

## **WE CAN'T BREATHE.**

Both literally and figuratively, the individual and collective breath of Black people across this country continually is choked off by systemic racism and state-sanctioned violence. While the entire country, and indeed the world, grapples with the ramifications of the continued blatant murders of Black people and other harmful disregard and disrespect for our humanity, we hear calls to action to “search our souls”, “prick our consciences,” “reflect on America’s failure to live up to its ideals”, extend “thoughts and prayers” for the families of the victims, etc. We’ve been hearing those same tired tropes for decades, if not centuries. And yet, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery and George Floyd were still murdered, as were all the others, too numerous to name in this moment. ENOUGH IS ENOUGH.

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Your Black colleagues and students here at IMSA are **not ok**. Every time we are killed by the police and hate-filled white people, our souls are traumatized. Our mental state is thrown out of equilibrium. Our blood pressure rises, our hearts race, our temples pulse. The distressing toll on our psyche and physical health has real consequences. And one of many consequences is the stress of having to show up in public with our masks on. And I don’t mean the personal protective equipment masks that protect us and others from the devastating consequences of the novel coronavirus, which is overwhelmingly and disproportionately impacting Black communities. I mean the Personal Protective Equipment masks of pretending to be ok, while smiling and waving to neighbors and **showing up on Zoom calls with colleagues at work**, hoping that they don’t see our trauma and that we are spending an exorbitant amount of time figuring out how to hold each other up and stressing over when the next #AnotherBlackPersonIsDead will hit social media.

These are some of the masks necessary for us to step out from behind the nurturing and protective cocoons of our homes, friends and families to show up in those places we must, even when those places don’t feel completely safe, **including at IMSA**.

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Micro and macro aggressions at IMSA abound. They have always existed as institutional and systemic racism exists in all of this country’s systems and the experiences of our Black employees and students bear witness to that fact. So while these aggressions are not new, the more we talk about systemic inequities and the need to dismantle and recreate our policies, practices and operations through a lens of equity, the more prevalent they become and the more denials we hear that racism exists in the classrooms, offices and residence halls at IMSA.

There are those who believe we are moving the equity work too fast and there are those who believe we shouldn’t be moving equity work at all. But, the Academy’s commitment to equity, inclusion and social justice has been clearly expressed through the Board of Trustees’ Equity and Excellence Policy, with which we are all familiar by now. That policy expresses clear equity outcomes that require the entire Academy’s efforts. But, it is clear to me, now more than ever, that IMSA cannot move forward with equity and excellence, without first dealing with racial injustice. You’ve likely heard me reference the Equity Literacy Institute Equity Principles before, the first of which is the “Direct Confrontation Principle” that there is no path to equity without a direct confrontation with inequity, which includes “interpersonal, institutional, cultural and structural racism and other forms of oppression.” In fact, “equity approaches that fail to directly identify and confront inequity play a significant role in sustaining inequity.”

With that in mind, my first direct call to action to the entire IMSA community is that we all commit to excellence as we “ignite and nurture creative, ethical, scientific minds that advance the human

condition,” and that we deploy that same level of excellence to consciously and intentionally ensure that we are leaving no one behind, particularly those in historically and marginalized communities due to indifference.

My second direct call to action is to my white colleagues. I’m asking three things of you:

- Acknowledge (or learn, if necessary) how systemic racism works, and the pervasiveness, especially and acutely, of anti-Black racism;
- Acknowledge your own participation (directly, indirectly, consciously or unconsciously) in maintaining these systems of oppression while working with us to find, expose, and dismantle these systems, within your spheres of influence, especially at IMSA; and
- To embrace accountability and engage in anti-racist praxis across the Academy. It is not enough to be “not racist.” I am asking you to progress in words and action to be “anti-racist.”

Your Black colleagues and students cannot shoulder the burden of eradicating white supremacy in society nor at IMSA. We are experiencing “racial battle fatigue” which means the psychophysiological impact on us caused by the cumulative stress of having to confront and navigate the constant racial injustices inherent in a society built upon and maintained by white supremacy, particularly when white people, as the dominant culture, silence, minimize, or ignore this trauma (Smith, 2003).

This is the work that is moving forward at IMSA, because Black lives do indeed matter, and even those whose fragility distorts this into “all lives matter” would have a hard time arguing that we are even living that out in this country, or at IMSA.

I invite you to join those of us who have already expressly committed and are ready to go.

**BECAUSE WE CAN’T BREATHE.**