

Sandra Baker, MSW
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 Sandra Baker. You've just heard from my husband James. I wanted to provide some additional information to supplement his remarks for your consideration.

Please know that I do not come here lightly and have done my best to navigate the system on behalf of my child. For nearly a year I have been actively trying to make my concerns known through the policies and procedures available to me. I started with a formal letter to the principal, informal direct conversations with those involved with the field trip and moved on to filing formal complaints and contacting various organizations.

My husband just read our daughter's account of what happened. Just so you fully understand how this whole experience impacted the class, I will share with you both some of the language used in the exercise by the facilitators and then some of the comments made by other students who participated in the reenactment.

The following comments were taken from the Nature's Classroom Underground Railroad Report, which was completed by, the Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy February 25 – April 18, 2013. I ask that you imagine these phrases being yelled at your 10 to 12 year old child and her friends: Here is some of the language used in the reenactment exercise:

"Bring those niggers to the house over there"

"Going to get the dogs to eat you"

"Nigger if you can read, there is a problem"

"You're an animal working in the fields the rest of your life"

"You don't have any rights, we own you"

"Dumb dark skinned negro person how dare you look at me"

"How dare you look those dark eyes at me, I am higher than you"

"Don't look me in the eyes you're worthless keep your head down"

"You will be fed twice a day, water and crumbs"

"You're not a person, you're property"

"If you get sick, you will be thrown off the boat"

Now, hear comments from the students about the experience:

- Felt like it was real, felt like a real slave
- Did not feel like it was a joke, did not know if the leaders were joking
- Uncomfortable with the yelling
- Scary, too dark, hard to walk on the trails in the woods
- Uncomfortable with not being able to talk, and lift up their head
- Mad and angry about what some people's ancestors had to go through
- Angry that freedom papers were set on fire and burned by Nature's Classroom Staff
- Started to believe some of the things the group leaders were saying

Although it has been 10 months since my daughter shared what happened on this part of the trip, I still find it outrageous and irresponsible. I can't comprehend how the principal and a group of teachers could allow our children to be intentionally demeaned, verbally abused and emotionally terrorized. Is this the best we have to offer our children?

As an African American parent, I carefully consider how my children receive messages about racial identity, and I do this because all too often these messages are not positive. There is no way

I would have allowed our child to participate in this aspect of the field trip had we be given the choice.

We have better and more positive ways of helping our children understand the experiences of African- Americans during slavery and on the Underground Railroad. Student accounts' detail how the environment was racially charged and emotionally abusive. It had a lasting impact on all the children that participated, not just the children of color. Can we really expect fifth grade to seventh grade students to label an activity as inappropriate and excuse themselves from participating when their trusted principal and teachers put them into that situation?

Lastly, I ask that you consider how the decisions made by HMTCA and Hartford Public Schools, in regards to endorsing the underground railroad activity violates Connecticut's Code of Professional Responsibility for Educators. The code states: (1) The school is to create an emotionally and physically safe and healthy learning environment for all students and (2) Consider the family's concerns and perspectives on issues involving its children and encourage participation of the family in the education process.

A child stated "I was starting to believe what they were saying about me". I hope this child and all the children who were harmed by the Nature's Classroom trip are not permanently damaged and get the support they need to heal and develop a healthy cultural identity. To date, neither

the school nor the district has provided an opportunity to debrief parents on the activity, or provided for counseling or support services for students traumatized by this ordeal.

All children should be in a safe nurturing environment that encourages a healthy sense of their identity and cultural selves. Middle school, in particular, is a time to emphasize activities that build confidence in our children and help develop a positive vision for their future.

In closing I offer the following three recommendations:

- 1) Eliminate the Underground Railroad portion for the Nature's Classroom Field trip.
- 2) Make sure parents are fully informed about the learning objectives & activities planned on each and every field trip.
- 3) Hold the adults who planned, supervised and participated in the reenactment responsible for their decision and actions up to and including issuing an apology, debriefing all the families affected by the trip (past and present) and reprimanding school leadership for the handling of this situation.

We've provided a packet of information for each of you. The packets contains: a copy of our testimony, and a copy of the Natures Classroom Report from HMTCA. In addition it contains a few letters to the editor from The Daily Hampshire Gazette from parents in Northampton MA who objected to reenactment and had it stopped in their school district.

I'd be happy to respond to any questions you may have at this time. Thank you.