

JACL

Midwest Office

Japanese American Citizens League
5415 North Clark Street
Chicago, Illinois
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William J. Yoshino, Midwest Director
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April 5, 2010

Ms. Felisha Cheatem
Principal, East High School
123 S. Forge St.
Akron, Ohio 44308

Dear Ms. Cheatem:

We recently learned that East High School uses the term the “Orientals” as its school nickname. As the nation’s oldest and largest Asian American civil rights organization, the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) is astonished and troubled that a school would use this nickname due to its derogatory and racist connotations.

The term “Oriental,” though once widely used is now considered a derogatory and offensive term by the Asian Pacific American community. It is a term steeped in racism, colonialism and xenophobia, conveying a pejorative depiction of Asian people and culture that was used to justify their exclusion and segregation from mainstream American society.

The term was used to depict Asian Americans as foreign and exotic and incapable of assimilating to the American cultural. It led the public to deem Asian Americans as untrustworthy and inscrutable, and a threat to the European dominance of American society. These unfortunate perceptions were neatly packaged as an acceptable slur extending from the 1800s to the advent of the civil rights era of the 1960s. The effects of these perceptions have been devastating. Asians were barred from citizenship, banned from marrying whites, excluded from many professions, prohibited from buying land, and forced to attend segregated schools. Some of the most egregious examples of institutionalized racism against Asians include the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882, which banned immigrants from China from entering the country, and the forced incarceration of over 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War II.

By continuing to use the term “Oriental,” Akron and East High School perpetuates a history of anti-Asian sentiment and discrimination. Concern over the term’s continuing usage has been so great that the Washington and New York State legislatures have outlawed its use in official government documents. Rationalizing the poor taste of the school nickname by claiming school tradition or ignorance of its offensive nature does not change its racist history nor erase the symbolism of its use. Instead, its use only serves to offend.

The JACL urges the leadership at East High School to do what is right by changing the derogatory nickname because it marginalizes members of the community and reinforces an ugly remnant of our history that is best left in our past. There are no reasonable grounds that argue for

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the continued use of this term for the school nickname. The JACL respectfully demands that East High School change this nickname.

Sincerely,

William Yoshino
Midwest Director
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