I want to thank Dr. Spells and the SBCSC for giving me the opportunity to offer a few brief remarks about the value and importance of public education here in South Bend. First, I want to say that although I am standing before you, it is not just my voice that you are hearing. In preparing these remarks, I spoke with members of Black Lives Matter, the New Black Power Movement, Community Action for Education, and the Community Forum for Economic Justice, all groups to which I belong or support, and all who are deeply interested and invested in preserving public education.

As an historian and an activist, I am deeply committed to public education, as I know you all are. What I want to share briefly is why I believe that public education is important and why we have to marshal our resources to not only support our public schools and the children who attend them, but to transform our school system in the face of the growing ‘school choice’ movement.

At the last board meeting, folks spoke out against state policies that criminalize youth activities, some of which target young people for perceptions of potential acts that have not even been done, and others which potentially and punitively punish our youth by taking away their driving privileges for acts unrelated to their driving habits. Many of the voices speaking out were those of young people who have felt the impact of policies like these.

Given the fundamental role that public education plays in shaping our society, the question comes down to what kind of world do we want to live in and what kind of world do we want to leave future generations. We have a sense of the world that Betsy DeVos, the new Secretary of Education, and the administration of the new president would bestow upon us. In this world, unfettered free-enterprise would dominate the economy, conservative social values would dictate how we should live, and private charity and faith-based services would replace publically funded programs. School “choice” is the mechanism by which they would carry out this mandate on the education front. We have to acknowledge the racial implications of this ideology and its historical role in targeting Black and Brown people, especially our children.

We see this with Betsy DeVos’ assertion that HBC’s were “real pioneers when it comes to school choice.” This is not only patently racist, more importantly, it is ahistorical and presents an ‘alternative fact’ to the real genesis of school choice. School choice, as a political issue, arose in the wake of Brown v. Board of Education when states, especially those in the South, began giving state subsidies of public money (vouchers) to white parents for private or parochial education in all white schools.

Supporting Devos’ school choice policy is like supporting Nancy Reagan’s “Just Say No” campaign in the 80’s. It is an innocent sounding slogan that is loaded with racial and class implications that particularly target African Americans. It is also fully in line with Donald Trump’s claim that school choice is the “civil rights issue of our time.” This is a cynical appropriation of the fight for justice that African Americans and other marginalized people have waged throughout their time in this nation. Trump’s assertion is the ultimate exercise of white privilege. Under DeVos and Trump, civil rights are truncated and bastardized; “choice” for those who can be made into their image, shaped by their commitment to privatization, and uphold a set of values that maintains the status quo regulating people of color to second-class status.
This does not mean that public education in South Bend is perfect. It is not. The level of disproportionate disciplinary actions against Black students is at a crisis level. If South Bend’s public schools are to remain the primary institution charged with educating our youth, it must address significant deficiencies. Competition from private and charter schools is bleeding the corporation of students and resources. In order to build Team South Bend, a number of things need to be addressed to make public schools the first choice for parents and our youth.

First, however, we should look at the data for disciplinary actions, which gives us a window into the how we relate to our students of color.

According to the data on the SBCSC website, in 2015-2016:
Black students are 35.5% of the total school population
White students are 32.6% of the total school population

When we look at the data for EOY disciplinary actions for 2015-2016, we find that 64% of students who were given OSS were Black, compared to 14% white students. 62% of students given ISS were Black, and 72% of all expulsions were Black students. Numbers like these show that it cannot just be about the kids. There is clearly an inherent racial bias at work that is systemic and institutional, and the repercussions are not surprising. Research shows that “students who were suspended were five times more likely to drop out of school [and] students who were suspended/expelled are, in fact more likely to be in contact with the juvenile Justice System.”

Anecdotal evidence shows that Black youth are punished more often and more severely than their white counterparts for engaging in the same behavior. And the kids know it. This creates unwanted consequences on both side of the racial divide. White students who get away with or suffer fewer repercussions for their behavior feel a sense of entitlement that reinforces their exercise of white privilege. On the other hand, Black students know that this is unfair, leading them to disengage and resign themselves to a world in which their success is not encouraged or valued.

Furthermore, as one educator noted:

It is important to remember that when measuring discipline disparities, you can’t just count the number of days recorded as out of school suspension then compare to see if the numbers went down. Removal from instruction can be masked in numerous ways to keep the number of suspensions that are actually reported low. The focus has to be on ensuring that all students have access to quality education. The district is considering starting additional alternative schools and many schools already have what is called “school within a school” model where certain students are relegated to a classroom or area in the building separate from other students. We have to evaluate these placements as they are often lead by non-certified staff, security personnel, or the least experienced teachers and have little if any instruction taking place. Research has proven these types of alternative settings as ineffective and detrimental to a

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2 John Ritzler, Ph.D., Executive Director, Research & Evaluation Services for the SBCSC.
student’s academic and behavioral progress. In fact, these placements most often serve as a funnel to the pipeline - a temporary holding space on the way to drop out or JJC.4

I share this because you are the leaders that we look to for ensuring that all of our children are receiving a quality education that is sensitive to cultural and historical differences. Alternatives to public education, like those championed by Betsy DeVos and Donald Trump are not the solution. The answer does not lie in dismantling our public schools, but rather in strengthening them. If we abandon public education we face significant consequences that include:

1) A less diverse student body and a growing institutional system of segregating Black and poor students.
2) A failure to develop compassionate and empathetic citizens who are engaged in a democratic society. The school choice movement reinforces the notion of everyone for themselves and prioritizes individual uplift rather than collective advancement.
3) We face the misappropriation of public funds meant for the many as they are redirected to the private benefit of the few.
4) This means that there would be fewer resources to support and educate students with the greatest need.
5) Doing so leads to warehousing the poor and generating selective services that ignore the systemic and structural basis of inequity.
6) Finally, dismantling public education is a rejection of the basic and fundamental commitment to justice.

There are solutions and ways that we can ensure that public education thrives and serves the purpose of educating all of our youth.

Dr. Russell Skiba, Director of the Equity Project and Professor of Counseling and Educational Psychology at IU recommended four prescriptions to address disparities in school discipline:
1. Make sure school data is disaggregated (and public).
2. Recognize race as the root cause of the disparities.
3. Consider how implicit bias affects disparities.
4. Provide teacher and staff training.5

Additionally, research based alternatives to suspension have to be instituted, which should include:
• Implicit bias training, cultural competency, and teacher diversity
• Restorative justice intervention practices
• Positive Behavior and Intervention Services (PBIS)
• Resources distributed according to need

We cannot do this without addressing teacher training. In order to assess this, we have to drill down into the data about teachers, because as another educator noted, “We know that the disproportionate racial

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4 Regina Williams-Preston, SBCSC
bias begins in the classroom.”

Thus, teacher training is critical to how public education serves our youth. We must ask:

- How many classrooms in SBCSC are being taught by "teachers" on emergency permit or paraprofessionals, or a rotating wheel of substitute teachers?
- How are these teachers on emergency permit distributed across buildings?
- With this critical teacher shortage, how many students with IEPs are getting the direct support they need to be successful? How often are paraprofessionals who are hired to support special education students being pulled out of their assigned class to substitute in unfilled positions or absent teachers?
- What professional development is in place to support teachers who are on emergency permit?
- What classes are being taught by teachers licensed in the area of instruction (highly qualified teachers)?

The solutions to the problem of disproportionate discipline are not out of reach because of a lack of resources. Community partners have offer to step in help develop free trainings in restorative Practices. CR-PBIS (Culturally Responsive Positive Behavior Intervention Supports and Teacher Training (IC Teams) are already in place and simply need to be given priority.

Public education is critical to our society, especially to students who come from historically underserved or marginalized communities that are often segregated by race and class. Our public schools often serve as a critical hub in the communities in which they are located. Unlike charter schools and private institutions, they are accountable to the state and to the public; and unlike charter schools and private institutions, they are in the business of education, not generating profit for a few shareholders. We need public education if we are to celebrate diversity and inclusion. There is tremendous community support from parents and other concerned members willing to take on this challenge in this political climate, but we need you, our school board, to have the will to make it work. We stand ready to work with you on this.

Thank you.

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6 Ibid, 37