



# Make Art Anyway

May 12, 2016

Board of Directors of NAFME  
1806 Robert Fulton Drive  
Reston, VA 20191

Dear Board of Directors of NAFME,

We have been closely following the online conversation regarding the comments made by Michael Butera at the April 28<sup>th</sup> convening around diversity hosted by the National Endowment of the Arts, as shared by Keryl McCord of AlternateRoots, and we wish to add ours to the growing chorus of voices calling for true commitment and action towards racial equity by the National Association for Music Education. We are a group of white staff from Arts Corps, who meet intentionally as part of our organizational practice of racial caucusing.

While we do not know Michael Butera or Keryl McCord personally, Ms. McCord's account immediately rang true for us. Even if Mr. Butera's words were heard in a way that did not match his intentions, it is clear that he became deeply defensive, shut down a critical conversation and left the room. This defensiveness feels familiar, and it alone speaks volumes. As white people, we have been socialized to respond in anger and defensiveness when people of color ask us to grapple with our complicity in racist systems. These responses are harmful and keep the status quo in place. To not challenge ourselves to overcome our defensive responses in the work against racism is a disservice to our collective work towards access to arts for all.

Over the past several years, Arts Corps has helped lead conversations around organizational transformations toward racial justice for arts education leaders at the National Guild for Community Education annual conference. We have seen this kind of defensiveness show up in big and little ways. We have heard racist statements, many subtle, some almost as blatant as those attributed to Mr. Butera, from our colleagues across the sector.

Also telling is the response of NAFME and Mr. Butera himself to the incident. A mission statement and written values are meaningless without actions that make them real, and the responses have been absent any such evidence. Mr. Butera is right that systemic inequity does make NAFME's desire for diversity harder to achieve. But that is exactly why working to do so must take precedence.

The truth is that many in the arts express similar hopes that *all people* should have access to high quality arts and music education, while still believing in and spreading the dominant racist narrative, which upholds white dominance and blames people of color for their lack of "skill." If we actually believe that *all people* should have access our first step must be a self assessment of our personal beliefs and biases, and only then can we begin addressing the deep structural barriers to arts education that exist for youth of color (and educators of color).

Reckoning with structural barriers will not happen easily. It requires the leadership and perspectives of people of color. It requires new ways of operating and organizing our work. It requires reshaping the cultures of our institutions with a critical lens toward dismantling the effects of outdated ideologies that



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perpetuate white privilege. But if we do not do this, we are in fact perpetuating the systemic oppression that will ultimately prevent us from meeting our missions, missions aimed at ensuring arts education access for *all*.

This is not easy work. And it poses added challenges for those of us who are white. As leaders and as white people, we have been socialized to believe we should be competent, knowledgeable experts. How can we lead around something that we have been taught not to see, or to change systems that we have benefitted from? Are we willing to transform the ways we operate and the culture of our organizations in order to welcome and actually share power with leaders of color in our work?

This honest work is where the rubber meets the road, where our value, quality and sustainability actually lives or perishes. Fortunately there are many arts education organizations actively seeking answers to these questions. Our own organization, Arts Corps, is still on this journey. As an organization focused on bridging the gap in access to arts education, we had few board members or staff of color for many years. But as we have worked to truly live our mission and values in all aspects of our work, the leadership of youth and people of color has grown in our organization, and people of color now make up the majority of our staff, board and teaching artist faculty.

This was not accomplished through a recruitment effort, nor because there was suddenly an influx of people of color into arts education leadership in our region. This happened through collective education around racism and other oppression, and by a deliberate, and sometimes painful, look at the ways our organizational culture, processes, compensation, fundraising, board and staff recruitment align with our values. This work has involved making space for staff of color to meet, support each other, and give collective feedback to the organization and help drive our racial justice work. It has also involved making space for white staff to meet, support each other in our own growth and commitments to racial justice, and to listen and receive feedback. And this is still an ongoing change process for our organization. This work involves constant discipline as our organization seeks to undo the impacts of systemic racism while continuing to work in deeply inequitable and racist systems.

We realize that Arts Corps is a very different organization, and that NAFME may be less nimble and capable of quick change. But we know that change is possible. We know it is necessary. Deeply unjust inequities persist in the arts and arts education. To rectify this we will need NAFME, and other field leaders to truly live their values of equity and inclusion, and to work with pointed courage.

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