June 17, 2020

The Honorable Andrew M. Cuomo  
Governor of New York State  
NYS State Capitol Building  
Albany, New York 12224

Mayor Bill de Blasio  
City Hall  
New York, New York 10007

Dear Governor Cuomo and Mayor de Blasio:

As you are no doubt aware, Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Korey Wise, also known as the Exonerated Five, were wrongfully convicted of assaulting and raping Trisha Meili in Central Park on April 19, 1989. Their convictions were vacated by New York Supreme Court Justice Charles J. Tejada on December 19, 2002.

Though the City of New York settled their civil rights lawsuit in 2014, the State of New York settled a case in 2016, and in 2019, Manhattan district Attorney Cyrus R. Vance called their wrongful conviction “an injustice,” a formal apology on behalf of the City of New York would be a powerful statement to affirm the cause of justice and our responsibility to make amends with those who have been wronged.

As the nation’s largest labor union, our advocacy for public education goes hand-in-hand with our commitment to racial, economic, and social justice. These values strengthen our democracy. As a union of educators, we firmly believe in the power of demonstrating that our civic institutions – and the people who lead them – can take responsibility for the past as we strive to build a more equitable future.

Reaching a financial settlement was an essential step. But a public apology would continue the progress. It would demonstrate that the strength of our criminal justice system and indeed our democratic institutions lies in our pursuit of truth and the ability of citizens to seek redress when they have been treated unfairly. Institutional racism continues to afflict our criminal justice system and other aspects of American life, holding our country back. An apology would also show that the principle of equal justice is more important than deflecting blame and responsibility from law enforcement when there is wrongdoing.
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It has been 31 years since the Exonerated Five were convicted for crimes they did not commit. As a nation, we continue to grapple with mass incarceration and the disparate treatment that Black and Latino Americans routinely experience during interactions with law enforcement. A statement of apology from your office, on behalf of the people of New York, would send a powerful message at a time when too many politicians continue to seek to divide us along lines of race and disenfranchise, under-resource, and otherwise marginalize communities of color.

On behalf of the members of the National Education Association, I encourage you to take this opportunity to make further amends to Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Yusef Salaam, Raymond Santana, and Korey Wise and help our nation continue to progress toward dignity and justice for all Americans.

Sincerely,

Lily Eskelsen García
President, National Education Association