Today, several news agencies reported on the current issue impacting our district and it read in a way that left me feeling uneasy and disrespected. So the statement I am about to give is not me speaking on behalf of the board or any of its members and my intent is to speak my truth, not to call out anyone but to put a call to action behind our shared belief in equity and our collective stand against systemic racism. Dori and team, thank you for all of your efforts addressing the issues impacting our district.

As elected members of this body, we are entrusted to provide oversight, guidance, and direction for the approximate 4,000 students, faculty, and staff of the East Lansing Public Schools District. Being a member of this body that is held accountable to the law as set forth by the Michigan Constitution and Legislature, but more importantly, being held accountable to the over 48,000 residents of this city we share and call home. These neighbors, family, and friends who elected us as their representatives have entrusted us as the caretakers of this institution, that is older than the city itself, to educate their children, ALL of the children. We have been elected to ensure that all of our children have quality teachers, teachers that are stewards of learning with progressive curriculums, tools, and supports.

The board and this administration was recently confronted with an atrocious assignment, becoming aware of its effects on March 23rd of this year. It is this assignment and its predecessors that has disturbed my soul for the past 48 days and contributed to many sleepless nights as well as a crisis of conscience as it pertains to my role in all of this. Being new in this position and learning how exactly I am supposed to navigate issues such as this I will maintain the knowledge of knowing what my lane is and staying in said lane, I have suffered these feelings of hurt, trust, and balancing my own moral compass alone. While this may not be my lane, I do feel that I need to speak up and I am more than willing to face any consequences of this action.

I am many things to many people but before becoming this elected official I was a parent and advocate. I AM a Black parent to two Black children, one who has already gone through this District and one still in the early stages of education in this District. Being Black in America is no easy feat, from a long and brutal history of racist policies and systemic disadvantages, to skim a lengthy list that now is well known to us all, to our latest fight of having our lives recognized and acknowledged as something that matters that played out nationally on all of our TVs and in our streets on repeat this past summer. The disparities we face as Black people begin before we’ve even emerged from the womb.

From becoming aware of this assignment on March 23rd and then on April 12th when we had public comments from one family brave enough to come forward to let us know that they were harmed by this assignment there has been exactly 21 days of silence regarding this assignment from the school. We have to be mindful of our words, actions and more importantly we need to be mindful of our inaction and what message it conveys to our peers, staff, students, families, and community members. Silence can be louder than a bullhorn and the continued silence speaks volumes, which is the reason for my statement tonight.

This assignment has caused disruption in the district, impacting the trust and confidence the community has in our abilities to lead, and most importantly altering the perception that we are building a diverse and inclusive community, prioritizing a commitment to nurturing each child, educating all students and building world citizens. Not only have these factors impacted our families, but it has put me in a difficult position as I sit with you all at this table. It is up to us as
board members, you as the district administrators, teachers, staff, and other adults to protect the children in our charge.

It has been reported to East Lansing Info that “children who might not feel the effects of the assignment now could experience trauma later”. How incredibly accurate is that statement? We had a student come forward with an email and could vividly recall the assignment, interactions with the teacher from a decade ago. Many of us can’t even recall what we had for dinner a week ago, most of us don’t even keep our tax returns for that long. As a mother, youth and community advocate, dedicating my life to helping those in need, fostering good and dispelling harm, this statement crushed me. With that, I ask where I stand as a member of this board, a board who has for 21 days remained silent, deferred its responsibility of oversight and stewardship to this district to the central administration. Who holds the administration accountable for this failure, if not us, then who? If it is us, then what is our role in resolving the situation? The current investigation is akin to the police policing the police.

I sit here today asking, what is our plan to move forward? I hope that we as the board and the administrative team can work to understand how one’s words and actions impact each of us differently and work to build a more coherent and respectful relationship with each other.

It is my hope that from this moment forward, we are intentional with our actions, words, and work. We need to move forward, move past being horrified, past being outraged, past lip service, the time for real action is now. We need to take a more intentional effort into understanding the depth of which this assignment has impacted our district, and the many families who don’t feel their voice has impact and we will move forward with empathy. As we move forward, I propose we address the following in addition to the steps already identified:

1. What climate are we fostering?
   a. Are we doing enough to identify and dismantle any systemic racism within our institution, we might have?
      i. Linda Vail, Medical Director with the Ingham County Health Department declared racism a public health crisis on November 24, 2020. What are we doing to proactively make our spaces more inclusive?
      
      ii. It has been said at this table, that “we understand that this is a systemic racist situation that we have to come to grips with in East Lansing and that we wish we could say that we won’t make these errors ever again, but we know that is not true, we can’t say racism is going away”. I personally disagree with this statement. I feel that leadership starts at the top with all of us here at this table. We have the position and ability to ensure that, at least in this district, we can put the necessary policies and procedures in place to eradicate institutional racism in our schools. We can ensure that our ideal ethical standards are folded into contract negotiations. We have the power to make this institution a culturally, diverse, and inclusive thriving institution for our community.
   
   b. Are we proactively tackling barriers that prevent all voices from being heard? Are we creating avenues for complaints to be received?
c. What policies and procedures are we going to incorporate to address requirements for personal, professional, moral and ethical responsibility that each of our teachers, staff, administration, and board should follow?

d. How are we looking to involve other stakeholders from our community? Experts come in different shapes, sizes, colors, professions, descriptions, and pedigrees. There is a powerful saying that positively showcases inclusion, it takes a village to raise a child, including other members from our village and not just those with fancy titles, well earned pieces of paper, and abbreviations next to their names would be a proactive measure of inclusion.

2. When does this board plan to take an internal look at the operations of this district?

a. When one of us fails we all fail. The impact of our failures will have a longer shelf life for our students especially, for our Black students, our other students of color. As elected leaders, teachers and influential adults, our views, words, action and inactions matter, it has impact, it could not only traumatize our students but also change the course of their life’s path.

3. How have we empowered our teachers to feel they are able to push back or refuse to teach something that they don’t feel comfortable teaching or has the potential to cause harm, be culturally insensitive, or improperly educate our students?

a. The learning environment that brought about these assignments, is that the teacher teaches what we tell them to teach from the curriculum we buy for them to teach, so accountability lies with all of us, including members of the central administration and the middle school administration yet the only person placed on administrative leave, being held accountable, was the teacher. I am concerned that by removing accountability from anyone else in the chain of command we are opening ourselves up to some serious problems.

i. Teachers are human resources that propel the service we provide to this community, if we don’t invest in them thoroughly with high quality training, further their education, truly value their worth, really seek their consultation on matters of the classroom, when something goes wrong it rests solely on us for not properly preparing them, for not knowing, for not having a system in place to address sensitive topics, that ensure we protect all stakeholders.

4. As David Anthony Durham stated, “Respect flows two ways and can mean as much to the giver as to the receiver” Have we created an environment where our students feel empowered enough to speak out against an assignment that impacts them in a way that causes trauma, disrespecting their beliefs and values?

a. Asking ANY student to find an alternative perspective to any historical atrocity is wrong, because there is no alternative perspective, wrong is wrong, no matter how many ways you turn it. The standard is/was FLAWED, THE ASSIGNMENT is/was FLAWED, our students knew that, but how many of them feel like they are able to speak up, speak out without being punished, labeled as defiant or uncooperative.

5. A timeline of changes and implementations with clear reasonable deadlines, needs to be put forth before the end of the school year. This curriculum was adopted in 2005 and has been
assigned for over 15 years. Part of our rectifying of the situation has been identified as reviewing said curriculum. While I understand that there is a process to go through the curriculum and I do not want it rushed which may result in another horrific assignment, we need clear deadlines for implementing these next steps for accountability.

a. It is extremely hard for me as a Black person to feel that the gravity of this assignment is being recognized when there are no concrete deadlines in place. It gives me the feeling of gaslighting by prolonging a response until the matter just blows over.

As I conclude, I reiterate that I am not speaking on behalf of the board or any of its members and my intent is to speak my truth, not call out anyone but to put a call to action behind our shared belief in equity and our shared stand against racism. One family discomforted is one family too many. For that I am compelled to speak. When one hurts we all hurt. East Lansing Public Schools, it's time to truly unite as one and lead from the front, we are stronger when we are proactive and not reactive.