

I moved to Vermont from NYC more than four years ago, with my then-husband. While we span a lot of identity groups just between ourselves (I'm Jewish, my spouse is Black bi-racial, I'm pansexual, she came out as transgender several months ago and is now my wife), we thought of Vermont as a "liberal" and welcoming place. While what we found here was certainly welcoming at times, it was not so much at others. It has been, to say the least, somewhat insular, and frankly rife with misinformation about those of us who are certainly Vermonters, as we pay our taxes here, but who are not necessarily of the white settler families who have been here for "seven generations."

On January 12th I read the local news, "Rutland High School Is Once Again Home Of The Raiders," and of course, my heart sank.

I was sad, but also more than sad. I was outraged and frankly, disgusted. As the education chair of the Rutland Area NAACP, and a member who sees our organization and other organizations like Rights and Democracy, SURJ, the ACLU and others working tirelessly to achieve equity and respect for all people in our state, the setback this represents is crushing.

My heart sinks because the NAACP and other organizations have spent so many precious volunteer hours, so much heart and caring into the work of educating others as to why it's simply wrong to objectify identity groups in any way, shape or form, to create "funny" ethnic mascots for the amusement of a largely white demographic. And to be honest, the fact that we have even had to spend time on an issue like this is mind-numbing. At this point, the issue can only be seen as a sort of sad rebellion of a bunch of forlorn folks stuck in the past, who seek to push back time and prevent the actualization of Dr. King's dream, the dream which became our dream, the dream of every single person who loves humanity and is committed to both equality and equity. It is frankly a pathetic effort to prevent the slow but steady movement of the arc of the moral universe as it bends toward justice – a justice where no group will ever again feel marginalized by their objectification as a mascot; where no-one is consistently demoralized by those who would shame us for or pretend not to see or acknowledge our races, our gender status, our sexuality, our languages, our differing abilities, our religion or indeed any aspect of our proud and beautiful identities.

And my heart sinks because once again, we see ignorance derailing what should be the real work of any and every school board, including Rutland's:

- to ensure that ALL students are receiving the best possible education;
- to ensure that ALL students are successful regardless of their external or internal, social or cultural contexts;
- to ensure that teachers and school administrators have the supports they need to foster real academic achievement, cultural relevance/responsiveness and social/emotional learning;
- and to mitigate harm of all kinds under conditions that are more difficult in many respects than those that public education has seen in more than a century.

We're currently in the middle of a truly serious educational crisis, both in Vermont and nationwide. Teachers and administrators are overworked, overwrought and exhausted, being expected to run different sorts of schooling simultaneously, and dealing with the social and emotional fallout of children still in the midst of a pandemic. They are undereducated and unprepared for the challenges that face them currently, particularly in the area of creating equitable education. And these same educators are quitting in record numbers, and there are no new candidates to fill the vacancies.

In Rutland, in the face of this massive crisis, we have a school board stacked with members that ran on a platform of restoring an obsolete and racist "mascot" and name to a high school sports team. Because THAT was the most important "educational issue" to them.

Even if we were not in the midst of a pandemic and a grave educational crisis, the idea that anyone would even put energy into reverting to a hurtful and harmful "mascot" because it was the misguided name of the team when they were growing up defies everything important about the sacred task of trying to make education better for all students, every day. Obviously, THAT is the business of a school board. That we have even had to spend our time, more than two years of our time, educating people about why an objectifying team name and mascot is harmful, is distressing.

I ask you, the Vermont legislature, to be relentless in your determination to mitigate ALL racism in educational institutions in this state.

I ask you to stop the harm being done by well-intentioned teachers who, sadly, not knowing any better, promote and perform racist and objectifying classroom simulations of slavery and other traumatic moments of the past 400 years (especially now, during Black History month) and then re-traumatize kids of color in their classrooms by putting them on the spot to "answer questions" as the "representatives of their race."

I ask you to promote the creation and implementation of equitable curriculum and standards reflecting such learning, pursuant to Act 1 (passed into law in 2019) to fully recognize the history, contributions, and perspectives of diverse and underrepresented groups and meet the needs of all students.

I ask you to work to achieve state-wide education for superintendents as well as school level administrators and teachers on understanding our biases, on how to teach Black history and the history of other people of color, which is everyone's history, which is the history of our country, in ways that don't lay in lifelong damage to children of color in Vermont classrooms, or promote harmful stereotypes to all students in our schools.

I ask you to create legislation banning racist mascots and other emblematic symbols of marginalization of all kinds statewide, so that we in organizations who spend massive numbers of volunteer hours trying to mitigate racism and all the other "isms" in our state are not tasked with trying to overturn this deeply emblematic mascot issue – because the issue should never

have existed in the first place. Objectification of one another's cultures is nothing that anyone should ever have to confront in school, which should always be first and foremost a place of belonging and safety for every student, every family, every community member.

I ask you to think about testimony that has been and will be given today and on many other occasions, the studies done in Vermont over the years demonstrating the outsized and indeed shocking degree of racism in schools and other institutions, the outpouring of difficult anecdotes and painful stories from Vermonters of color for these many years, and I ask you to commit to working tirelessly to mitigate this harm, and transform our state into the welcoming and embracing place that it must become, but by no means is, at the current time. Let us work together to make it so.