

The War on Merit Turns into Systemic Injustice

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Parents from the #SaveMerit coalition rally at Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology in Fairfax County, Va., January 3, 2023. (Photo: Andrew Thomas/DTPhotos.net/Courtesy SaveMerit.com)

By [Asra Q. Nomani](#)

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Emails obtained by FOIA request amount to a disturbing paper trail showing how Virginia schools withheld student awards.

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When the news broke in late December that Ann Bonitatibus, the principal of Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology (TJ) had withheld National Merit commended-student awards from those who had earned them, Fairfax County superintendent Michelle Reid blamed a “one-time human error.” After more principals started confessing to the practice of withholding awards — in up to 18 schools in Virginia’s

Fairfax, Loudoun, Prince William, and Stafford counties — Reid shifted the blame to “staffing” issues. In a recent missive to parents, she insisted that there “is not a war on merit.”

However, 2,000 pages of emails obtained in response to Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests — reported here for the first time — reveal that TJ staffers and administrators, seemingly motivated by the pursuit of so-called equity, willfully engaged in a deliberate pattern and practice of withholding awards, devaluing their worth, and deceiving parents in the process.



In 2022, the National Merit Scholarship Corporation recognized about 34,000 commended students, or the top 3 percent of 1.5 million high-school students who have taken the Preliminary SAT exam, and another 16,000 semifinalists, or the top 1 percent of students who later compete to become finalists. For these students, the awards are portals to lucrative scholarships and résumé boosters that can get them into the colleges of their choice. Withholding them amounts to theft. “It certainly appears to be a failure of fiduciary duty on the part of school administrators, staff, and teachers,” says John Banzhaf, a law professor emeritus at George Washington University.

And yet, TJ staff members falsely told parents that the awards have “no financial recognition” when in fact many are attached to scholarships. Staff members have claimed that “no letter” or “formal announcement typically come with the awards” when in fact schools all over America make a big deal of them, and National Merit sends out the awards with the expectation that schools will ceremoniously announce the winners.

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But the documents obtained show that, as early as in fall 2020, TJ staffers squirreled away National Merit certificates in the “records room” in “the last aisle farthest from the door on one of the shelves.” In fall 2022, a few teachers handed out the certificates surreptitiously “in the hallway” so as not to “make a big production” of their delivery. Some students never received their awards.

What seems to be at work at the 18 schools that now confess to having withheld awards is political ideology. The Fairfax County school district has been hijacked since the summer of 2020 by the newfound social-justice-activism ideology of its 12–0 Democratic school board. Since the summer of 2020, a woke army of self-proclaimed “equity warriors” has laid siege to K–12 school districts such as Fairfax County as part of a war on merit but also a war on kids.

In August 2020, local school-district leaders, including TJ administrators, fawned over a virtual event with Ibram X. Kendi, the author of the “anti-racism” treatise that makes the argument, “The only remedy to past discrimination is present discrimination.” Later that

year, the school board voted, 12–0, to rid TJ of its merit-based, race-blind admissions process, and the school principal went on record saying that she wanted more “brown and black children” (perhaps forgetting that 80 percent of the school’s students are members of minorities, most of them Asian Americans). In April 2021, TJ teachers taught a “social-emotional learning” lesson, which featured material from the Black Lives Matter organization and an activist alumnus who scolded the school’s Asian-American students for having engaged in “cultural appropriation” when they salsa-danced during a school event that celebrated global cultures. Meanwhile, in fall 2021, the Virginia Department of Education hosted a webinar with a Muslim educator-activist who argued that the 9/11 hijackers shouldn’t be called “terrorists,” for fear of hurting the feelings of Muslim students.

More from Asra Q. Nomani

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Virginia Parents Have Had Enough of ‘Woke’ Lies at Their Schools

In response to news of the withholding of the awards, Virginia attorney general Jason Miyares launched a civil-rights investigation into the issue and into TJ’s new admissions policy. An analysis of National Merit winners reveals that about 75 percent of semifinalists are Asian, indicating that the withholding of the commended-student awards has an inordinate impact on Asian students, a protected minority under civil-rights laws.

* * *

On a Friday afternoon in November 2022, after early-admission deadlines for many colleges had passed, a TJ staff member sent 17 senior-class homeroom teachers an email to tell them that the staff had “recently received” commended-student certificates. The certificates, which the principal had received weeks earlier, included a message in bold: “Please present the *Letter of Commendation* as soon as possible, since it is the student’s only notification of this National Merit Scholarship Program honor.”

Within minutes, social-studies teacher Melanie Morris responded that 18 of the 26 students in her homeroom were among those who received the award and warned: “Please be cognizant that handing these all out at once in one classroom might single out the students who DID not receive one.”

“I’m going to hand them out as I encounter them in the hallway,” she wrote, “or if I teach them in another class — not all at one time.” She added, “Just food for thought, especially considering my thoughts on using the PSAT as an indicator of success.”

Latin teacher Patricia Lister responded, punctuating her comment with a smiley-face emoji: “True — and it might actually be the opposite in that many of the kids who DON’T get one might be semifinalists, and those who get ‘just’ the commendation might not be so thrilled.

In any case I'm not going to make a big production of handing them out."

Days later, Brandon Kosatka, TJ's director of student services, told local mother Shawwna Yashar that he and the principal had withheld the awards from students so as not to "hurt" the feelings of those who hadn't received them, and to focus instead on students as "individuals" rather than as "achievements." Soon after, TJ associate principal Sara Genetin admitted to the principal that she hadn't told commended students about their awards in 2021 until a parent raised the issue. In another email, Kosatka admitted to the principal that he "did not tend to the NM Commended Student process" even in 2020.

Indeed, in a letter dated September 10, 2020, a National Merit official sent Bonitatibus a list of commended students, a sample press release, and award letters for each student, noting the "important part that you and your professional staff play in the development of academic excellence."

But, by September 22, a parent, whom I'll refer to as Mom No. 1 because she wants to remain anonymous, learned accidentally that her son was a commended student and emailed a TJ staffer, asking: "Are these Commended students listed anywhere, or is there some sort of letter or something that we can have to document this achievement?"

The staffer replied, "There is a certificate for the Commended students that will be sent home at some point!"

More than a month later, in the morning of October 27, with early-admission deadlines for many colleges just days away, Mom No. 1 asked again for the award: "We still have not received the National Merit Commended Student certificate." She forwarded her query to the principal. Soon after, a staff member sent Kosatka a spreadsheet with the names of 230 TJ commended students with details on where she had stored the award certificates. My own son's name was on that list, but I wouldn't learn about it until two years later, which was when I first reported this story.

Kosatka responded to the staff member about the certificate the mom was trying to get, saying that there's "no harm in sending it, if we have it, but for the rest — we can include it or distribute it later."

Another month later, on November 24, a different parent, Mom No. 2, told a TJ counselor via email that she had discovered that her son was a commended student. "However, we were never notified and did not receive a letter," she wrote. "They told me to contact you to see where it might have gone." Her son needed the certificate for a four-year scholarship to Liberty University worth about \$100,000.

The counselor claimed falsely: "There is no letter and no formal announcement for commended scholars." Meanwhile, across the county, Langley High School had just announced its own commended students.

Mom No. 2 asked: “Can you scan it and send me a copy?” The counselor told the staff that the mother was “requesting a copy for a scholarship opportunity.” Staff directed the counselor to “the last aisle farthest from the door on one of the shelves.” Finally, the counselor sent a scan of the award to Mom No. 2.

Mom No. 1, in the meantime, had still not heard back about her son’s certificate. On April 9, 2021, she emailed Bonitatibus: “What do I need to do to receive our copy?” Bonitatibus asked Kosatka and another staff member: “Do either of you recall what was done with the certificates? . . . ”

Eventually that mother, too, received her child’s certificate. The rest of the certificates remained shelved. (Note that both of these mothers who successfully pursued their children’s awards are American-born, unlike many of the school’s parents, who are Asian immigrants.)

In the fall of 2022, the school repeated its willful subterfuge. In mid October 2022, Bonitatibus falsely told a parent that commended students “received notification [of their awards] last spring.” The mother replied that she was “slightly confused.” Finally, on November 14, Bonitatibus distributed that year’s awards, but teachers were intentionally cagey in handing them to students, after Morris, the TJ social-studies teacher, had recommended that her colleagues be subtle in doing so. On December 12, Kosatka admitted that the certificates had been delivered late, passively claiming that the “mistake” had “been brought to my attention.”

A parent wrote to Kosatka that her daughter “didn’t receive anything on November 14 and never heard anything about this.” Another parent wrote to Kosatka: “I probably need some education about the recognition. I did not go to high school in this country and don’t know the gravity of such recognition. Is it the same thing as the national merit scholarship? Or is it something right below that?” Kosatka responded with false information, claiming that the award is just a “notable accomplishment” without “any scholarship or financial recognition.” (Commended students qualify for 800 corporate Special Scholarships, according to National Merit.)

In an email late last year, a mother wrote that her son “wasn’t given the certificate in his homeroom,” even though he “has been present every day except one in his four years at TJ.” The parent asked Kosatka if another one of her children, who had graduated from TJ in 2021, was a commended student. Indeed, he was, Kosatka informed her two years too late. This callous disregard was “very disappointing,” the mom replied. That afternoon, Kosatka wrote to a National Merit official asking for a “reprint of the National Merit Commended Students certificates” — from the *fall of 2020*.

Reid, Fairfax County’s new superintendent, has committed to a philosophy of “equal outcomes for every student” by hiring a California-based consultant at \$450,000 for nine months to chart an “equal outcomes” strategy for the school district this year. Meanwhile,

many students and their families are still unaware of the national recognitions they've achieved over the past few years — recognitions that, had their educators been faithful to their duty, could have made a dramatic difference to their academic and professional futures.

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