

To my City Schools family:

Like many of you, I began this week feeling tired and overwhelmed. This is one of the most difficult letters I have had to pen in my role as CEO which is why it has taken me so many days to find the words. Maybe you have been waiting for a message from me to acknowledge your pain, calm your fears, and ease your anger. Know that I felt a great responsibility to offer those sentiments and so many more. But, the unadulterated truth is, as an African American woman and a mother of three daughters, I needed to admit that I too, am struggling to navigate this moment.

The last few weeks have felt like the re-opening of historic scars and the salting of new wounds. The images are unmistakable and familiar, only the names have changed. This much is clear: the tragic deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, and countless others, are clear and present reminders that our nation's systems are steeped in institutional and structural racism. And again, Baltimore and communities across the country cry out for a change too long delayed.

We must recommit ourselves, examine our own practices, and disrupt the insidious barriers that have plagued our education system and negatively impact our students, families, and staff. It's why we created an equity office, adopted an equity policy, and have started the deliberate work required to create a new way forward. This work is about acknowledging ways in which institutions by their very design have been historically complicit in marginalization and our refusal to collude any longer.

Our work is about creating space for each other and in particular, our young people to process their experiences in ways that are meaningful, authentic, safe, and responsible. I am in awe of the courage and leadership displayed by our students this week as they organized and led protests in the streets of Baltimore, from the convention center to City Hall. We owe it to the legacy of our ancestors and to this generation, a generation that has been forged in fire, to harness all of our energy and power to mobilize - to stand up for justice.

In the days and weeks to come, with the help of partners and local community organizations deeply invested in this work and in City Schools, we will be creating space for students and staff to process and heal. In the words of Audre Lorde, "Sometimes we are blessed with being able to choose the time, and the arena, and the manner of our revolution, but more usually we must do battle where we are standing." We stand firm in our commitment to each of you and to our collective humanity.

While these days have been troubling and uncertain, I wish for each of us - peace over panic, faith over fear, and wisdom over worry. We see you, we hear you, and I believe we are truly a community of strength. We will get through this together.

Thank you,

Sonja Brookins Santelises
Chief Executive Officer
Baltimore City Public Schools