

## Letter to ISD Reflections Team 9-14-2020

Dear Issaquah Reflections Chairs Kristen Allen-Bentsen and Heather Bratton,

My name is [REDACTED] and I participated in the Reflections Art Contest at Issaquah High School last year. While I thoroughly enjoyed my past participation in this contest, I am writing on behalf of students from Western Washington regarding concerns about the theme for the 2020-2021 PTA Reflections Art Contest, "I matter because..."

Namely, how it asks all students – many, if not most of whom, are white – to publish written and artistic statements about why their life matters. In the context of a nation resounding with cries of 'Black Lives Matter' for racial justice, this year's theme feels painfully evocative of the 'All Lives Matter' movement. By prompting connection to the 'Black Lives Matter' rallying cry through central use of the word "matter" in the Reflections theme, then asking all students to participate, it contributes to the racist dismissal of the unique challenges Black-Americans face. That is the impact, even if it was not the intent.

Two students wanted to share these messages in particular:

"My name is [REDACTED] and I am a 15 year old sophomore. Something I am very passionate about are racial issues in our country. Especially right now, our country is at an all-time high for racial injustice and it keeps becoming recognized every day. The reflection theme is, "I matter because..." The problem with this theme is I feel it takes away the focus from the BLM movement. I feel as though it is arguing BLM by saying All Lives Matter. This shows to me that I don't matter, and my African American family, friends, and peers don't matter. I hope that the prompt is changed. This would have been a great prompt 2 years ago, but right now that is not the situation."

"Hello my name is [REDACTED], I am a 15 year old African American and I am speaking on behalf of students of color and the equity student council. The black lives matter movement impacts me a lot because I am a African American female that has gone through a lot when it comes to racial injustice and discrimination. The point of Black Lives Matter isn't to suggest that black lives should be or are more important than all other lives but it's to point out the injustice that African Americans face for just existing on a daily basis, it's to make more people aware of what's going on and to end racially all motivated violence."

Thousands of elementary, middle, and high schools in Washington State recognize Reflections entries by exhibiting them in common areas. This year, those display cases will be mostly filled with non-black students reflecting on why their life matters. If no change is made to this year's program, these submissions will not just be accepted but celebrated with indifference to the impact they have on Black students walking the halls. We can do better. We have to do better.

Steps moving forward could include...

- Posting a message contextualizing the problems with the theme to the PTA Reflections websites
- Elevating this issue to the PTA State Office

Another potential option would be to boycott this year's Reflections contest and create a contest at a school and/or district level.

PTA President-Elect Anna King, after announcing this year's theme, acknowledged some of the new meaning the theme takes in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder but failed to address the problems it presents.

While we do not wish to antagonize the PTA, we want to bring this concern to light from student voices. Even though this theme was announced before George Floyd's murder, and was presumably approved with good intent, its impact nonetheless is to distract from the unique barriers that Black students in our school system face.

We are not the only ones deeply concerned about this year's theme, and to show this we started a petition that's quickly gathered over 150 signatures and counting: [change.org/2020ptareflections](https://change.org/2020ptareflections). While addressing this issue will likely be

uncomfortable as no one wishes to be an enabler of discriminatory behavior, it must be acknowledged with understanding.

We hope this message can be taken to heart and look forward to hearing back soon, because we are united in our shared goal of creating a more equitable learning community for all.

Sincerely,  
[REDACTED], on behalf of concerned students

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## Letter to Concerned Students 9-15-2020

Thank you so much for reaching out with this letter, and for coming to us with your concerns around this year's theme. Your letter is both impassioned and articulate, and you demonstrate both a grasp of the social climate and of the feelings of your peers who participate in Reflections. We hope that our reply can be the beginning of a dialogue between us, and that we can find a way to make Reflections work for you and your peers this year, given the chairs' limited power in the situation.

We appreciate your clear explanation about why you find this year's theme troubling. We recognize "matters" is a triggering word given everything that has happened since the death of George Floyd in the spring. We also appreciate that you have watched the national PTA's response video, and have spoken to it here. You have done impressive research. Most powerfully, you have included firsthand reactions to the theme by our own students of color in Issaquah.

We are also appreciative of the thoughtful next steps you have included in your letter. We would like to explore these with you, and to ask you to help us consider other options as well. As district chairs, we do not have the power to change the theme. If we were to change the theme just for the Issaquah School District, we could not move our art forward to the State Level. This move might have implications for artists who would have had a chance to place at state and nationals.

We will be honest that we are not sure what the best next move is. We are hoping that together we can decide.

- We will certainly elevate your concerns to our Council leadership, and ask them, with your permission, to elevate your letter to the State PTSA Office.
- We have crafted a statement for our website that contextualizes the problematic language with this year's theme, and offers suggestions for participating without using the explicit language of the theme.
- We would love to have your permission to share your letter with the chairs in our district.
- We are struggling with the notion of a boycott for several reasons. First of all, boycotting denies artists the opportunity to compete at the state and national level, and silences artistic voices that should be heard. In Issaquah, most of our Reflections participants are students of color, and for many, art, writing, and music are their superpower. I have already heard from students who have created art and I would hate to cancel Reflections on them. I am also unsure if this makes a statement, or just erases the voices of Issaquah students entirely. However, if your group might consider co-opting the theme to make it work for you in your individual artistic responses to the prompt, we might have an opportunity to make a powerful statement about racism and systemic injustice, using the power of art.
- Art submitted to the Reflections program could speak directly to the problems with the theme. The language of the theme need not appear in the statement or the art. What if artists, musicians, writers and dancers respond to the problematic theme by making art? Is this naive? In your petition, you mention that the National PTA should consider changing the prompt to "I am valuable because". Changing the wording of the prompt (which I agree wholeheartedly seems like an easy thing to do, but for the reasons stated by the President, the National PTA does not seem inclined to do it) in advertisement is probably not going to happen, but perhaps our artists could choose to enter into the theme with language like, "I am valuable because" or "I am strong because". Further, impassioned artists can submit entries that directly address the injustice that they see in the prompt.

We believe that artists can change the world.

Let's keep this dialogue going. This is hard stuff, but we are bursting with pride at seeing young people on fire to change the world in a positive way. You and your peers are taking everything that we, as parents and educators, have been preaching about-- intent v. impact, about engaging to change the world, about persuasive writing and community building--and putting it into action. You are teaching us. Our hearts are singing.

As chairs of the Reflections program, our responsibilities include running a program, training chairs, facilitating judging, processing hundreds of pieces of art, celebrating student artists, and physically delivering art to the state level. As community members, parents and fellow humans, our job is to listen towards understanding, to build community and to work with others to make this world better for everyone. We hope we can do both jobs well.

Thank you for letting us be a part of this journey. And please make art!

Sincerely,  
Kristen Allen-Bentsen, Heather Bratton, and Leah Gibson

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### Letter to ISD Reflections Team 9-25-2020

Dear Kristen Allen-Bentsen, Heather Bratton, and Leah Gibson,

Thank you for your email; we greatly appreciate your commitment to equity. Our group has met to discuss the potential actions regarding this year's Reflections Art Contest as well as the resulting consequences. This has led to a conversation regarding how changes to the theme or the functioning of the Contest will fail to address the larger-scale issues with racism in our area.

As a result of our discussion, we would like to approach this issue through the lens of defining what constitutes an 'acceptable' entry that highlights artists' self-exploration versus an 'unacceptable' entry grounded in prejudice. The meaningful aspects of why the theme was selected are accentuated by entries that demonstrate artists' belief in themselves, and we do not want to limit this type of expression.

We are interested in meeting with you virtually over Zoom to discuss thoughts and potential courses of action. Please let us know when you are able to meet.

Thank you,  
Concerned Student

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### Letter to Concerned Students 9-26-2020

Dear Concerned Students,

Thank you for giving us the opportunity to dialogue with you about Reflections and larger issues of systemic inequity on Thursday night. Your thoughtful, authentic passion resonated throughout every minute of the incredibly well-run, timely meeting. On a personal note, we were quite grateful for the 8:00 ending time, as we tend to lose our mental stamina much later than that. :)

In response to your follow up letter, we would like to be clear about what steps we will be taking, and those we cannot.

We will/have amended our marketing of the Reflections program by:

- Removing the theme from the main advertising page.

- Acknowledging the problematic nature of the theme.
- Encouraging students to interpret the theme in protest or with replacement language like *strong* or *valuable*.
- Adding (coming Monday) further language to our page that details the work of National PTSA's journey in the theme, including their discussions with Black Lives Matter groups, and our support of Black Lives Matter.

We will be discussing this issue and the sensitivities around it with our Reflection chairs on Monday, including ways for them to train their judges to spot harmful, hurtful, or hateful entries. Following ISD policy, harmful, hateful, or hurtful entries will not be judged.

At IHS, we plan to try to reach diverse student artists by sending advertising through Mr. Frost directly to club chairs. We are open to further suggestions about how to find and encourage these artists.

Issaquah PTSA Council is a non-profit, 501c3, volunteer run organization. We are held to legal standards and best practices to maintain our status and affiliation. To that end, we cannot issue a statement dictating parameters around acceptable art. We will hold to our established policy of not judging or displaying harmful, hurtful, or hateful art.

Reflections is also not the appropriate venue for re-educating students who might create racist art. As we operate within the school, we are held to the same privacy restrictions any student matter would involve. Even when we have brought a concern about art in the past, once we communicate with the school, as volunteers, we are not privy to further action taken. Typically, our only communication with participants is email messages about the next steps for their art.

Ultimately, Reflections seeks to celebrate talented writers, artists, choreographers, composers, photographers, and film makers who have a demonstrated a creative interpretation of a theme.

We are hopeful that your work as artists and activists will further encourage students to participate. Theme aside, we are of two minds when imagining this year's participation. Student artists may find themselves with more time because sports and clubs are not happening and will be filling their time with creative pursuits; or students will feel disconnected from school entirely, and therefore, not interested. On a district level, we have several schools struggling to find Chairs, as many parents of younger students are busy with schooling their kids. This may impact our overall participation as well.

We are happy to be on this journey with you. Please keep in mind that Reflections is ultimately an arts program, seeking to celebrate talented student artists and their interpretation of a theme. This year, the challenges of running a program in Covid mean that many of our artists will be participating solely for the love of creation as we have no easy ways to celebrate or display their work.

We encourage you to keep working on ways to reach your peers to educate them about both overt racism and micro-aggressions. We are deeply grateful for your advocacy and partnership on this issue. Each of us feels that you have helped us navigate this year's theme in a positive, inclusive way.

Sincerely,  
The Reflections Team  
Kristen, Heather, and Leah