



January 26, 2010

Mr. Rahm Emaunel
White House Chief of Staff
1600 Pennsylvania Ave NW
Washington, D.C. 20050

Dear Mr. Emanuel,

I read with dismay today, the Wall Street Journal's article describing the tension with policy-making circles that is hardly uncommon in Washington. What troubled me was not the diversity of the opinions surrounding your role—I can only imagine how difficult it must be to serve the country in this time. But what did trouble me was the quote attributed to you describing a plan to air certain ads as “f-----g retarded.”

Of course, I have no way of knowing if this expression was actually used by you or anyone else. However, I want to take this opportunity to familiarize you and the members of your staff to the suffering and pain that is perpetuated by the use of the terms “retard” and “retarded.” Special Olympics has welcomed the voice of thousands of people with intellectual disabilities who have joined us in trying to change the conversation and uproot the stereotypes and stigmas carried by what we refer to as the “R-word.” Regardless of whether the term was actually used or not, I would ask you to join us in this important fight.

Last year we launched a youth driven campaign called “Spread the Word to End the Word” to raise awareness about the hurtful nature of the R-word, which to our population is just as painful as any number of racial or ethnic slurs, jokes or taunts that society has committed to eradicating from our lexicon. Yet because people with intellectual disabilities continue to be the most neglected, underserved, and discriminated against population on the planet, the R-word has not only remained in use, but it has become so pervasive in our society that most people find it acceptable to use as a synonym for “stupid” or “hapless” or to describe behavior that is considered less than ideal.

Our “Spread the Word to End the Word” campaign is aimed at changing the perception that the R-word is acceptable and the good news is that the world is beginning to slowly change. Classrooms are becoming more tolerant, communities more accepting and the work place more inclusive as people with intellectual disabilities are slowly being seen for what we've always known them to be – people of value who help us all to understand we are each gifted in unique ways. But this change is too slow and each use of the R-word as a synonym for a stupid action, a schoolyard taunt, or the punch line of a joke, slows our progress immeasurably.

I ask you to join us in our campaign to “Spread the Word to End the Word.” Our annual day of awareness is just around the corner on March 3rd. I ask you to pledge not to say the R-word at www.r-word.org and help us to change the conversation and to raise awareness about the power of language and the hurtful nature of the R-word.



Thank you in advance for your consideration. I know that private political discourse can sometimes include profanity. But at the same time, our community cannot accept the idea that they will remain the butt of jokes and taunts. I hope you will join us in changing the conversation and eliminating this word from your vocabulary.

Best Wishes,

Chairman and CEO
Special Olympics