

Russ Sperling  
Equity Statement

I am anti-racist.

And anti-homophobic, anti-xenophobic. I believe that Black Lives Matter, Trans Lives Matter, and to be more specific, Black Trans Lives Matter. I am an advocate for equity.

I believe that it is incumbent upon me, a white gay male who has privilege, to be clear in these statements. As Ijeoma Ulou said, "If you live in this system of white supremacy, you are either fighting the system or you are complicit. There is no neutrality to be had towards systems of injustice--it is not something you can just opt out of." In my work as an educator and who I am as a citizen of this country, I will not be neutral.

I grew up in a conservative family in the suburbs, and in this environment, I did not learn about the way our society is structured. My exposure to people of color, immigrants and LGBT-identifying people was very limited. Then in my first job I became a teacher at a high school that was experiencing a change in demographics--there was an increasing number of students of color attending our school, and also more students from families experiencing economic hardship. There were racially-charged student fights that caused large disturbances on campus. We as a faculty had much to learn to create safe spaces so we could serve all of our students. This was the 90's and there was so much we did not understand.

Then in 1999, I finally came to grips with my sexuality and I came out of the closet. I honestly can say that I did understand that I would be sacrificing privilege if I came out, although I'm not sure I would have labeled it "privilege" at the time. I knew that people would see me differently, because I knew that I saw others (as a closeted white male), whether they were gay or not, as different. But I decided I couldn't live a lie any longer, so out I came. Yes, I have experienced discrimination as a gay man. It's ugly. But I also know that I can "hide" my sexuality for my own safety if I need to, whereas people of color cannot hide their skin color. I'm aware I still have privilege.

I do believe that these experiences help to give me a perspective on equity. We all bring our personal lens to this topic, and I know that my life's story has helped me become more empathetic to dark skin folx. But I will never know what it's really like to live as someone who experiences our 400 year-old system of white-supremacy and all its educational, health, financial, and oppressive effects.

So I am an advocate for equity. I created the "San Diego Pride Youth Marching Band," the first of its kind in the nation, and I have spoken nationally about this group and my experience leading it. In my role as visual and performing arts director in San Diego Unified School District, I revamped our delivery of elementary music so that all students received instruction, not just those who opted in (as I had learned that teachers were holding lower-achieving and lower socio-economic status students back from attending music). As a member of the NAfME board

(National Executive Board or NEB), I advocated for a Diversity Officer. This was not approved by the board, but instead the Cook-Ross study was commissioned. I became a leader on the NEB for implementation of the Cook-Ross recommendations, and now I serve on NAFME's Equity Committee.

I think about Diversity, Equity, Access and Inclusion in my work and life constantly, and it is a lens through which I make all decisions and take action. It takes strength to stand up against those who are limited in experience and understanding of the needs of all people, but it is important, necessary, and required for the abolitionist movement. As Bettina Love has written, "Being an abolitionist means you are ready to lose something, you are ready to let go of your privilege, you are ready to be in solidarity with dark people by recognizing your Whiteness in dark spaces, recognizing how it can take up space if unchecked, using your Whiteness in White spaces to advocate for and with dark people." I will continue to advocate for all people if chosen to serve as the president of NAFME.

This is the real work that must be done in order to connect and represent all people in this national organization. I will not be neutral and will lift voices so that all may be heard and contribute to the betterment of the NAFME and music education within the United States.