and to choose, spaces where our children are fully seen.

But we must be clear about where the burden of equity now falls. For years it was carried by a court, by a monitor, and by a handful of Black families who refused to be quiet. When that oversight ends this month, the burden does not vanish. It shifts. It shifts onto this community, and above all onto the neighbors who place “Black Lives Matter” in their windows and on their lawns. Many of those signs went up in the summer of 2020, after George Floyd was killed a thousand miles from here. But a sign in the yard was never the same as a question directed at the school board or the Superintendent.

Too many of the families who displayed those three words never once asked how to support the Black lives of the children in their own school district, in the classrooms their own children sat in every day. And some did worse than stay silent. When the moment came, they fought us, because a teacher they liked was being asked to answer for treating Black students inequitably. They chose comfort for an adult supported by a union over accountability for how that adult may have treated a Black student.

If Black lives matter in these towns, then the education and protection of Black children must matter enough to defend them when the settlement period ends and the monitor has closed his file. It must matter enough to sit through the board meeting, to read the enrollment and discipline reports we fought to make public, and to insist that every promise on paper becomes real in a classroom. A lawn sign is not a policy. Any solidarity that ends the moment there is tension was never solidarity at all; it was just tolerance.

We integrated a house that was, in many ways, already burning. If this community means what it says on its lawns, it must take the baton and continue the progress we have made, especially after the formal oversight ends; this is when justice is hardest, but matters most.

“Everyone is down for the struggle, until the struggle begins” – Meshell Ndegeocello

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