



Did Social Justice Summer 2020 Make DEI Work Easier or Harder Inside of Our Schools?

By Educator Barnes – October 25, 2020

The protests this summer focused on the importance of acknowledging racism, demanding police reform, and showing that Black lives do matter. School districts across the country felt compelled to release statements acknowledging the social unrest. Some of these statements mentioned actions these districts had already taken and what these districts were going to do moving forward. These statements did not necessarily offer protection for teachers.

There have been teachers of color and white teacher allies who have been engaged in social justice work for years in their schools in either an official capacity or an unofficial capacity. Then, there are teachers new to the cause. This summer convicted their hearts and pushed them to do more. Whether new or deeply embedded in the work, educators are getting pushback from fellow colleagues and parents.

Some parents believe that teachers are attempting to indoctrinate their children. Recently, Indy K12 covered this issue in "[Exposing Students to Different Viewpoints Is Not Indoctrination](#)." If living through a pandemic was not enough of a burden for educators, now some have the additional burden of worrying about parents trying to get them fired because they are teaching about racism and social justice. There is also a fear of being ostracized.

I know all about being ostracized. I returned to my school this year with people saying I was toxic and not promoting a positive culture at my school because I said the school was not emotionally safe for all employees and because of my education activism and advocacy outside of my job. When I was asked how I was able to return if I felt this was a real issue, I had to remind people that being an educator is my purpose and my calling. No person or opposition is going to deter me from this purpose. Also, I'm not new to these situations. I am a Black educator who won't keep her mouth shut when injustices are happening. I know the risk of this, but the risks are so much greater when my mouth stays closed.

I'm grounded but everyone is not. Since this summer, I have been communicating with educators across the state of Indiana and in other states by text, phone call, and Zoom call about issues they are having and how to push through. These educators aren't all educators of color. I talked to people about them getting in trouble for wearing a Black Lives Matter shirt or mask, from using a novel they used for years, but is now a problem because of one complaint, administration visiting their classroom three times as much without the purpose being clear, equity work constantly being delayed, and harassment from other colleagues.

The weight of listening has made me incredibly sad. Educators are trying to do what is best and instead of school and district leaders being supportive and making changes, they criticize, take a neutral stance, penalize, or do nothing. One person I talked to has resigned twice during this pandemic, and others have resigned and switched jobs once.

[Melissa Statz](#), a Wisconsin teacher, had parents demanding she be fired because of a lesson she did about what occurred over the summer. The school district didn't fire her and the district also took a neutral stance. Afterward, there was vandalism that included the n-word

being written on school property. Later the superintendent said, "I see how my perspective was offensive and understand that there is no neutrality when pursuing equity ... The fact that we even need to specifically say that Black Lives Matter to affirm the importance of human beings is to say that we as a nation have not done a good job of regarding Black and brown people as valuable members of our society historically or currently."

A teacher should not have to get dragged through the mud to get support. I assert that if a school district won't support teachers who are actually doing diversity, equity, and inclusion work, then they aren't actually interested in doing the work and are only being performative. The events this summer should have made this work easier, but unfortunately, this doesn't seem to be the case.