MIDDLEBURY UNION MIDDLE SCHOOL Excellence through rigor, responsiveness, equity and partnerships

Interim Principal	Counselor
Interim Assistant Principal	Counselor

November 19, 2020

Dear Phoenix and Ohana Families:

Shortly after Thanksgiving break, your child will be embarking on an interdisciplinary unit of study in their Individuals and Societies and Language and Literature classes entitled Race and Racism in America. Within it, we will provide students with opportunities to engage in conversations and learning activities about race and racism that are sustained across two content areas, using two rich, complex texts as the foundation of our work: Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You by Dr. Ibram X. Kendi and Jason Reynolds and The Hate U Give by Angie Thomas. Our hope is that within the supportive environment of our classrooms, we can explore these issues through the lens of two different literary genres.

Stamped: Racism, Antiracism, and You is a nonfiction history book and is a "remix" for teen readers of Kendi's award-winning Stamped from the Beginning, which won the National Book Award in 2016. Stamped takes teen readers on an accessible journey through the history of racist ideas in America, and, as Goodreads states, "inspires hope for an antiracist future." The New York Times Book Review echoes this, writing "Reynolds's engaging, clear prose shines a light on difficult and confusing subjects. . . . This is no easy feat" (https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/06/books/review/stamped-ibram-x-kendi-jason-reynolds.html).

The Hate U Give is a work of young adult fiction and follows a specific time in the life of a black teenager named Starr, who witnesses the shooting of her childhood friend, Khalil, at the hands of a police officer, and must make a series of difficult decisions as she figures out who she is and what she wants to stand for. This book has garnered many awards and has been highly recommended for young teen readers by countless organizations, including the American Library Association, which calls it "An inarguably important book that demands the widest possible readingership" (ala.org). It was also chosen as the 2020 Vermont Reads novel by the Vermont Council for the Humanities, whose directors write, "The powerful themes of The Hate U Give have been brought into sharper focus for millions of Americans by the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbury" (https://www.vermonthumanities.org/).

While this novel is held in high esteem, we do feel it is important to alert you to the fact that it contains expletives. The language is not included for gratuitous shock value or sensationalism; rather, it is simply the result of real characters living their lives in unstructured moments within "unscripted," natural interactions with one another. While we do not condone or encourage this type of language within our classrooms, we believe that the value of this text outweighs the discomfort we might

initially feel at seeing some of these expletives in print. We will certainly discuss this with students before beginning the book and make certain that our expectations for interactions with one another around this issue—and other sensitive issues that The <u>Hate U Give</u> and <u>Stamped</u> highlight and illustrate—are guided by classroom norms and agreements that we have decided upon ahead of time with the students. Already, we have invited all students on both teams to anonymously share their ideas for creating norms around having difficult conversations in a Google Survey, and the results will be collated, shared with students, and used to create our list of agreements so everyone can feel safe in our classrooms, is able to learn and grow, ask hard questions, and gain a greater understanding of these complicated, timely, and important issues.

Finally, a couple of logistical notes. First, we will distribute these books to students very soon. We would like to recognize and thank the Vermont Council for the Humanities and Vermont-NEA for awarding us grants towards the purchase of some of the title copies, as well as The Vermont Book Shop for its generous discount so that we may offer these titles to all our Grade 8 students. Each student will get a borrowed copy of both texts (assigned a specific MUMS number), and we would like them to leave these books at home; we will have a class set that remains in our classroom. This way, students will not accidentally leave them at school, rendering them unable to read at home on their "remote" days. They will be expected to read each week, and both classes will supply students with a weekly reading calendar to keep them on track. Additional scaffolding will be provided to support students (e.g., key excerpts for analysis, chapter summaries, plotline, etc.) that reinforces important ideas from the reading. Both classes will keep reading journals, which will invite students to interact with Stamped and The Hate U Give in a variety of ways (e.g., art, quote analysis, summary, photography, creative writing, argument writing) and receive feedback from us throughout the unit.

It will be essential for students to keep up with their reading; any support you will be able to offer at home would be much appreciated. And on that note, we hope that this unit will inspire conversations at home. Ask your child what they are reading and learning and studying, and together, we can support students as they become more informed citizens of our world! Of course, if you have any questions, thoughts, or concerns, please feel free to contact us.

With great appreciation,

Darcy Annino, Phoenix Team Individuals and Societies

Sara Nadeau, Ohana Team Individuals and Societies

Martha Santa Maria, Ohana Team Language and Literature

Eileen Sears, Phoenix Team Language and Literature