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MEMORANDUM

TO: Superintendents, Principals, Headmasters and All Educators
COPY: VSA, VPA, VSBA, VCSEA, VT-NEA
FROM: Rebecca Holcombe, Ed.D., Secretary of Education (RH)
SUBJECT: Our Role as Public Educators
DATE: August 18, 2017

Several of you have reached out to ask what your role is as public educators in addressing your students and their parents regarding the events in Charlottesville, Virginia.

Let's start by acknowledging that people can reasonably disagree about important issues. In fact, the strength of our democracy depends on protecting space for civil dissent. It is through civil discourse that we forge commitment to shared purposes, including Vermont's economic prosperity and civic health. As Americans, we have an obligation to protect the rights of all of us to disagree.

However, we have an equal obligation to denounce any group that has as its core purpose the silencing or subjugation of others on the basis of their sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, marital status, race, color, religion, national origin, immigration status, age, or disability.

The history we teach in our schools reveals that the continued pursuit of liberty and justice is our American legacy and project. As [Abraham Lincoln wrote in a letter to Joshua Speed](#): "As a nation, we began by declaring that 'all men are created equal.' We now practically read it 'all men are created equal, except negroes and foreigners and Catholics.' When it comes to this, I would prefer emigrating to some country where they make no pretense of loving liberty — to Russia for instance, where despotism can be taken pure." Lincoln was a product of his time, but knew at his core that discrimination was antithetical to democracy. Equality is something we work towards, but struggle to achieve.

Our Vermont Constitution enshrines the rights of free assembly and speech, but also the foundational principle that all persons are born equally free and with certain inherent rights. Vermont has a long history of opposing discrimination against persons based on race, sex, color, religion, sexual preference, disability and national origin. This commitment to equality is the foundation of many Vermont laws. Just this past session in Act 5, our General Assembly and Governor reaffirmed our core commitments to affirming and protecting the rights of all Vermonters, recognizing that Vermont has the moral obligation to protect its residents from religious persecution. This commitment is also reflected in laws that govern behavior in schools, requiring all schools to have safe, orderly and positive learning environments. No Vermont students should feel threatened or be discriminated against in school; harassment, bullying and hazing are not — nor should ever be — tolerated. Discrimination undermines democracy.

You are not alone as public servants in responding to recent events. Recently, five Joint Chiefs of Staff, representing the Army, Air Force, Navy, Marines and National Guard, denounced racism and the white supremacist groups behind the Charlottesville rally. The Navy leader affirmed that the U.S. Navy forever stands against intolerance and hatred. The U.S. Airborne tweeted that “our WWII Airborne forefathers jumped into Europe to defeat Nazism.” Many of us have family who served in Europe or the Pacific, and know from their stories the tremendous debt we owe those who sacrificed so much to protect our basic civil liberties and the right of every American to be equal before the law. In a [recent video by Governor Phil Scott](#), the Governor cited his own family history in explaining his objection to racism and fascism in any form.

In an increasingly fragmented society, our public schools are one of the few places where people of every socioeconomic class, political perspective, race, religion, gender identity, and disability status come together under one roof not just to better themselves, but to work together to develop common cause. Our schools both reflect and foster the health of our democracy.

As educators, our role is not to tell students *what* to think, but rather to expose them to the past so they can understand current events in the context of our historical experience and evolution. Our role is never to espouse a particular political orientation, but always to challenge students to ground their conclusions and views in fact. Our responsibility is to help students evaluate the merits and weaknesses of their arguments and the arguments of others, so they can reason their way to informed opinions. Make sure your students understand the Constitutions of the United States and Vermont, and the rights and obligations we have as citizens. Teach them that rights and obligations go hand in hand; democracy demands active engagement, lest we lose it.

Don't be afraid to tackle hard issues: your students are already marinating in them through family conversations, social media and the press. Current events are the substance of democracy, and avoiding them makes education irrelevant. Instead, teach your students to question and think critically, to listen and hear those with whom they disagree, to engage in civil discourse. Questioning our individual implicit biases and assumptions is uncomfortable, but it moves us all towards that more perfect union to which we aspire.

More importantly, teaching means protecting for our children-- until they can do so for themselves-- the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. As educators, we strive to make sure every one of the children in our care feels valued and respected, as that is a precondition for wellbeing and learning. This means that, as did our Joint Chiefs of Staff, you must speak against points of view that would strip the basic dignity and civil rights of some of our own people.

There is no more important work than raising our children well. I am grateful and proud every day to work in a state with so many dedicated professionals who work so hard and creatively to make sure every one of our children thrives. Democracy is not always easy, but it is worthy. Together, we can serve the goals of both freedom and unity. I wish you all the best as you prepare for the new school year.