

October 2, 2014

Dear Admissions Committee:

As you review this candidate's file, you may notice that he or she has some unexcused absences, grades lowered because of unexcused absences, unexplained lapses in extracurricular participation, or even disciplinary action in late September and early October of 2014. We, the undersigned, wish to elucidate this part of the student's record and help to explain why he or she might nevertheless make an excellent candidate for admission to your institution.

In 2014, the Jefferson County Board of Education—driven by a newly-elected majority funded by outside interests—sought to make sweeping changes to its schools. These changes targeted teachers and sought to curtail intellectual freedom. Most specifically, the Board sought to attach teacher pay to standardized test scores and to review the newly adopted Advanced Placement U.S. History framework to ensure that the curriculum emphasized “respect for authority” and did not “condone civil disorder.” As the Board declared:

Review criteria shall include the following: ... Materials should promote citizenship, patriotism, essentials and benefits of the free enterprise system, respect for authority and respect for individual rights. Materials should not encourage or condone civil disorder, social strife or disregard of the law. Instructional materials should present positive aspects of the United States and its heritage. Content pertaining to political and social movements in history should present balanced and factual treatment of the positions.

This attempt to distort the acceptable scope of U.S. History content mirrored a nationwide and coordinated effort. Prominent professional associations, including the American Historical Association, endorse the AP U.S. History framework as a sound approach, one that best allows teachers to convey the critical and historical thinking skills that not only make for excellent undergraduates, but also make for excellent citizens. The Jefferson County Board of Education sought this curriculum review not because the board members doubted the academic merits of AP US History, but because they wished to implement a curriculum that explicitly supported their political beliefs.

Jefferson County students immediately understood the motivations behind the proposed review. They also understood the importance of “civil disorder” as central to the main movements of U.S. History, from the American Revolution through abolition through the Civil Rights Movement, and saw it as a strategy by which they could become agents of their own education. They walked out by the hundreds in a sustained grassroots movement that stretched across multiple high schools. Many, if not most, of these students were not, themselves, eligible for or students of AP U.S. History, but nevertheless sought to support the intellectual freedom of their classmates. They undertook this action despite the threat of academic penalties, and many of them may receive records that indicate as much.

Students who participated in this movement are likely to be critical thinkers, people strongly committed to civic participation, and activists in a generation of spectators. Any undergraduate institution would benefit from admitting such students; we all yearn for more of them in our own classes. We hope that participating in this movement will not adversely impact the applications of dedicated students. We also hope that this letter encourages you to talk to this student about his or her participation in the walkouts—and also about protest and free thought, about common cause and common history, and about the much brighter future young people dedicated to critical thinking can engender, given the opportunity to do so.

You may also find this letter posted online at <http://www.supportjeffcokids.org/for-students-who-participated-in-protests/>

Sincerely,

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Green Mountain High School, 1990

Melinda Baldwin
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Lakewood High School, 2000

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Wheat Ridge High School, 1977

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Green Mountain High School, 1984

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Recreation Supervisor, City of San Leandro, California, and Adjunct Lecturer, San Francisco State University
Green Mountain High School, 1997

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Director and Associate Professor of Women's and Gender Studies
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Green Mountain High School, 1984

Erik Meddles

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Arvada West High School, 2006

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AP U.S. History Exam Review Board, Committee Member

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