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Dear Parents/Carers and Students,

UKAT - Celebrating Diversity: Tackling Discrimination

I very much hope that you and your family are still coping well with the ongoing restrictions imposed due to the Covid 19 pandemic. I think we all hope that things will return to normal in the not too distant future. However, I do think the current situation is likely to persist a while longer. We are beginning to make tentative plans for a return to school for all students in September – but this of course will depend on government guidance and directives in the months ahead.

I would like to share with you my reflections and thoughts on the significant and important issues raised through the Black Lives Matter agenda, and what it means for UKAT. Our academies are fortunate enough to work every day with very diverse cohorts of the most amazing and talented young people, their families, and staff from a wide cultural spectrum. Many of our students come from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities. The enrichment that comes from having such a diverse community is absolutely apparent - relationships between the majority of our students are strong and heartening. This is what gives our academies their special feel and ethos. However, despite this view, the recent events in the USA and worldwide, have made us really think deeply, and reflect on our BAME students, their families and our own BAME staffs' experiences of studying and working within our UKAT community.

The appalling and horrific murder, in the USA of George Floyd, has been an absolute catalyst in shaking the world - and us - awake to the systemic suffering that black people and those of colour endure. Racism is an emotive subject in all societies, and it polarises opinion. A large majority of people will say we are not a racist country compared with others, and that we, as individuals, are not racist; but it is far more complicated than this. It has always been UKAT's highest priority to ensure our schools are inclusive, and that equality for all is central to all we do. Reflecting on current events and listening to all the commentary from a variety of sources, I can see we have, over time, become 'colour blind' - assuming all is well, and that we are meeting all our student's needs – academically, socially and emotionally. However, this is clearly not always the case.

I know that many BAME students and staff feel happy attending and working within a UKAT academy. However, over the past couple of weeks we have, through direct communication with some of our BAME families, and through some student social media posts, seen that some of our students do not always feel they have a valued voice, and that their educational experiences are not always as positive as they should be. A real feeling emerges that often their race - which is a fundamental part of their identities - is not acknowledged and appreciated enough in our educational setting. I think this is a fair comment. Although there have been some specific steps by individual academies, even in the past year, to address inequality where we have perceived it, we have not moved swiftly enough - we now need to move further forward with focus and determination.

Those of us who come from white backgrounds do not necessarily fully appreciate the everyday barriers that can impact negatively on the self-worth, and self-esteem, of our BAME community; as they battle with a range of obstacles and challenges caused by negative stereotyping, negative attitudes and opinions; and all, just because of the colour of their skin.

I am sure the majority of us will say we are not inherently racist, but sometimes assuming everything is ok, keeping silent and not continually reflecting on our organisation's policies and procedures, and not proactively promoting BAME voices and opinions, we are compliantly going along with the status quo, and are quietly promoting a form of unconscious prejudice, and keeping the needs of people of colour on the margins of society. Our academies must overtly stand up to, and tackle societal racism and racial bias, wherever it is found and bring about actions to change and call out discrimination in all its forms.

It is our intention to speedily begin the process of positively engaging with our BAME students, families and staff, in working to bring about systemic change and improve our academies, to promote more inclusive practices and reflect different cultures and backgrounds, and tackle racism with vigour and endeavour.

What is life really like for BAME students studying every day in our academies? What are we actively doing to ensure our students' experiences promote and celebrate and value all our differences? If you are in lessons every day, and not one example in the learning materials (that is presented by the teacher) reflects BAME students' experiences of their life, their backgrounds and cultures, or people of colour are not represented in resources that underpin our lesson delivery, then what is that saying to them? If in dealing with behavioural issues, there is no understanding of a student's cultural identity then how can we deal with it fairly? It is easy to see, just from these few examples that BAME students can feel undervalued, not important and ostracised.

Words are one thing, but actions must follow. I know we have an amazing UKAT community, and I also know we have a collective resolve to build a new future to ensure all our BAME students, their families and staff feel valued, respected, supported, honoured and celebrated for all their differences. I very much look forward to meeting up, and working with you all, on our return to school.

We welcome your views and opinions regarding this matter, please do not hesitate to contact us using our Value Your Voice email address - valueyourvoice@universityofkentacademiestrust.org.uk. We look forward to hearing from our students, parents/carers/staff and governors.

My very best wishes to all our families.

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