

Student Council Solutions to
Ongoing Violent Conflict and
School Climate

Sunday, May 7, 2017

To Dr. Marseille, Dr. Smith, Dr. McFall and the School Board of Cheltenham Township,

Since the events of May 3rd, there is no doubt that the community is shocked, surprised and unhappy. Unfortunately, for the students of Cheltenham High School, this event has just been another regular violent occurrence in our learning environment. Individual students, teachers and various student organizations, including Student Council, Women's Student Union, Black Student Union, Cheltenham Leaders in Equity and Achievement Reform to name a few, have requested any response from administration and yet, we have received very little effective solutions or visible changes to our environment - until now.

Now we see a visible response to the reality that we've experienced during our entire high school careers. And we, the disillusioned, confused students, must ask why now, why not before. Was it because eight teachers were injured, despite teachers' warnings of this circumstance potentially occurring for years? Was it because this time, the fight was leaked to the media?

Why not before? Why wasn't anything done when very clearly students have needed services or intervention in our school. We, the students, have been blamed for creating this climate, and although we can accept some responsibility, we cannot bear everything on our shoulders, for it is you - administration - that creates the policy and it is you - administration - that enforces, or rather, doesn't enforce it.

Student Council went to administration in January requesting action in response to the repeated violent confrontations in our school. We were told that all disputes were personal, between specific individuals, that our community would be safe. And we moved on, feeling

unheard and swept under the table. However, we now find it is imperative that we go to the public with our questions, grievances, and most importantly, our solutions.

Since Thursday, May 4th, Student Council has been actively taking student statements about this incident. Consistently, students have brought up questions and ideas about our current discipline policies, the changes that are being made to them, the media's role in events, the lack of transparency between administration and stakeholders, the need for mental health and counseling services, and the district wide issues of the achievement gap.

Because of the ineffectiveness of current policies, we know that administration realized that they should construct a new discipline chart for the high school. We must ask that this chart is complete and official by the start of the 2017-2018 school year. We suggest that students who have been in incidents and disciplined successfully and teachers who have been a part of successful discipline protocol be included as advisors in writing the new policy. This inclusion will create a qualitative, data-driven, student-inclusive approach to discipline, something that we believe can be more effective than the traditional top-down policies. We suggest that the policy include consideration of the circumstances of individual perpetrators, including past incidents, mental health and level of provocation. However, we want to be sure that there is no special treatment for any students based on race, personal connections or socio economic status. When these standards are completed and voted on by the board, we ask that they be shared directly to all stakeholders - students, teachers, and parents. The students ask that restorative practices and preventative measures be a part of the new policy, including: the development of the youth court, long term counselors specializing in conflict resolution, effective training in conflict resolution for adults in the building, a special program for freshman and transfer students with discipline issues and an assembly during the first week of school that lays out rules and expectations.

I'd like to move on to the role of the media. Perhaps the most disturbing and unsettling thing of this entire incident is not only the negative portrayal of our close-knit, loving community, but also the perpetuated stereotype of young black women in the media. This has not been discussed, mentioned or acknowledged in any formal form by administration but many black students want to discuss this. I informally learned there was one mental health professional leading discussions on this matter, but this wasn't publicized to the entire student body. Why? How are students supposed to heal when they don't even know of the opportunity to get help? Additionally, there has been no acknowledgement from administration about the trolling of white supremacists and racists, no acknowledgment of the parody videos made by surrounding school districts on various social media platforms. Again, students need to be aware of any counselors or services available to discuss these deplorable circumstances.

We realize by now that major cause of the dysfunction in our school district is the lack of transparency and honest communication between all stakeholders. We as a community must construct a common image to more clearly communicate protocol and policies between students, faculty, and the community. We request regular class meetings, or that homerooms be reinstated as the Student-Council has urged, so students can discuss and brainstorm ideas to improve school climate. Although we had class meetings the day after last week's fights, and we appreciate there was instructional time sacrificed to do so, students were still talked at instead of talked with, and blamed for the climate and incident. This was not effective and perpetuates the student-administration conflict that has plagued the school climate since the 2014 sit-in. We ask that the faculty and administration effectively communicate about policies as well - students should not have to lose educational opportunities, whether that's through instructional time or teacher's leaving CHS, because of the personal problems teachers and administrators have with each other.

Students are in school to learn and teachers are in school to teach, and because of this ongoing conflict, our education is being sacrificed.

As a solution to this climate and these repeated violent confrontations, Student Council urges that we improve our mental health and counseling services and address the issue as a unified District. Our guidance department is currently overworked and understaffed. We cannot expect them to work on academic and college logistics AND mental health counseling at the same time. We need permanent professionals to help students resolve disputes. Although we thank administration for acknowledging this with the temporary addition of a professional that specializes in social/emotional conflict related to violent confrontations, we strongly advocate for an individual to be offered a permanent position in our high school. We also ask that administration meets with all student leaders to discuss the lack of mental and emotional health services at the high school. We would like to create a space for students to voluntarily explain mental health and behavioral interventions that have worked to improve upon our policies and approaches. As students that have been in this district for a very long time, we see the culmination and proliferation of violent circumstances in our high school as district wide issues. We know that discipline problems begin in the elementary schools and middle schools, as transitions are unsupported and discipline unenforced we need to diagnose when the issues begin to make the future policies more effective. We hope that the new school board written discipline protocol addresses this. We also want to acknowledge that our district's wide achievement gap contributes to the repeated amount of fights. Our community is incredibly and wonderfully diverse, and has many racial and ethnic identities, socio-economic statuses, religions, and family structures. We need to realize that our diversity is our strength, but the disparity created by achievement gap and violent confrontation will weaken our community. Students who want help

can't find it – and they continually are marginalized in a school that ignores their needs. We ask that any new discipline policy takes the achievement gap into account so that we find a solution that addresses both violent confrontation and the academic divide in our school.

We, the students of Cheltenham High School, love our school, our community. Even though many of us are graduating, we want our district to improve and to give our great high school experience to upcoming students. This place is special and we know this, but we must fix our problems instead of deny them.

Signed,

Pagona Paige Kytzidis '17, President of Student Council 2016-2017

Isaac Smoler-Schatz '17, Speaker of Student Council 2015-2017

Valerie Melecio '17, Secretary/Chief of Staff of Student Council 2016-2017; Co-Founder of Latinos Unidos

Matthew Werner '17, Treasurer of Student Council 2016-2017

Erin Kuchler '18, Speaker of Student Council 2017-2018

Lillian Phung '18, Chief of Staff of Student Council 2017-2018; Research Chair of Student Council 2015-2017; National Honor Society Secretary 2016-2017; Asian Student Association Secretary 2015-2017

Liza Becker '17 Class of 2017 President 2014-2017

Javier Moraleda '17 Class of 2017 Treasurer 2014-2017; National Honor Society President 2016-2017

Emmett Deitcher '17 Class of 2017 Vice President 2015-2017; Vice President of Spanish National Honor Society 2016-2017

Aminah Johnson '18 Civics and Community Engagement Chair of Student Council 2017-2018; Founder of Cheltenham Leaders in Equity Achievement Reform (CLEAR)

Alyssa Davidson '17 President of Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA)

Antonio Mosquera '17 *Class of 2017 Secretary 2015-2017; Cheltenham Men's Track and Field Captain 2015-2017*

Chad Johnson '18, *President of Student Council 2017-2018*

Malachi Somerville '18, *President of Black Student Union 2016-2017*

Michelle Ampofo '18 *Accessibility Chair of Student Council 2017-2018; 2016-2017 Treasurer of Black Scholars; 2015-2016 Secretary of the Class of 2018*

Eve Glazier '19 *Civics and Community Engagement Director of Student Council 2017-2018*

Autumn Angelettie '17, *Overseeing Director of Women's Student Union 2016-2017, Leader of Up the Octave 2016-2017*

Jacob Smith '17 *Research Committee Chair of Student Council; President of Spanish Honor Society 2016-2017*

Lionel Smoler Schatz '19', *Treasurer of Student Council 2017-2018*

Aquilah Ohemeng '17', *Vice President of Black Scholars Program, School Spirit Chair of Student Council 2016-2017*

Grace Osiemi '17, *Black Scholars Program President 2016-2017; Women's Student Union Director of Outreach 2016-2017*

Madeleine August '17, *Women's Student Union Director of Administration 2016-2017, Leader of Up the Octave 2016-2017*

Julian Morein '17, *Cheltonian Student Newspaper Editor-in-Chief 2016-2017*

Taylor Laing '18', *Secretary of Black Scholars Program 2016-2017, Captain of the Cheltenham Color Guard 2016-2018*

Bridget McHugh '19, *Dance and Spirit Chair of Student Council 2017-2018*

Ezinne Ottih '17', *School Spirit Chair of Student Council 2015-2016, Charity Chair of Student Council 2016-2017*

Leslie Melecio '19, *Class of 2019 Vice President 2016-2017; Director of Charity of Student Council 2017-2018*

Mavi Han Chen '18, *President of Key Club 2016-2017*

Cassie Malec '19, *Dance and Spirit Chair of Student Council 2017-2018*

Jada Pham '18, *Class of 2018 Treasurer 2015-2017, Charity Chair of Student Council 2016-2017, Environment and Sustainability Chair of Student Council 2017-2018*