

Coalition for Racial Justice

500 North Clinton St, Iowa City, Iowa, 52240



November 23, 2013

Iowa City Community School District Board of Education
Stephen F. Murley, Superintendent of Schools
1725 North Dodge Street
Iowa City, IA 52245

Dear Ms. Hoelscher, Members of the School Board, and Superintendent Murley:

We write to protest the ICCSD calendar's including Martin Luther King Day as an in-session school day on January 20, 2014. Our organization is a mix of white people and people of color, allied across genders, ages, and social classes in a common quest for racial justice. We met on Thursday, November 14, and discussed what we believe was an insensitive decision, out-of-step with community needs and circumstances.

Black parents in our combined group spoke of the importance of MLK Day to their families, of their special pride in having that day declared one of the ten national holidays, a time to tell their children their own stories of their history and of what it took to win their civil rights. They are glad enough also to have it dramatized in assemblies or taught by white teachers, but this day is especially theirs to celebrate in their own way. We wondered—was the decision to make this change made in consultation with groups of African-American parents in the elementary, junior, and senior high schools who had a real say in how their schools made such decisions? Or was a gathering of black faculty and staff consulted? We suspect not.

Similarly, many of the white parents in our coalition voiced their strong support for acknowledging the federal holiday as a day when children, their families, and their communities can spend time together in honor of the memory of Dr. King and the thousands of activists who stood against racism. Last year, a group among us took part in the National Day of Service in Washington, DC, and many already have planned how to spend 2014's holiday performing service in the local community and attending celebration services for Dr. King.

2014 is an especially important year for our community to honor Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the leader of a persecuted people to whom justice had long been denied and who, when they demanded to live in their country as freely as their white peers, were cruelly beaten down. His extraordinary heroism was not just his leadership against the common law of segregation and social/political degradation, but his leading the way nonviolently as a man of God. If there has ever been a year to celebrate nonviolence, this is it, considering the massacres in schools and theaters and record rates of murders on the streets of Chicago, and Waterloo and Cedar Rapids.

We ask you to bear in mind a sharpened community focus over the past year that is likely to make rescinding Martin Luther King Day's status as a holiday seem particularly callous. The School Board has acknowledged and is working to bring a better balance to racial disparities in disciplinary and special education outcomes between students who are white and those of color. The report prepared by the Coalition for Racial Justice has heightened community awareness of these and other such racial inequities, and this MLK Day decision is likely to be interpreted as an example of the kind of institutional racism we seek to dismantle.

We have learned that a good deal of effort has gone into making January 20th a meaningful day with special presentations and service projects planned where students will work on helping tasks throughout the community. No one can quarrel with the goodness of these activities. We simply ask that you recognize the sacredness of Martin Luther King Day. Reschedule your planned activities for another

time, and work with our organizations to create a place of equitable schools and workplaces, full community participation, and genuine good will for all families.

Sincerely,

Marian and David Coleman
Charles Eastham
Joel Gilbertson-White
Henri Harper
Royceann Porter
Circe Stumbo
Annie Tucker
Pastor Dorothy Whiston

on behalf of the Coalition for Racial Justice