

Chairperson Tessa McKinley's Opening Statement

Acton-Boxborough Regional School Committee Meeting 12/23/2020

Welcome everyone to this special meeting that we have called. I want to say a few words about the purpose of the meeting tonight and to remark on the absence of public participation.

What happened last Thursday night was vulgar and inexcusable. It was a direct attack on the two black women on our committee. Our community is continually faced with the need to denounce racism but it's time that our committee go beyond condemnation and apology. The work to heal from this incident, as well as the countless others that have occurred in recent years, needs to be done not just by our committee but our community as a whole.

As I reflect on my own reaction to the incident and my responsibility to my colleagues and our community, I think back to one of the most powerful concepts gleaned from my SEED training: I don't know what I don't know. I need to listen and learn from the voices that represent different experiences from my own. My reading of Ibram X. Kendi's book has taught me that I am a part of our racist society. It has also taught me that I am in the privileged position of being elected to make policy. Kendi states clearly that "Every policy in every institution in every community in every nation is producing or sustaining either racial inequity or equity between racial groups." He goes on to say that "We all have the power to discriminate. Only an exclusive few have the power to make policy." I recognize my power and pledge to use my position to further our school district and our community in their anti-racist journey.

Since the incident, the outpouring of support from across our communities, our region, and our district has been heartening. Some people, however, have centered the conversation on themselves so I have decided to center Evelyn and Kyra's voices at this meeting. They were verbally attacked, they have been wronged, and their voices should guide the rebuilding of our committee as well as our actions going forward. I know that there are many individuals and groups who would like to voice their support for Evelyn and Kyra and to denounce racism. There will be time to voice those wishes. However, in an effort to minimize any additional trauma, I have decided that we will not entertain public comment at this meeting because Evelyn and Kyra's voices as well as their needs must remain the focus. We deeply value public participation and our communities have a rich tradition of participation in local government but tonight is about Evelyn and Kyra's experiences and the healing our committee needs to do in order to move our important work forward. Public participation will resume at our January meeting and in the meantime, comments can always be directed to abrsc@abschools.org.

Members will have an opportunity to make their own statements this evening and my hope is that we can vote on a joint statement regarding our response and our plans moving forward. As we listen to each other tonight, I'd like to remind everyone of some of the ground rules we used in our SEED training. In responding to each other, I hope you'll consider the intent versus the impact of your words. We began this work this summer in order to have these difficult conversations and we are all still learning. I will now allow members to share their statements if they desire.

Kyra Cook
Statement read at ABRSC meeting 12/23/2020

I am here, first and foremost, to say thank you.

Since Thursday, my phone has not stopped ringing. My mailbox is full of messages of love, encouragement, and hopes to do better. The strong statements of support from Superintendent Light and the AB Leadership Team, Chairperson McKinley, the High School Faculty, Rep. Gouveia, AB United Way, and other members of our community were deeply meaningful during a trying time. I have received emails from AB Students as young as 5th graders telling me they know what happened, they are so sorry, they hope we all do better, and they care about me. The idea that our diverse and dynamic student body knows about what happened to Evelyn and me, and cares enough to reach out in grief and support, has so much meaning for me and for us as a town. What happened—and what followed—will have a lasting impression on my sons, Evelyn's daughters, many of our district's students, and maybe even your kids watching at home. And that impression could last, perhaps, for a lifetime.

My favorite history professor in college started all his courses with a simple sentence that has always stuck with me. "Ideas have Consequences." So let me talk for a moment about ideas and their consequences. What we have seen over the last week is that we all have very definite ideas about our town. And those ideas have dictated how we've behaved. But maybe we should all be a little less certain about the ideas we hold dear. Maybe this town is a little more complicated than our ideas have led us to believe. Maybe we should make a point of exposing ourselves to new ideas, which will in turn affect our conduct and have concrete consequences.

What I saw in action this weekend is that sometimes the consequences of our ideas can be unplanned, unintended, and still powerful. The people who stood up to show support for Evelyn and me, to show support to the people of color in Acton and Boxborough, including our students, have helped reclaim the narrative.

I want you all to know that I see you and I appreciate you. I know that you are what Acton is all about. We're a dynamic, changing, complex community. We are demanding and we have high expectations. We are smart, sophisticated, and beautiful. Our children are poised, bold, and forward-thinking. I've said it many times since Thursday and I'll say it again: I am so proud to have been elected by this town to serve and fight for our students. I am so proud to be a resident of Acton. Acton is not just a white community with Black people in it. It's not just a place where people of color are interlopers in someone else's community. We have been here a long time -- in some cases, we've been here all along -- even if we haven't always been noticed. I chose this town for my boys and their future. So many of you have gone out of your way to tell me that my family and I belong here. I will be forever thankful for that.

I know that there are still consequences to some of the well-worn, yet now exposed and debunked, ideas that still linger in our community. There are still neighbors among us who are

scared and who need more support to feel seen, heard, known, and welcome in our towns. We need to continue to be there for them. And there will be instances when bigoted ideas resurface. We need to continue to reject and rebuke the small minority of people in town who would try to marginalize any Actonian for the color of their skin, or the language that they speak, or the religion that they practice, or where they were born.

And so, we move forward. When we look back on this moment, I hope we forget the incident itself and only remember how our community came together to reject racism. I hope we can feel a bit of pride in ourselves and our neighbors for refusing to be bystanders in the face of a heinous violation of our civic life. And I hope we can all be more fully committed to the idea of trying to make our community better than it was the day before.

I know I am. And I am grateful to you all for lending me the strength to do that.

December 23rd, 2020

Adam Klein Statement on Racism

In thinking how I would respond to the events of last week, I wanted to make sure that my experience did not overshadow that of Kyra and Evelyn. I thought about making a brief statement in support of them and that I should stand by them in this difficult time. As I was gathering these thoughts, the cuckoo clock in my office went off. This is a clock I inherited from my grandparents. At that moment I recalled an article sent to me about my grandfather, Ray Klein. Ray was a founding member and first president of the Oceanside Committee on Human Rights. Their goal was to bring about equality among the races. They worked locally to fight for equality and participated in the March on Washington in 1963.

My grandfather was a privileged white man from Long Island. He didn't just stand by in support. He stood up, he took action, and used his position to make life better for the whole community. So tonight, I am here to do the same. I'm here to actively use my white privilege to highlight the racism around us.

Racism exists in Acton and Boxborough.

Local officials need to use their voice to not only denounce and push for investigations, but to acknowledge that racism exists. No, one person or one racist act does not represent a town, but just one person denying the existence of or minimizing the insidious nature of racism in our towns is unacceptable.

Our first step to improving is to collectively accept that racism exists in Acton and Boxborough.

Either overtly, like we experienced last week, or implicitly, like we've seen in many public and private statements since. Racism exists in Acton and Boxborough.

I commit to using my voice to highlight the systemic racism around us and lift up the voices of those marginalized because of their religion, disability, or the color of their skin.

To adapt a quote from the Boxborough Select Board statement:

Kyra, Evelyn, you are not alone,
Evelyn, Kyra, you have value,
Kyra, Evelyn, you are appreciated,
Evelyn, Kyra, you belong here.

Thank-you.

Ginny Kremer

Statement re: racist attacks against two School Committee members, 12/23/2020

First, I want to underscore the false narrative circulating that, in voting to retire the Colonial as our school mascot, this Committee did not listen to both sides. That is simply not true—we did listen to both sides, but then unanimously voted to retire the Colonial. Second, I want to note that this Committee’s **unanimous** decision was a response to a request that was brought to us by a group of current AB students. Those students felt strongly that the Colonial cannot and does not represent them, and actually leads them to feel marginalized and unvalued. I understand that there are people in this community who do not agree that current students **should** feel that way about the Colonial. What I object to is any statement that demeans those students, or that calls into question their motives for seeking to retire their mascot.

I have seen members of the group called Save Our Colonial refer to this as a “cause,” which itself is unfortunate. I also note that two of the most active and vocal members of the Save Our Colonial group are grown men who graduated from AB years ago. It makes me wonder--in this moment of sickness, death, and crisis in this country--what it is that motivates grown-ups to devote their time, energy, and money to making sure that a school from which they graduated a long time ago keeps the mascot that was current when they attended that school.

I think at least part of the reason was expressed in the recent Boston Globe op-ed by Kimberly Atkins called The Year of Fear and the Fragility of the White, Male Myth:

“the denigration, dismissal, and erasure of women and people of color — in an effort to preserve the enduring, if inaccurate, vision of American exceptionalism being a product of [only] white men — isn’t new. History books taught us all that the Founders, after all, were Fathers — not the actual mothers, sisters, aunties, or Black and brown brothers upon whose shoulders the actual labor of building a new nation fell. That blind spot is necessary to perpetuate the myth. And those who seek to dispel the lie end up being blamed for the social chasms in the country that are being stoked by [the current occupant of the white house] and others seeking to protect the white, male hegemony at all costs.”

For those of you who question whether the recent outrageous and public racist attacks against two members of our Board are connected to our unanimous decision to retire the Colonial, I invite you to spend the many hours it took each of us to read through the 700 plus emails sent to us. You will find that a large percentage of those emails expressing opposition to retiring the Colonial spoke in extremely racist terms. And stunningly felt completely free to do so. So, if you are a community member who is in favor of keeping the Colonial as a mascot, I hope you will consider giving some thought to the reasons that the Colonial mascot is so important to you, despite the fact that it causes pain to so many of our current students.

Finally, I want to express my gratitude and support to Kyra and Evelyn. I am glad that they have experienced an out-pouring of support in the wake of that attack. Their voices, informed by their experiences, are deeply needed by our community and leadership. I thank them for their service.

Ginny S. Kremer, Esq.

“There is a long history of women and people of color (being) pushed to the margins or policed in the margins,” said Karin Wulf, historian and director of the Omohundro Institute of Early American History & Culture at the College of William & Mary.

In a year when a woman of color ascended to the vice presidency, Black Americans demanded that the justice system recognize that their lives matter, and women became the faces of the front-line fight against a deadly pandemic, that pushback — largely by white men seeking to put them in their place — has been unyielding.

As Wulf notes,

When patriotism is propaganda by Mail Obam-sa-win

Erasure is the collective art of forgetting, and one of the most effective tools of racism. It absolves the Town of Acton from addressing the from injustices that have festered since its “founding.” Erasure has nurtured ignorance through systemic miseducation—by telling history only from one perspective or painting a happy picture of the relationship between pilgrims and native peoples. Erasure has also nurtured ignorance through stereotyped iconography, putting the white, male colonial at the pinnacle of _____.

The fact is, the Colonial cannot and does not represent all of our students

Colonial settlers posturing as historians wrote legends for future white generations to be proud of. The glorification of settler-colonials.

American patriotism rests upon collective amnesia and the advancement of historical myths — because ignorance protects us from shame, and denial protects us from problem solving.

Time will never cure foundational injustices. Nor will retiring the Colonial

Amy Krishnamurthy

Statement read at ABRSC meeting, 12/23/2020

Thursday night I witnessed an attack that shook me to the core. I have never seen such a disgusting, vile, hateful assault on another human being, much less two women I truly respect and care about. Unfortunately, one thing became very clear to me. This was not the first, second, or even tenth time Kyra and Evelyn have witnessed and been the target of such hateful actions and words. You both, along with black, indigenous, and people of color, in our communities must be exhausted being forced to fight these battles alone. While words can often feel trite and insignificant, I promise you are not alone. I see you, I hear you, your voice matters and is essential. I promise to do all within my power to support you and let you know that you are not alone.

Nora Shine

Statement read at ABRSC meeting, 12/23/2020

I cannot truly know what it was like for Kyra and Evelyn to sit in our school committee meeting last week and view the hateful speech that was sent to all of us. Words that seek to dehumanize and shame, to disempower any of us, will not be effective here. I will continue to listen to constructive perspectives, broadening my own views, and continuously learning. An inclusive community is a strong one when we all work to see each other as equals, and understand each other.

There has been concern expressed that this recent racist attack has been wrongly conflated with the discussion about retiring the Colonial as the school mascot. It is true that **we do not yet know who** is responsible for the hate speech that was messaged to the school committee. That being said, as a school committee member, the context cannot be ignored. Our unanimous decision to retire the Colonial mascot has been met by surprise and confusion by many, and hopefully has led for others, as it did for me, to a broader understanding of the multiple meanings that this symbol holds.

Unfortunately, there also has been protest from a handful of persons who have been relentless in seeking to pressure a reversal of our decision. Our decision was meant to be a model for hearing multiple perspectives and demonstrating a willingness to care for and learn from each other. Unfortunately that model has not been emulated by some, who have instead tried to own the narrative, and who demand their view be upheld as the only correct interpretation of this complex symbol. In most cases, those who see the Colonial as symbolizing liberty and bravery, have come to understand that while this is true, there are also other truths.

Some who have been very vocal have taken an extreme and unbending position. As school committee members, we have been informed of outrageous conspiracy theories, false accusations of malintent, personal insults, including of committee members and our children, costly record demands, coercion, cries of "reverse racism," and shockingly racist rhetoric, all in opposition to our decision to retire the Colonial as a school mascot. Last week during our meeting, it was in **this** context that I heard that racist attacks were being made. (It is important for others to understand that most members did not have the chat open, and so did not see the comments during the meeting. It is also a rule of order that committee members do not reply to public comment during meetings.)

I am encouraged that there has been a strongly voiced commitment to antiracism across our two towns. As a school committee, we will continue to work deliberately toward valuing a diversity of voices, and hope to create a committee in which our perspectives are continuously broadened, with equity as a specific goal.

Angie Tso
Statement read at ABRSC meeting, 12/23/2020

First I want to say to Evelyn and Kyra, that you shouldn't have to deal with this, I am also so proud of your strength and spirit in standing firm in the face of this attack.

Words are powerful. In this internet and social media age, people can abuse their weight and think they can get away and hide behind a screen. Words are also dangerous, as they can have a different impact in different contexts. As a non-native speaker, I can share multiple experiences that the same word is understood very differently by me simply because of different cultural backgrounds and understanding.

With this Zoom bombing, I hope that it's very clear that our school, committee and community are all on the same page, that hate speech will never be tolerated by anyone, and that action needs to be taken to stop racism in our community.

This will be very hard to do as racism exists. We will do it together with policies to educate and make sure that for all of our students, no one will have to experience this but will have the same opportunity to achieve what they desire regardless of race or whatever differences. We also do it by listening and understanding that we all have different backgrounds, therefore, we often cannot imagine how others feel. We will do it by encouraging and learning from each other. We will do it by thinking about the words you will say as if to say it to yourself.

Racism has no place here but inclusiveness and love do.

AB strong.

Marie Altieri Statement
School Committee Meeting
December 23, 2020

Evelyn and Kyra,

I am so sorry that this happened to you. This was a horrific and racist act of violence and

I am so sorry that you were the target. There is no excuse for what happened to you.

I stand with you, I hear you, I am inspired by you, and I learn from you. I am committed to use my privilege and my position of power to fight the racism that exists in our community and in our schools. This incident, and other incidents happened on my watch. Other racist and anti-semitic hateful acts against our students have happened on my watch. I reflect on that, and constantly think about ways in which I could have done better, and we could have done better.

I commit to doing better in the future. I have learned a lot since many of us stood on the field in June two and a half years ago in the face of hateful anti-semitic symbols.

I know I have much more to learn, and there is much more I need to do to help eliminate racism and hate from our schools. I am grateful for our community partners. I have been reading and hearing the feedback from you and community members.

Evelyn and Kyra, I am so grateful that you have the generosity of spirit and are brave enough to donate your time and experience to serve on this Committee with a vision of a better school district where each and every child in Acton and Boxborough can be included and know that they are loved and that they belong. I look forward to continuing to learn from you and I am committed to doing better.