

James Baker, BSE (ME), SM, MBA  
Testimony before the Hartford Board of Education  
Re: Underground Railroad Reenactment @ HMTCA field trip  
September 17, 2013

Good Evening Chairman Poland and members of the Board of Education:

My name is James Baker. I am a Farmington resident here tonight with my wife Sandra to share some concerns we have about Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy where my daughter was a student last year. Specifically, I am here tonight make you aware of the sanctioned social and emotional abuse my daughter and her classmates suffered during a field trip with HMTCA. The field trip was to Nature's Classroom in Charlton, MA and the abuse happened during the night of the Underground Railroad Reenactment portion of the trip 10 months ago, November 26-30, 2012.

**Here is my daughter's account of what happened in her own words.**  
**Starting with her entrance into a mock slave ship:**

I was told about the reenactment about a ½ hour before it started.

**The Ship (pretend ship)**

Before we went into the dark room, we were lined up outside and asked to close our eyes and imagine having to run with our families in Africa. The slave master finds us and beats, stabs and kills my father in front of me and then takes me away from my family.

I went into a dark room where I had to sit on my bottom with my knees together; my legs fell asleep and were hurting. We were jammed together tightly touching each other. While in the dark room,

- I was told by the instructor that we will go to the bathroom on each other, and some of us might throw up.
- The instructor told me, "We don't need any sick slaves. If you get sick we will throw you over board."
- I was told sharks were following the ship and that they could smell our blood.
- I was told I may have to dance to entertain them

**In the woods (later)**

- I had to pretend I was picking cotton, like a real slave.
- I had to hold my head down and could not make eye contact with the white masters
- I was told the slaves had to work until our hands were raw and bleeding
- I heard the instructor ask the kids behind me to open their mouths so their teeth could be checked. Some were asked to jump up and down.

- I was called names by the instructors, but I can't remember them
- I was told "I was nothing" and that "I was their property"
- The instructor told me, If I were to run they would whip me until I bled on the floor, and then either cut my Achilles so I can't run again or hang me.
- I was also told if I teach another slave to read or write they would cut my tongue out so I can't talk
- While running in the woods trying to make it to Canada I saw "wanted" signs for runaway slaves
- I was also told that "God put me on this earth to serve them"

Although it has been 10 months since my daughter shared what happened on the trip, I still find it outrageous and irresponsible. We can't comprehend how year after year the principal and a group of teachers could allow children to be demeaned, abused and terrorized. And that no one in this school administration was conscious of the potential psychological and physical harmful this activity might pose for all students. We trusted the principal and teachers and this administration to protect our daughter.

Many African American parents introduce the harsh experiences of slavery and other forms of discrimination to children over the course of their k-12 experience, and in a manner so as to avoid children developing a negative self-image about their culture and community.

Dr. Beverly Tatum in her book Why do all the Black Kids sit Together in the Cafeteria details the importance of developing a plan with developmentally appropriate educational activities to promote a healthy sense of racial identity. This activity evidences no such knowledge of racial identity development theory, which has been research since the 1960's.

HMTCA practiced cultural insensitivity by placing African American students in simulations of slavery and racial bigotry. If the school placed Jewish kids in a harsh reenactment of Nazi death camps that would be equally problematic. Why because the Stanford Prison Experiment in 1971 demonstrated the power of role play on identity and behavior and how mind and body reacts negatively to simulations.

**We are happy to address any questions that the board may have.**

**Thank You**