June 8, 2020

Dear UCS School Community,

With the rise of the COVID-19 pandemic, our community and our staff has had to deal with difficult changes, yet together, we effectively responded to these challenges. We have witnessed countless stories of selflessness and creativity as we worked to create a safe and healthy environment.

Recent events in the news have been difficult and disturbing. The death of George Floyd is frightening and morally wrong. The issues are painful and symptomatic of broader concerns. As a community, we must stand together to bring about positive change. While we may currently feel pain, anger, and sadness, now is the time to focus our efforts on building a society that works for and engages with hope, respect and civility for everyone.

As the state’s second largest district, Utica Community Schools has in the very fabric of its vision that our graduates will succeed in a society that is ethnically, linguistically, socio-economically and racially diverse. We know that racism cannot be tolerated, and respect and civility must be extended to every person. We know by observing our students and staff that a commitment to excellence and to hearing all voices, brings about innovation, growth, and leadership. Education is foundational for this change to occur.

This is why our Board of Education adopted Policy 6000 – Excellence, Equity and Access. The policy makes clear that students have a right to a high-quality education which meets their needs through respect and empowerment. The policy is a starting point for concentrated work for greater equity and access to services, such as Advanced Placement, Dual Enrollment, Career and Technical Education and Specialty Programs.

However, equity is more than making things more accessible. Our work on equity must have a focus on anti-racism. Though we have provided cultural proficiency and implicit bias training to teachers and principals, we must intensify our efforts. We must implement curriculum that is culturally responsive, professional development to further greater understanding and conversations around this issue, and community engagement that reflects the experiences of our families. Cultural responsiveness must permeate every part of our district – the hallways, the classrooms, the bus stops and the athletic fields.

In times like these, it is important to also consider the needs of our children. These events are difficult for adults to process, they are even more difficult for children. During times of fear and instability, it is easy for anxiety to increase and isolation to occur. We must help our children feel loved, valued, and protected. I would encourage you to take additional time with your children, particularly if they are struggling to understand current events.
Utica Community Schools will continue to prepare all children for success in a diverse community and global society. We must teach the importance of treating people with dignity and respect because we know that this is foundational to sustain a strong community. Thank you for being a partner in this process.

Sincerely,

Christine M. Johns, Ed.D.
Superintendent of Schools