

Black suburban students face racism

Subtle prejudice, taunts are routine, they say

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Will Barrett, an 11th-grader at Fairport High School, has avoided the pitfalls of many other suburban students of color. He takes several Advanced Placement classes and doesn't have any disciplinary problems.

Even so, he said he is constantly confronted by the sort of overt racism that many white people believe disappeared generations ago. He recalled one instance where another student said that black people come from the jungle. Black people commit the vast majority of crimes, the white student continued, so the country would be better off without them.

A teacher overheard the comment, Barrett said, but instead of intervening with the white student simply told Barrett that he "shouldn't stand for that."

"I feel the teachers let the microaggressions boil over by not fixing the situation when it starts," he said. At the same time, the lack of black teachers in the school means "there's no one to check these (white) teachers when they let things happen."

Black students in districts across Monroe County provided a lengthy list of racist incidents, most of them within the last school year. They ranged from subtle but persistent prejudice — white students touching their hair or complimenting them for "talking white" — to being taunted with the word "Trump" or called the N-word.

"Every day there's lot of racial comments made at school, directly basically to anyone who's not a straight white person," Hilton student Mark Simmons said. "Because of where we are (geographically) and how little connected we are to the real world, people just are afraid of anyone who doesn't look alike."

Black students in Penfield said many white students believe they can use the N-word liberally as long as they have an "N-card," meaning they have a black friend who supposedly has given them permission to do so.

going to school and I don't always, because people say that word," 12th-grader Kennedy Jackson said.

The high school administration, they said, did not address the problem when they brought it up. Nhadia Hemphil, an 11th-grader, added, "Then if you speak out, they brand you as an angry black girl."

Penfield schools Superintendent Thomas Putnam, previously the principal at the high school, said he was surprised to hear that.

"Honestly, as a leader and someone who lives in this district, it emotionally hurt me," he said.

Teachers as role models

Districts uniformly professed to taking the issue of racial disparity seriously through professional development, recruiting minority teachers and supporting the minority students already in their buildings. White and non-white students alike are helping push that change forward through diversity clubs at their high schools as well as the countywide Roc2Change summits focusing on racism.



Brother and sister Isaac and Bethany Beru in the hallways at Rush-Henrietta High School, where they are both students. SHAWN DOWD/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

“I should feel comfortable

Part of the sting of racist incidents, minority students reported, is a lack of adults with whom to discuss them. They reported ham-handed attempts to empathize from some white teachers and outright disbelief from others. “I think it’s in (teachers’) heads that they want to be more racially (sensitive), but they go about it the wrong way,” Mark Simmons, of Hilton, said.

Black teachers in Monroe County’s suburban schools remain exceptionally scarce. A 2017 report from Education Trust New York showed that only 1 percent of teachers and 3 percent of administrators in those districts are black or Latino. Most students attend schools where every teacher is white. Local districts — indeed, nearly all urban and suburban districts in New York — have been trying to recruit, hire and retain more teachers of color, but the supply is far short of demand and out-of-town candidates can be difficult to attract to upstate New York.

In their absence, minority students reported lacking an ally who could support them and also potentially affect the negative behavior of white teachers. They also sensed a lack of confidence, even hostility, from some adults in the building.

“We all know what it’s like to know people that think that you only have a certain path, like you can only sell drugs or play basketball,” Rush-Henrietta 12th-grader Isaac Beru said. “I don’t talk to any teachers, anyone here, about personal problems. I just don’t feel comfortable.”

At the same time, schools suspend black students at significantly higher rates than white students, and for longer periods of time. At Brighton High School, for example, black students were nine times more likely to be suspended out of school at least in 2015-16. Leah Stewart, a student at Greece Olympia High School, said she’s seen students get into fights plenty of times. When

white students fight, they’re called into the office but later sent back to class. Black students are often sent home instead, she said. “At our school, there’s so many consequences,” Stewart said. “I know for a fact a lot of students don’t have good home lives. The teachers don’t take the time to realize that and know that, and their first automatic response is to suspend them.” Greece is also among districts that suspend black students for much greater lengths of time cumulatively than white students. Federal data shows that black Greece students lose 248 days to suspension every year per 100 students, compared to 31 days per 100 white students. Many local districts, including Greece, said they are examining their practices and assumptions around discipline, often by instituting restorative justice practices to reduce the reliance on suspensions and keep more students in the classroom rather than at home. R. L’Heureux Lewis-McCoy, a scholar at New York University who studies the experiences of minority students in suburban schools, said there is a larger problem in terms of “the way that black students are read differently from students who are non-black.” The same action — a flippant comment to a teacher or a minor altercation in the hallway — can be interpreted very differently depending on who does it. “You look at who gets suspended, who gets access to the best housing and medical care, and rather than saying (explicitly that) someone is different, we build systems that allow people to be sorted in certain ways and then look back and say, ‘I’m not sure what happened,’” he said. As Putnam, the Penfield superintendent, put it: “School districts are a microcosm of greater society. Disparities are a given; our job as school leaders is to find ways to fix that.”

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