

October 13, 2020

Dear Faculty and Staff,

In addition to the tremendous challenges presented by the COVID virus, there is no question that the highly charged political climate in our country can have a significant impact on our students, our schools, and the educational process. Elections at the state and federal levels, as well as the complex issues related to racial injustice, can be very polarizing and often lead to heated discussions among educators, families, and students. Therefore, it is important that all of us adhere to the relevant policies and guidelines when approaching these topics, to foster thoughtful academic discourse, protect the rights of those involved, and ensure safe, inclusive learning environments.

As educators, we take very seriously our responsibility and legal obligation to educate students about the history and current events in the United States and about the importance of civic engagement to our democracy. In a country of nearly 330 million people – with diverse backgrounds, religions, and political views – there will never be agreement on all issues. Our educational system is designed not to tell students what to think about issues, but rather, how to gather and examine information, think critically, engage with their peers, and draw informed conclusions.

At the same time, we know that many of us have strong opinions and deeply held beliefs of our own. When political issues arise in schools – particularly when students ask thoughtful questions – it can be difficult to set aside our individual perspectives and respond without bias. Some argue that even in school settings, students and adults are protected under the First Amendment to freedom of speech. However, that provision of the Constitution does not give individuals the right to voice any opinion, in any setting. The circumstances and context do matter, and in the case of schools, we have a legal and ethical responsibility to ensure that our viewpoints do not create division or disruption that would be harmful to students or staff. This year in particular, with so many members of our community feeling the anxiety and strain of the COVID-19 pandemic, we must be more vigilant than ever about creating school cultures rooted in empathy and support rather than conflict and opposition.

With Election Day just three weeks away, it is important also to remind the entire community that the law prohibits any form of campaigning in schools or on school grounds. Furthermore, public employees are prohibited from engaging in any political advocacy on school grounds, during the school day, or using any school property or resources to campaign or raise funds for any candidate or referendum. This includes a prohibition on hanging signs endorsing a particular candidate or position on a ballot question. It is also not

permissible for teachers or other staff members to advocate for any political candidate in class. When engaging students in discussion about politics, each of us must remain neutral about our own views, while creating a constructive forum for students to explore and discuss the issues. Verbal or symbolic speech which results in disruption, disorder, or interference with instruction or professional activities is prohibited.

We recognize that in this political environment, the stakes are high, and many of us are deeply passionate about the issues at hand. In a community composed of people with different viewpoints, we will undoubtedly encounter neighbors and colleagues whose opinions may not only be different from ours, but may even seem offensive, prejudicial, and out of step with the values of our school community. As objectionable as these viewpoints may be, they do not negate our responsibility to maintain safe, civil learning environments focused on students' academic growth and social-emotional well-being.

If you have questions or concerns about these matters, please contact me directly. I am truly grateful to the members of this community for demonstrating kindness, compassion, and decency during these incredibly challenging times.

Best,

James

James F. Jette
Superintendent
Milton Public Schools
(617) 696-4808/4809

"If you're always trying to be normal, you will never know how amazing you can be"
Maya Angelou

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