

Statement from the NTHS Board of Education President

New Trier's teachers, students, and administrators conceived of, developed, and organized the February 28th Seminar Day titled, "Understanding Today's Struggle for Racial Civil Rights." For the past year, more than 30 members of the New Trier All-School Seminar Day Committee have worked tirelessly to plan this day. The Superintendent and the Board of Education have continued to support and approve of this undertaking.

To those in the community (numbering more than 600) who reached out via email and phone to express overwhelming support for the All-School Seminar, and to the more than 5,200 who signed a supporting petition, we appreciate your encouragement. To the many alumni – including more than 470 who added their names to a letter to the Board -- who wrote and called us to say they wish there had been such an event during their time at New Trier and to support this day of thinking critically about and discussing civil rights, we thank you for reaching out to us. To those who have expressed concern about the seminar, the Board and administration respect your voices, and we have tried to engage directly with you to share the structure and goals we have for this day and to hear your concerns.

Since the December announcement of the Seminar Day session descriptions, speakers, and schedule, the Board has studied and made inquiries into the content and goals for the sessions. Based on detailed information we have received about the development of Seminar Day and the confidence we have in the teachers and administrators of New Trier, I am convinced that the goals of this forthcoming Seminar Day are educational in nature and meet the philosophy, objectives, and goals of education at New Trier High School as outlined in Section 6 of the Board of Education Policies, specifically 6-10 (Educational Philosophy and Objectives), 6-15 (Goals and Objectives), and 6-80 (Teaching About Controversial Issues). There is no evidence that the selection of speakers or the planning of the event by New Trier teachers, students, and administrators was driven by any political or social ideology or agenda.

To address concerns expressed by some about New Trier's educational effectiveness, I would note that this past year, New Trier achieved its highest ever average ACT scores, rating our school highest in the state and among the highest nationally for open enrollment schools. Our high school is nationally ranked in the top 10 or 20 in many polls. Our students are participating in extracurricular activities at a rate of more than 85%. We have clubs for a myriad of interests and sports teams for everyone who wants to participate. We have performing arts and music programs that are nationally recognized. We send more than 98% of our students to college. Our students report high levels of preparedness for college and for life after college. Graduates' college and post-college accomplishments speak volumes. New Trier High School is far from perfect, but New Trier is and will continue to be a high-performing public high school. This is a direct result of the passion and commitment of our faculty, staff, and administration to adhere to the New Trier motto – to commit minds to inquiry, hearts to compassion, and lives to the service of humanity.

On Seminar Day, all students will participate in a common lesson with their adviser groups and will attend a keynote session led by speakers who are each National Book Award winners with distinguished academic and civil rights track records. Students then will attend two workshop sessions they have chosen from among 100 offered. Approximately 70 of the 100 workshop sessions will be led by teachers and students. With respect to our outside speakers, they are a combination of activists in the civil rights cause, scholars of civil rights topics, and accomplished individuals who have dedicated their lives to the cause of civil rights and equity. There is no political or social agenda being promoted; this is not about taking sides

or right vs. wrong opinions. There is only an educational mission, just as there is during the other 182 days of the school year.

The Board has considered the input from those in the community who advocate for changes to the February 28th program. We have listened to calls for “conservative viewpoints,” “balance,” and presenting the “other side.” We have heard from those who advocate cancelling the event. We have also heard from many, many more members of our community that Seminar Day should proceed as planned. The view of the Board President and the Superintendent is that this day is intended to discuss, debate, empathize, and learn about issues and different perspectives related to civil rights. We are presenting a diverse set of topics and we are discussing many issues by examining them from different perspectives. A case in point is affirmative action policies and the related session in which we ask, “Do they help or hurt, who do they help or hurt, and are they effective?” The committee at New Trier designed this seminar to be a pedagogical exercise, not a political one. Therefore, the notion that this day somehow advances an agenda or point of view is just not borne out by the goals and structure of the sessions. Where appropriate, topics will be covered from multiple perspectives. However, we are not going to, for example, question the very existence of racism in furtherance of some extreme notion of balance.

I believe the All-School Seminar Day as structured will enrich and challenge our students to think critically about racism and civil rights, and make them more aware and prepared to become better global citizens. They will learn important discussion and listening skills, empathy and tolerance for diverse viewpoints, and methods for counteracting bullying and harassment. The event will supplement and add meaning and understanding to the extensive service projects in which our students participate. We’re raising and educating future leaders. Let’s send them into the world with a perspective that includes a better understanding of the role of civil rights and racism in our country’s history and present day. Let’s give them an opportunity to consider, express, listen to, and respectfully discuss competing views. Let’s trust them to be active participants in the marketplace of ideas.

The Board of Education is proud to support the event and proud to continue to pursue the New Trier motto consistent with our educational policies.

To the New Trier community, I have this message: The February 28th Seminar Day will go on as planned.

Sincerely,

Greg Robitaille

President, New Trier Township High School District 203 Board of Education