

Loving Concern @ Dalton

An Open Letter to The Dalton Community

Dear Dalton Community,

We are writing with heavy hearts and loving concern over the future of Dalton. As alumni and parents, we have been part of Dalton and its wonderful community of teaching and learning for several decades. Amidst these trying times, we want to step back and remember what matters most. Dalton's great strengths have been 1) an educational philosophy that celebrates teaching and learning, independent thought, curiosity and creativity, and 2) an extraordinarily dedicated and caring faculty. To these strengths, the school has added one more great light—an unbelievable diversity of the student body, unique among its peers, of which the school may be very proud. While the passion for a progressive education—a true liberal arts, child-centered education that nurtures a love of learning and curiosity native to children—seems to have waned over the years, nothing prepared us for this fall.

Love of learning and teaching is now being abandoned in favor of an “anti-racist curriculum.” Our new mission is “vocal” and explicit. How else are we to interpret the repeated communications from the Head of School pledging allegiance to a new ideology that is untested, and worse yet, untestable? How else can we interpret a curriculum night where every single class, from science to social studies to physical education, must now be rewritten to embody “anti-racism?” When so many of Dalton's extraordinary faculty sign a letter that shows little interest in the education of children, the joy of learning or the kids' intellectual development? Every class this year has had an obsessive focus on race and identity, “racist cop” reenactments in science, “de-centering whiteness” in art class, learning about white supremacy and sexuality in health class. Wildly age-inappropriate, many of these classes feel more akin to a Zoom corporate sensitivity training than to Dalton's intellectually engaging curriculum.

Many of us do not feel welcome at Dalton any more. That really hurts to write. This ideology is extremely exclusionary to those families (perhaps a majority of the Dalton community) who don't identify as part of an oversimplified racial dichotomy in a beautiful and diverse world, or those who choose not to make their racial identity the centerpiece of their family life or their children's education.

Dalton's progressive educational philosophy believes that each child has a spark, and all we need to do is fan that flame with a love of learning, books, art and human

civilization, to cherish nature and love and respect our fellow humans. This approach is enshrined in The Dalton Plan. You'd never know that to listen to this year's classes and administration. The curriculum is being revamped in a rush in the middle of a pandemic. Not once this semester have any of us heard (and because the classes are taking place in our homes, we hear) mentioned the joy of reading, of learning, of independent thinking, of curiosity, of discovering math and science, of human cultures. What we have heard is a pessimistic and age-inappropriate litany of grievances in EVERY class. We fear that rote learning of political concepts that must be accepted as gospel is not a nutritious educational experience.

In place of a joyful progressive education, students are exposed to an excessive focus on skin color and sexuality, before they even understand what sex is. Children are bewildered or bored after hours of discussing these topics in the new long-format classes. Dalton used to awaken children's imagination with fiction, art, Aztec bookmaking, the Renaissance, ITL and Carmino Ravosa musicals. Having children focus on skin color and their sexual identities, rather than immersing them in the beauty and joy of human civilization, the wonder of science and nature, or the meaning and power of words and math and music, seems nuts to us.

The children are innocent, decent, humane young people full of joy in a diverse classroom. It's almost as if we are punishing the children for "the sins of the fathers." Some of this material seems a strange thing to teach seven or ten or twelve year olds. They shouldn't be anti anything. They should be pro the beauty of humanity, works of art, creativity, loving and caring for each other as citizens and community members. We have each found ways to make community building and social change part of our life missions, many of us with the tools that Dalton taught us.

This new "anti-racist" obsession with race is incredibly exclusionary and hurtful to many of the children and their families, and many are considering leaving. Why would anyone voluntarily send their children to be taught that they are guilty regardless of their decency and kindness? A school where they are constantly reminded of the color of their skin, not the content of their character. What Black parent wants the other children to feel sorry for their kid and look at them differently? We have spoken with dozens of families, of all colors and backgrounds, who are in shock and looking for an alternative school for their children.

Jim Best's recent email suggested that the school "will always welcome community input and honest debate around how to meaningfully bring these principles to life." Nothing could be further from the truth. There is not an intellectually honest debate over the role and scope of "anti-racism" at the school and in the curriculum. It is an

anti-intellectual, doctrinaire soliloquy of the Head of School, perhaps with the assistance of corporate consultants who are invited to indoctrinate the rest.

Please understand the fear surrounding the implementation of this radical change to the curriculum. No one can speak up for fear of being branded a racist. Or for exhibiting white fragility. Nonsense. We are all caring people who want a better world. As a result of this fear, the Board and the administration don't realize the depth of the pain this has caused to many families, or how many feel compelled to leave Dalton altogether. Jim's recent email states that this is a done deal. "We agree that our commitment is clearly aligned with our mission, strategic plan, and values as a culture and a community. *I need all of us to understand that as well.*" Honest debate? Basically it says we know what's best, and get on board.

We are concerned that the administration has lost its way, and that the Board appears unable or unwilling to speak out and represent the Dalton community as a whole.

When a great institution undertakes a periodic curricular review, and certainly a revamping of the core mission of the institution, it is done with the advice of world renowned educators, faculty, board members, parents and alumni. We have forgotten that before being an "anti-racist" institution, we must be an educational institution. We can't remake the curriculum only with the expertise of teachers specialized in "anti-racism," or we will accidentally make that the focus of the curriculum.

At most, social justice is just one part of the educational world. We need a broad based group of passionate educators to look at the curriculum over a period of years and restore our educational philosophy. We have confused a progressive pedagogical model with progressive politics. Even for people who are sympathetic to that political viewpoint, the role of a school is not to indoctrinate politically. It's to open the minds of children to the wonders of the world and learning. The Dalton we love, that has changed our lives, is nowhere to be found. And that is a huge loss.

To be clear, we abhor racism. We celebrate Dalton's diversity and its inclusive environment, and we believe in better outcomes for Black Americans. Diversity is the best thing to happen to Dalton in the last twenty years. We, too, have been inspired by the tragic events of last summer and are taking action in our own ways to make a difference. We totally understand the administration's desire to do something. We simply object to "anti-racism" on philosophical, ethical and pedagogical grounds, and we support other ways to oppose racism and teach children to become thoughtful and empathetic people. In our view, these recent curricular changes achieve precisely the opposite results as intended.

As many scholars have noted, the recent push for “anti-racism” education rests on unquestioned and potentially flawed philosophical underpinnings. It flattens out the rich diversity of the student body. There is no questioning allowed. Look at how divisive this initiative has been. One can embrace the ideals and hard work of making the world a better place without straying from our core educational mission. We risk losing what makes Dalton special. We must recommit ourselves to finding it.

It’s unfortunate that the discourse has become so fraught that the numerous community members who contributed to this letter feel compelled to remain anonymous. We hope this communication will help the Board and the administration become aware of the depth of hurt that has been unleashed with recent changes to the direction of Dalton. In the spirit of getting a meaningful dialogue going, we have shared a few ideas below that we think could contribute to restoring the trust of the community. We have set up lovingconcernatdalton@protonmail.com as a confidential way for people to reach out and share ideas. Any creative ideas to help the community connect with Dalton’s core mission would be welcome!

Most importantly, if you share our love of Dalton’s educational mission and our concerns about the future of the school, please reach out to the Board of Trustees, share this letter widely and make your voice heard.

If we focus on ideology at the expense of curiosity and creativity, we will extinguish the spark. Let’s celebrate what makes Dalton special—an extraordinarily diverse community, a wise and enthusiastic faculty, curious and engaged students and a distinct educational philosophy that has survived the test of time. Let’s build on that foundation to continue to grow and improve in a patient and thoughtful way. We must dig deep into the Dalton spirit and get back on track with an exciting and meaningful progressive liberal arts education.

Sincerely,

Loving Concern @ Dalton

Ideas for Restoring the Confidence of the Dalton Community

In response to this crisis of confidence, we believe three important steps are necessary, and we outline them below. We welcome a dialogue and the free exchange of ideas— if there are better ideas those would be great too!

First, the Dalton Board must immediately appoint an impartial ombudsperson to advocate for Dalton’s educational mission and to solicit feedback from parents and alumni about the changes to the curriculum. This could be an Ombudsperson for Curricular Excellence as outlined by the incoming Board Chair. This must be someone who is widely trusted, someone that parents and alumni may feel comfortable reaching out to in absolute confidence. Ideally it would be someone well steeped in the Dalton way. This person would be ethically and legally bound by confidentiality.

It is essential that this ombudsperson be impartial and not come from the DEI industry or specialization, which would defeat the purpose of having an independent voice. The recent appointment of experts on DEI from outside Dalton to ascertain whether we have gone far enough is not sufficient. These may be respected and talented professionals of good will, but the nature of their mandate and professional expertise does not necessarily position them to look at whether the school is being served by the curricular changes, whether the school is staying on mission, and whether the proportion of DEI materials in the curriculum is right sized. They are not positioned to see how divided and upset the parent body and alumni are. It is important that the Board take this responsibility and not the administration. The administration must not be involved in the selection or guidance of this important representative of the community.

Second, the ombudsperson must open a confidential avenue of communication with community members and hold an anonymous survey of the faculty, parents and alumni to understand how the community feels about the pedagogical changes. This is very different from the survey being proposed by the administration. If the results of the survey aren’t anonymous, it’s basically useless. It must be designed and implemented by an ombudsperson accountable to the board and bound by confidentiality to honor the anonymity of respondents. This is the only way to get a real feel of the depth of the crisis that has been created. The survey should include the following areas:

1. Do you feel Dalton has stayed true to its educational mission?
2. What are your thoughts about the Dalton “anti-racism curriculum?”
3. Does “anti-racism” make you feel hurt or excluded?

4. Is the cadence right? i.e. should it be every class, every day, every subject? or perhaps an assembly once a year? once a month? In response to current events?
5. Would you be happier supporting diversity, equity and inclusion, or DEI, without "anti-racism" in the curriculum?
6. Is a DEI program which appears to segregate parents and children by race in groups and clubs contributing to healing within the community?
7. Do parents and faculty feel the new material is age-appropriate?
8. Does the community have confidence in the administration and DEI leadership to champion Dalton's educational mission?

Third, the school must immediately put a hold on this new "anti-racist" curriculum and revert to the Dalton curriculum. Immediately pause the "anti-racist" teacher training programs, Pollyanna, and other well-intentioned programs that are altering the curriculum and mission without proper review. First Program students and Middle Schoolers have been exposed to a college-oriented curriculum with sexuality and violence. Make Health and Assembly optional until there is a consensus that these are age-appropriate. Empower the teachers to passionately take responsibility for the children's education and teach their subject matter in accordance with the Dalton Plan, as they have done so well for 100 years. It seems insane that we have to say this, but let's restore the centrality of education to the school's mission.

With regard to the teacher trainings driving curricular changes, a glance at Polyanna's website suggests that their recommended curriculum has already permeated Dalton classes from social studies to science. This is a brand new, untested endeavor and it appears that there are close ties between the board, PA, and administration that suggest a potential conflict of interest, or at least a muddling of priorities and missions.

The company's website features a quote from Jim Best: "Pollyanna is transformative. You'll talk the talk, you'll walk the walk, and you'll see the world—and your work—in a new light." We don't believe it is right to transform the Dalton curriculum and pedagogy with a new "anti-racist" pedagogy, or "racial literacy." It appears some of the worst abuses this year stem from this source. It's quite clear that over the summer, when schools across the country were thinking deeply about how to reopen and teach students, the Dalton administration was on on a crusade to radically transform the school's curriculum and pedagogy. Many parents and alumni have lost confidence in the administration's leadership and ability to make independent and unbiased decisions about the content of the curriculum.

A neutral and respected ombudsperson appears to us the only way that a reasoned dialogue can be achieved in the wake of a highly divisive top-down rollout of curricular changes, in an atmosphere of fear of speaking up. If the Dalton Board is not willing to step up and get an independent person that can be trusted to take the pulse of the community and act as steward of Dalton's educational mission, as concerned parents and alumni, we would be open to finding a neutral third party for this important role.

We understand that the Board isn't set up to design the curriculum. They are, however, trustees and stewards of Dalton's educational mission. Curricular changes that affect that mission should concern the Board. In civics terms, these curricular changes have been taken in the heat of the moment by Executive Order, but are serious enough to require a Constitutional Amendment.

Once the situation has been stabilized and the school reconnects with its core mission, we can consider a multi-year curricular review. The content of the curriculum could be considered holistically by some of the finest minds of the educational world. It is in this context of ensuring a broad liberal arts education that curricular changes might best be considered and evaluated in accordance with Dalton's educational mission.

We hope this is food for thought, and we implore the Board to open a more meaningful dialogue with the community before the administration makes major changes to Dalton's curriculum and educational philosophy.