



BLACK LIVES MATTER

# Making Hard Choices in Tough Times

*By Dr. Robert M. Stwalley, III, ISBA President*



**P**ublic schools - and American society in general - are currently facing a moment of reckoning that seems to come once in a generation. When I was growing-up, there was an amazing man who preached common sense, logic, and equity in the name of Civil Rights for all citizens. He stated that, "An injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere." At the time, he was considered a radical for threatening the status quo of race relations in the United States. He was especially frightening to the elites and the poor white underclass of the old South, who somehow felt that civil liberties were a zero sum game.

However, Martin Luther King's assassination did not silence the Civil Rights movement, instead it seemed to galvanize it.

The wrongful death of George Floyd in Minneapolis seems to have done the same thing today. The truly sad part of this is that it needs doing at all. The end of the Civil War, the Thirteenth Amendment, and Juneteenth are 155 years in the past, but the work did not end there. The Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments took another five years to enact, but at least another 100 years and scores of additional legislation to put into effect. The corrosive doctrine of 'separate, but equal' was enshrined

into law in 1896, and 58 years was needed to overturn it. The First and Second World Wars were fought with segregated military forces, and it took an Executive Order by President Truman in 1948 to end that travesty. The 'separate, but equal' of *Plessy v. Ferguson* was finally overturned in 1954 by *Brown v. Board of Education*. As school board members, we should be particularly sensitive to this part of history, as the school board was the losing litigant that supported the segregation.

The next 15 years or so brought significant progress. Most of the overt signs of racism were eliminated. Without a doubt, the United States in the mid-70s and afterward was a better place for African-Americans than the US of the mid-50s and before. Unfortunately, that's where things seemed to get stopped. Much of the blatant racism of the previous eras was driven below the surface, but it exists today using subtler, more hidden vantage points. It is no less real or despicable, and as the overwhelming support for the protesters shows, it is in everyone's best interest to eliminate the inequality and racism from society, once and for all.

Schools are critical to changing society for the better and eradicating the scourge of racism from our world. The children that we educate today become the citizens of society tomorrow. School board members cannot sit on the sidelines here. It is vital to understand that we were elected to make decisions and that the policies we set are for the good of all children, not just those from our own families. Our job as school board members is to represent all of the patrons from our communities, not just those that look like us. We must re-structure our school systems to teach and reflect the world as

we want it to be. We have the opportunity here to stand-up for public education and mold consensus.

This will require that we have some courageous and uncomfortable conversations with all of our families, particularly those that are currently feeling disenfranchised. We have to convince them that our intentions are honorable and in the best interests of their children. We know that education reduces poverty; familiarity with broader cultures increases tolerance; and understanding improves civility. If we want a society that reflects these values, we must ensure that all students receive instruction that provides them with the ability to earn a living, be culturally responsive to diverse upbringings, and know how to engage with others in a positive manner. These are the values that we want our citizens to hold dear, and as individuals charged with the oversight of Public School systems, these are the qualities we must instill in our graduates.

### **AS STEWARDS OF THE PUBLIC TRUST:**

- ▶ We must ensure that there is an intentional and equitable allocation of resources to disadvantaged children to provide them with an opportunity to become adults competing on a level playing field.
- ▶ We need to find a way to balance the disparate allocation of property tax funds from wealthy areas to less fortunate ones.

- ▶ We must eliminate the gerrymandering of electoral districts that silences the voices of our minority communities.
- ▶ We need to know that the school resource officers (SROs) that we hire have the best interests of all children in mind, instead of viewing their work as extended 'policing'.
- ▶ We must rework our curricular offerings to eliminate the implicit bias within all lessons and showcase the contributions of exceptional individuals of all races.
- ▶ We have to hire teachers, principals, and administrators that look like our student populations, and we must stop complaining about what higher education sends us. Public education shapes young people's career choices! We are not doing an effective job at this, if we aren't convincing a balanced percentage of all of our students to go into education and become teachers. School boards have to tailor their policies and practices to aid in this process.

ISBA is committed to equity, justice, and equality in our schools and in society. We are working on developing specific policies and roadmaps for our public school systems to combat racism and improve educational opportunity for all. We must be forced to see the inequities in our existing systems, and as school board members, we must do whatever is needed to overcome them. As Dr. King so simply and eloquently stated, 'The time for productive action is now.' 🗳️

**WE MUST BE FORCED TO SEE THE INEQUITIES IN OUR EXISTING SYSTEMS, AND AS SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS, WE MUST DO WHATEVER IS NEEDED TO OVERCOME THEM.**