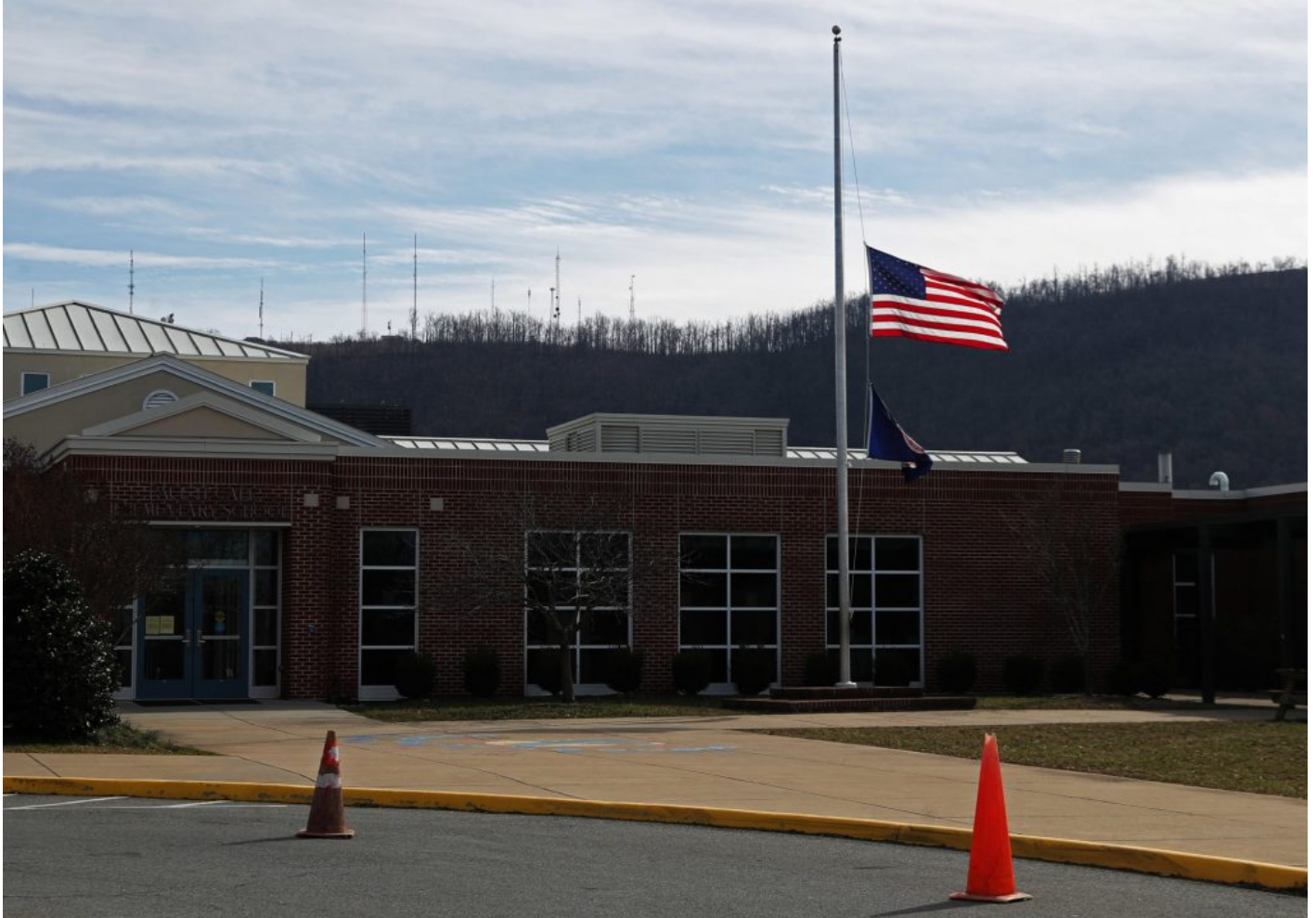


Community Commentary/Opinion: Response to Cale poster on slavery misses the mark
written by Newspack Team | February 20, 2020



It's important to understand that I have the utmost respect for Superintendent Matt Haas. He was the principal at Albemarle High School when I was a student there in the early 2000s, and my now wife and I even babysat his children on occasion when they were younger. I have always known him to be responsible, fair, respectful and thoughtful, and I am of the opinion that he has the school system moving in the right direction.

All that said, he got this one wrong.

Recently, a poster was put up in the front hallway of Paul H. Cale Elementary School, a local school named after former county superintendent and segregationist of the same name, that has been accused of "fomenting dissension" within the institution.

According to a comment allegedly made by Superintendent Haas, he was made aware of the poster on the morning of Thursday, Feb. 13, and ordered it removed by the end of that day, citing that the "poster became disruptive to the learning environment." The unfortunate and obvious subtext is that the poster was "uncomfortable for white people." In a posted comment, he goes on to say that he "wasn't made aware of the presence of the poster until [Feb. 13] morning, and it is clear to me that the poster was not bringing the Cale community together in a spirit of inclusivity and celebration, nor did it reflect the school's and our division's values of young people, excellence, respect and community."

Platitudinous at best.

I have myriad issues with the statement and the subsequent enforced action, but the most salient is the fact that in an era of buzzwords like “DEI” and “culturally-responsive teaching,” even those tasked with the stewardship of our most vulnerable and impressionable population are still too afraid to practice what they inauthentically preach. Cultural amnesia and white fragility are still stronger than unassailable truth. Even though every school mantra (or business mission statement for that matter) is overflowing with en vogue terms like “inclusive” and “equity,” the comfort, and relatable historical narratives, of our Black and brown children *still* come second to the dissonance felt by their white classmates and their families as they struggle to reconcile the truths of American history. Schools and businesses are undergoing “antidiscrimination” and “antiracism” trainings at breakneck pace to rubber-stamp themselves as being “culturally competent” all the while shying away from the *actual* hard and occasionally uncomfortable work and dialogue that it takes to being to dismantle the racially prejudiced platform upon which our society is built.



This sign was removed from Cale Elementary School after officials said it “generated a contentious environment that undermined its value.”. Credit: Credit: Submitted photo

This same American history has an interesting way of being both universal and deeply personal at the same time. It affects all of us as a collective, shapes our norms and informs our present and future. It also touches each and every one of us individually based on our context, vocabulary and understanding. We are doing *all* of our children a disservice, but especially our Black and brown students, by continuously and predictably pandering to white fragility and sterilizing the spaces in which they spend the most time of the truths about their heritage. Our schools are still propagating the same tired (and dangerous) narrative that “slavery was bad, but we got beyond and everything is fine now.” That systemic racism ended with the 13th, 14th and, finally, the 15th Amendment, ratified way back in 1870.

How is ignoring the fact that slavery is coded into the DNA of our country, that race is a man-made construct purposefully enacted to create a caste system such that white people could maintain control and that we’re still contending with the legacies of slavery today promoting the “the best experience possible for children, staff and families?”

We can’t begin to have those conversations because an innocuous poster that humanizes the mothers, artists, scientists and others stolen into bondage and made into property is unpalatable to the school system and its leadership. It’s unfortunate that when we talk about a “spirit of inclusivity and celebration,” we really mean the expected assimilation of our Black and brown children and anything counter to that will be suppressed. What the county really means by our “values of young people, excellence, respect and community” is that it’s time for Black and brown families to accept the past and move on. That our white counterparts’ anger and discomfort are prioritized above ours, because we’re not allowed to let the residue of systematized oppression affect us.

Related Article:

- A poster on slavery was put up for the second year in a row at Albemarle’s Cale Elementary. Officials said they took it down for being controversial.

It’s important that we celebrate the teachers and administration of Cale Elementary School for a genuine, tangible attempt to tell a more inclusive story to their students. Even though this poster lasted

less than 24 hours it is indicative of a mindset that I hope will continue to pervade our schools and our community.

Charlottesville, if this offends your sensibilities — if it's *that* difficult for you to confront the truth about the creation of America and the systems in which we work, play and raise our children — think about that next time you pat yourself on the back for how “woke” you are and your contributions to how much “progress” we’ve made.

Price Thomas is the director of marketing and communications at the United Way of Greater Charlottesville. He formally was the director of marketing and communications at James Madison's Montpelier and aided in the launch of the award-winning exhibition on slavery and the founding era, The Mere Distinction of Colour.