



Open Letter from Justin M. Jennings, Ed.S on the Death of George Floyd

As I watch what is playing out across the country in the wake of the untimely death of Mr. George Floyd, I pray for his family, friends, and all who have been impacted by this senseless tragedy. As an African American leader, I know too well the feelings being expressed by people of color across this nation—we must work tirelessly and push to ensure our institutions continue to work toward justice for all. But we must not be so filled with emotion that we miss the big picture.

While I am an educated African American man, that does not stop my fear when I hear sirens—I can't stop the fast beating of my heart and the thoughts that go through my head. I think to myself, "Am I the next George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tamir Rice, Timothy Russell, Melissa Williams, Sandra Bland, or Emmett Till?" Racism has been taught and passed down from generation to generation, and the fear, unfortunately, is warranted.

To my friends who have reached out to ask how you can help, two things:

1. Please don't tell me you are colorblind, see me and my color but judge me by my character, and
2. when you hear or see injustice speak up, by what you say or possibly don't say and vote to support justice.

Everyone in this country must have the right to live free from fear and to be treated with dignity and respect. The public health crisis has placed a spotlight on our country's division and the lack of equity in our health care system in terms of accessibility and valuing money over human life. We need to be smart and pay attention to what is happening. COVID-19 has taken the lives of Black, White, Latino, and Asian alike, wealthy, middle class or poor, city dwellers, suburbanites and those who live in rural areas, maybe this pandemic is showing us something we're missing. We are all mortal.

Bad people and laws have controlled the narrative for long enough; it's time to start right here and right now. We have great police officers, and we can't let the few bad ones who make a bad choice be a voice for them all. Officers I support you, but if you stand and watch a man or woman Black, White, or from Mars be killed, you are just as guilty. The solution to this is not changing laws as that has already been done; the solution is to change hearts, through dialogue and solution-based conversations.

We will have compelling conversations with each other to seek and inspire non-violent solutions for our fears and concerns. I'm proud to say Youngstown City School District is a place where these conversations will take place. We will work together to end this strife and seek common solutions for our collective interests.

Sincerely,

Justin M. Jennings, Ed.S
Chief Executive Officer
Youngstown City School District