

A Call for Institutional Equity and Inclusion

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SUMMARY

Dear EMS Administration and Board of Directors,

During the Spring of 2020, the United States as a whole experienced a movement that forced many US residents to reckon with this country's history of racism and oppression. The killing of George Floyd in particular sparked protests around the country and many academic institutions have, in response, reevaluated their curriculum and school culture to try and create more inclusive and safe spaces for students and families who are Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC).

As former students and alumni, we care about Eastern Mennonite School and believe in its vision to reflect Christ's light as a learning community where every student belongs, thrives, and lives God's call.

However, we recognize it has fallen short as racist ideals have been promoted and encouraged at Eastern Mennonite School during our tenure, both inadvertently and intentionally. Through discussion, we as alumni have identified specific areas of harm. Led by alumni who identify as BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, or People of Color) and a group of concerned alumni (both BIPOC and white) have discussed these harms and request the board, administration, faculty, and staff to take steps to build an anti-racist institution where every student belongs, thrives, and lives God's call.

The school has a unique identity and culture, but has struggled to be fully welcoming for students who don't identify as white Mennonite. We request a review of Chapel services, extracurriculars, and community service efforts with an anti-racist lens, identifying ways these parts of school life can be more inclusive, culturally competent, and sensitive to local needs.

Faculty, staff, and administration do not currently represent the diversity necessary to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for BIPOC students. We request a review of the hiring practices for all positions at the school to identify areas of bias and identify new recruiting pools to ensure greater diversity for employees at all levels. Additionally, we request anti-racism and trauma-informed training for all EMS employees and board members, with regular accountability measures for ongoing learning and development.

The overall academic curriculum perpetuates a white/euro-centric narrative and additionally does not provide space for the multiple ways students explore areas of faith and sexuality. We request a review of the current academic curriculum with an anti-racist and anti-oppression lens.

Areas of review should be led by BIPOC voices, persons with developed anti-racism and anti-oppression understandings, and include outside experts in these areas to reduce internal bias. Review findings should be made public, as should steps for addressing the areas of concern, to ensure accountability. In the pages that follow, these requests and related needs are further explained for your consideration. Eastern Mennonite School's response to this letter can be sent to the coordinating alumni group at emsalumniforchange@gmail.com.

CURRICULUM & FACULTY AND STAFF

EMS strives for academic excellence through practices like Christian discipleship, peace and justice, and a global outlook. However, the curriculum and teaching at EMS has fallen short of its ideals. EMS alumni have identified three requests in regards to the academic arena:

1. EMS needs to review the current curriculum (teachers, teaching materials, lectures, etc.) and incorporate content that promotes a diverse mindset and global citizenship.
2. EMS needs to provide academic spaces that are safe and welcoming to all identity groups (racial, gender, sexual, etc.). Teachers should not teach curriculum that may perpetuate false information that could harm a student.
3. EMS needs to review hiring decisions to increase diversity among faculty and staff and provide anti-racist, anti-bias, and trauma-informed training for teachers.

Specifically, EMS fails to teach anti-bias and anti-racism in many aspects, like the lack of BIPOC authors in English courses and eurocentrism in world history courses. Elective courses like CFL and Sociology failed to provide students with a broader scope of possible lifestyles, instead upholding patriarchal and heteronormative lifestyles and family systems. Bible courses, similarly, failed to encourage questions and ponderings about faith, and instead shut down ‘controversial’ discussions for the sake of ‘peace.’ Other aspects of curriculum like the library and E-term must also be evaluated, as the library continues to contain outdated resources that uphold stereotypes and racist mindsets. Broadly, in class discussions EMS must not burden BIPOC students by asking them to educate white students on topics of race. Recognizing and actively changing problematic aspects of EMS’s curriculum is the first step in providing education that supports diversity.

To actively address these issues EMS alumni ask that EMS incorporate a lens of anti-racism and anti-bias practices throughout the curriculum. A focus like this will not only support a diverse mindset but provide academic spaces that are welcoming to all identity groups. For example, instead of reading Black literature for a small period of time, literature teachers need to recognize race as an overarching theme and lens throughout all reading materials. Additionally, EMS must understand the difference between tokenization of BIPOC authors and learning from these individuals. By establishing this practice, students will have the opportunity to understand how current systems were shaped by past literature, historical events, science, etc. “A change in the focus of history classes would be another way to address this. For example, courses should be more intentional about connecting content to what students see around them. For example, instead of only studying the rising numbers of Latinx immigrants in the U.S., students should be taught about the harmful U.S. foreign policy that has complicated issues in Latin American countries.” Another example includes supporting non-patriarchal lifestyles in classes like CFL. Bias in classes like these has denied students the opportunity to build a diverse mindset.

Training faculty and staff on anti-racist, restorative justice, and trauma-informed practices will help create an inclusive environment that supports diversity among the school community. Faculty and staff will have the opportunity to gain tools to actively participate in developing an inclusive institution. The institution must also be prepared to support diversity among faculty and staff. We ask that EMS not only increases diversity among faculty and staff, but provides an environment for all faculty and staff to feel welcome.

To successfully achieve academic excellence through Christian discipleship, peace and justice, and a global outlook, EMS must follow the actions of Jesus himself by loving thy neighbor, loving thy enemy,

welcoming the stranger, and fighting for the least of those. Meeting tangible goals such as implementing reading materials from diverse authors will help EMS successfully achieve practices the institution claims to apply. Jesus calls on the Christian church to view *all* people as holy and sacred. In light of this, EMS must respond with active change throughout the school's entire curriculum.

EXTRACURRICULARS & THE BROADER COMMUNITY

EMS prides itself on a student body that is very involved in activities outside the classroom. Whether it's sports, touring choir, musical theatre, or the We Serve Club, many students at EMS find their voices and talents outside the classroom. However, the experiences offered in extracurriculars and community outreach at EMS frequently do not encourage diversity. In terms of extracurriculars and community outreach, EMS alumni have the following three requests:

1. EMS must examine their definition of “community service” and actively seek to engage with the broader Harrisonburg community.
2. EMS needs to examine what purpose chapel serves in shaping school culture and find ways to make chapel more representative of student identity groups.
3. EMS needs to consider how BIPOC voices are represented within extracurriculars, especially within choir and music.

The alumni of EMS first ask that the school reconsider how they define community service. Community service at EMS has often been centered around reaching out to white Mennonite areas of Harrisonburg, and many alumni can recall mulching outside of Park View Mennonite Church or sorting clothes at Gift and Thrift as part of Community Service Day. Neglecting to engage with Harrisonburg beyond its Mennonite circles is a lost opportunity for learning from and creating connections with the broader Harrisonburg community.

Engaging with BIPOC communities in Harrisonburg will allow the school and students to learn about their local and global communities. We recognize that BIPOC communities are not tourist locations or places for us to change, but we also recognize many EMS students do not engage, interact, or build relationships with BIPOC communities in Harrisonburg. This not only deprives students from the chance to learn, but this message communicates that students should stay in their bubble. EMS can use Community Service Day as a chance to teach students how to be allies rather than “white saviors.” By engaging with BIPOC communities in Harrisonburg as part of Community Service Day, EMS can show students that doing community service doesn't just mean mulching the garden outside the neighborhood church. It means developing a mindset grounded in global citizenship.

Next, EMS alumni asks that the school examine the effect that chapel has on the student body. Chapel is an experience that is unique to EMS. It offers a time for all students to gather together and hear the same message. Therefore, the messages that speakers present in chapel should be considered carefully and thoughtfully. In the past, alumni have noticed that chapel primarily amplifies the white voice. While some students do feel represented by the viewpoints displayed in chapel, EMS alumni believe that chapel needs to offer more diversity in the number of perspectives offered.

Chapel is a chance for students to broaden their global understanding each day. However, this isn't possible without a diverse group of speakers. EMS alumni request that the administration diversify the types of speakers they bring in to speak during chapel. There are certain times, such as Black History Month, when having Black speakers should be more common. Without disregarding intersectionality, BIPOC speakers should become a normalized part of chapels. EMS alumni also request that the Chapel Planning Committee be taken into more consideration than they have in the past as administrators have allowed donors to control chapel content. Including voices of different identity groups in chapel is important to expand the student understanding of global citizenship. EMS must also develop guidelines

for chapel speakers that help create a safe space for students of all races, genders, religions, and sexual orientations.

Finally, EMS alumni ask that the school examine how BIPOC voices are represented in extracurriculars, particularly within choir and singing chapels. Music and hymns are important to many EMS students. Singing and playing songs from another culture is a great way to learn about and engage with another culture. However, the alumni of EMS would like to point out that there is a fine line between cultural appreciation and cultural appropriation.

If choirs, orchestras, or the musical theatre department choose to perform a piece from a different culture, it is vital that the teachers educate students about the culture where the particular piece comes from, why it is important to this culture, and how students can learn from performing this piece. This is particularly crucial for any majority white choir that performs a spiritual. Performing spirituals are a great way to learn about Black history. However, it is the job of the teacher to research the song and educate students and audiences on the culture that the music comes from.

We recognize that it is not the job of just BIPOC alumni to educate the school, however, EMS alumni offer their knowledge to the school in making these particular changes to extracurriculars and community outreach. BIPOC alumni are great resources for learning about cultures outside the white Mennonite experience. Alumni also are great resources for contacting more diverse chapel speakers. If the Chapel Planning Committee were to make a list of topics available to alumni, we might be able to help secure more diverse chapel speakers for a variety of topics. We request that if teachers and administration want to talk to BIPOC alumni they do so carefully or contact a member of our group who can direct them.

Extracurriculars and community service are great ways for students to engage with the community around them. However, this cannot be done without intentionally including and supporting voices from different identity groups. There is so much richness to be found in the differences between individuals, communities, and cultures. There are also so many similarities that can foster relationships. To be able to lean into the discovery of diversity and the appreciation of voices of different identity groups in settings outside the classroom is an incredible opportunity that has been missed in the past.

SCHOOL IDENTITY AND CULTURE

EMS was created by Mennonites with the intention of providing an academic experience with Anabaptist theology at its core. EMS intends to “reflect Christ’s light as a learning community where every student belongs, thrives, and lives God’s call.” Despite this vision, the tight grasp on tradition (specifically, the Mennonite tradition) hinders progress toward the inclusion of differing perspectives alongside a changing community and world. EMS alumni have three requests regarding school identity and culture:

1. We ask that the EMS faculty and staff commit to becoming a restorative institution, by including anti-racism/anti-bias, restorative justice, and trauma awareness teaching and training.
2. EMS must adopt a framework to evaluate the messaging that is projected to students in chapels and in the classroom, focusing on messages that teach anti-bias and anti-racism through widening students’ worldview.
3. EMS must construct a clear disciplinary policy for faculty, staff, and students that demands a response following racist behavior, comments, or actions. What is the grievance procedure for harms that occur? What is the disciplinary procedure for harms that occur? Where do faculty, staff, and students take their grievances?

EMS disempowers and excludes individuals and perspectives that do not fit within its mold. As an institution that draws in local Mennonite students, the overwhelming majority of students at EMS are Mennonite. The discrepancy between the perspectives represented at EMS and perspectives in the wider community leads to a lack of understanding of racial struggles and differences. For instance, EMS alumni have expressed that the history of Latinx immigration is rarely explored. Additionally, BIPOC often face the pressure of their socioeconomic differences by being asked to fundraise through events like Christmas Fund Drive or other class specific fundraisers. Currently, EMS is a community that fits white middle-class Mennonites.

As an institution founded on Christian theology, dissension within the church influences decision making and messaging at EMS. With a history of not being “of this world” and choosing to sidestep politics and involvement with “controversial” issues, Mennonites often fail to recognize the power and privilege that exists in the choice to disengage. By deeming issues of inclusion “political” or “controversial,” and refusing to take a visible stand, EMS does not uphold the safety and wellbeing of its students, specifically BIPOC students, students identifying with different religions, and LGBTQIA+ students.

SEX EDUCATION AND LGBTQIA+ INCLUSION

A common experience among EMS students regarding sexuality is the institution's assumption that all students are cis-gender and heterosexual. A second common experience is the catch-all use of abstinence to answer any and all sex related questions. These two assumptions inform the approach to sexuality at Eastern Mennonite School, both in the classroom and in the halls. Three major issues arise from an environment that does not focus on inclusivity or an understanding of sexual health: ignoring the topic of sexuality, avoiding conventional sex-ed topics, and inadequate guidance in healthy relationships. EMS alumni have three requests in regard to sex education and LGBTQIA+ inclusion:

1. EMS needs to provide a sexual education course that offers non-biased opportunities for students to learn details about sexual options.
2. EMS needs to place greater emphasis on student safety, access to therapy, and validation, as the institution currently prevents any structural support for LGBTQIA+ students.
3. EMS needs to provide channels for all members along the gender and sexual spectrums to have safety and dignity.

Abstinence-only education bypasses essential sex-ed lessons about consent, respect, sexual and gender diversity, birth control, and STI prevention. As a result, students graduate high school lacking a basic understanding of healthy and safe sexual relationships. Many alumni went to college with a very unhealthy view of their own sexuality, and this view was reinforced by the paralyzing silence about sexuality prevalent in Mennonite culture.

In the absence of comprehensive Sex-Ed, Christian Family Living (CFL), a faith based guidance class, attempts to bridge the gap between health and biblical studies classes by covering a wide range of topics from the lens of a "Christian lifestyle." CFL only teaches about heterosexual relationships and heavily pushes the ideals of heterosexual marriage and abstinence. Many alumni feel that CFL does not adequately prepare students for life after high school, and it tailors specifically to straight, cis, white Mennonites. Given this, we ask that EMS remove CFL and replace it with a class that emphasizes planning for adulthood with an emphasis on health, safety, and options. Students should not be made to feel alienated from a class as vital as life planning simply because they do not fit the narrow mold that EMS envisions for their students.

A sexual education course should help students healthily navigate young sexuality in a way that emphasizes smart choices and safety, covering concepts like consent, boundaries, sexual and gender diversity, birth control, and STI prevention. Many young students do not have a full conceptualization of bodily autonomy and need to be taught about the meaning of sexual choice and sexual violence. Students need to know how to access services and resources that can help keep them safe. Avoiding these topics perpetuates rape culture and leaves EMS students vulnerable to harm and to harming others.

In the current institutional environment, EMS prevents any structural support for LGBTQIA+ students. LGBTQIA+ students continue to be harmed by this culture of exclusion and discrimination. While retooling essential classes is one step, there needs to be a cultural response to the discrimination of the LGBTQIA+ community. Staff and students need to be taught how to have respectful discussions about gender and sexuality.

In addition to a school wide effort to understand and embrace sexual and gender diversity, there need to be channels for all members along the gender and sexual spectrums to have safety and dignity. Students

and faculty must have someone to report to if they felt guidelines were violated. EMS cannot expect its students to have a respectful and healthy attitude towards gender and sexuality when its own culture and curriculum fail to embrace these values.

CONCLUSION AND SIGN-OFF

As an academic institution, Eastern Mennonite School holds the distinct opportunity to provide a learning community that fosters inclusion, opposes racist and oppressive systems, and gives a voice to all of its students. In this letter, EMS alumni outline areas for review and requests for change. These areas for review are rooted in shared experiences and individual stories, and we ask that the EMS Administration and Board of Directors meet these requests with validity, care, and action.

Sincerely,
EMS Alumni for Radical Change