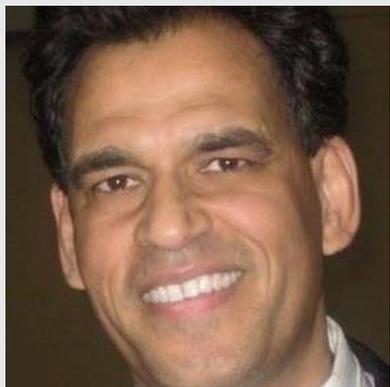


"Wake Up" – "This is America!"



By **Dennis Bisgaard**, *Head of School, Whittle School & Studios (DC Campus), Former Head of Kingswood Oxford School (CT) and former NAIS Board Member*



For the past month I have been fascinated by what oddly may be the perfect storm needed for the transformational change advocated by so many of us. I know I will never forget Whittle School & Studios' 2019-2020 school year, our inaugural year as a newcomer on the Washington DC landscape, trying our very best to become a uniquely modern, global, and different kind of school, not tied to any tradition, history, existing norms, or systems. We were in the envious space many educators dream of: to imagine, build, and co-create from scratch our notion of a perfect learning environment for the unique needs of every student. Today, it feels like we are all now newcomers to a world of education forced to evolve or perish.

Last August, The New York Times' 1619 Project emerged, with great acclaim, to reframe our country's history commemorating and re-examining 400 years of slavery in the US. Cyclones, typhoons, tornadoes, and wildfires followed, and then...the Global COVID-19 Pandemic; shelter in place, no college, no March Madness or professional sports, no concerts or large gatherings, a nation deeply, politically divided, and no school – just stay at home and deal! And you will have a lot of time to think and reflect.

And then George Floyd! Enter the latest death of an unarmed black man at the hands and knees of police officers. Pent-up and trapped anger, restlessness, frustration, fear, and “enough is enough” erupted. Shelter in place, masks or none, people spilled into the streets everywhere, in the US and across the globe in massive Black Lives Matter protests. The movement that came to life in 2013 after Trayvon Martin's death and subsequent acquittal of his murderer was reborn with new energy.

That energy feels so very different – the diversity and youth of the crowds, the global outcry in initially surprising places, the consistency and seeming permanence and energy around fighting injustice, discrimination, senseless brutality, and political turmoil. And alumni of color of our many institutions have “suddenly” taken to offer truths, hurts, slights, stories, and insensitivity to their very alma maters via Instagram, Twitter and other social media.

In Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* from 1989, the black character Radio Raheem at the end of the movie is killed by police officers. In Lee's movie *School Daze* from the year before, the final scene is the loud screaming of “Wake Up!”

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Protesters in the streets and our alumni of color in #BlackatSchoolX are telling us to Wake Up. If our country is to thrive again, we must commit to start anew. Our schools must become the fertile grounds that allow our students, students from any background, their full potential, the skills and tools they need to succeed, and on equal footing.

It is time for our schools to listen closely, to embrace the feedback, to learn, to commit to the work and provide a more robust experience for all of our students, an experience where they feel part of the very fabric of the school, where they matter and belong. Institutional racism, white privilege, and anti-racist training need to be examined closely, and students need to see themselves reflected in what and how we teach and assess, and by whom.

In 2005 I wrote an article in NAIS' Independent School Magazine, "Diversity 20 Years From Now: Do We Have 2020 Vision?" and in 2015 I wrote a piece for The Head's Letter, "A Call to Action for Heads of School." The irony is I

could have written both pieces yesterday because relatively little has changed and some of the same arguments can easily be made today. I am an eternal optimist, and I sense something critically important is brewing right now. The question is whether we will receive the "gift" of the moment; lean into discomfort, engage in authentic, hard, and difficult conversations, re-examine the past through a different lens, and commit to a more equitable and meaningful future.

I am not certain why exactly, but the disturbing and haunting video of Childish Gambino, "This is America," displaying gun violence, mass shootings, long standing racism, and discrimination, as well as American Soul and Jazz poet Gil Scott-Heron's best-known composition, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised," both came to mind recently. The two artists, decades apart, paint the same picture. Gil Scott-Heron's very last repeated line states, "The Revolution Will Not Be Televised. This Time the Revolution Will be Live!" The ultimate call to action.

