

## Racism allegations hit Pittsford schools

### Justin Murphy

Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

The allegations are disturbing.

A white Pittsford Mendon student repeatedly used the N-word in reference to her teammates on the track team.

A fourth-grade girl in the district was called the N-word, one of many young children to be targeted with racial slurs by fellow classmates.

A black student's white classmates joked about nooses and making him their slave.

A Korean boy had his facial features mocked by other students and was told, repeatedly, to go back to Mexico.



**Incidents of racism in Pittsford schools have been reportedly occurring with increasing frequency.**  
TINA MACINTYRE-YEE/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE FILE PHOTO

A teacher displayed on the wall a Black History Month project in which several elementary students had used photographs of white people rather than the black inventors they were supposed to honor.

It was not taken down until a black parent happened to see it.

A black parent resigned from Pittsford's Inclusivity Advisory Committee, saying it was flawed in composition and direction.

Incidents of racism in Pittsford schools have been occurring with increasing frequency since the 2016 presidential election, according to both parents and the school district.

The district's response, the parents allege, has been obfuscation and coverup, even as a high-level committee is supposedly leading the way on the problem.

Those concerns spilled over Tuesday at a heated school board meeting, where dozens of parents protested what they called a tepid treatment of the issue by Superintendent Mike Pero.

Bonin, the mother of the Korean student. Kim Melvin, the mother of an Urban-Suburban student at Pittsford Mendon, said the problem is rooted in "the elitism of the community."

"What our children hear is: 'If you're Urban-Suburban, you should just shut up and be quiet because we let you come and get this great education,' " she said. "And if someone calls you the N-word now and then, oh well, at least you're here." Pero said the slew of stories of stark racism "broke (his) heart," and served as evidence the district still has a long way to go. But he defended the efforts now underway, including extensive professional development and an Inclusivity Advisory Committee.

"There's aspects where I feel really good about the work we're doing and certainly aspects where we need to do more," Pero said. "I can see significant progress. However, if (some) children can't feel that progress, that means we're not moving fast enough."

“I don’t know what he is afraid of, but at this point, there have been multiple times we’ve begged him to address racist behavior and language in Pittsford schools and he chooses not to every time,” said MaryJo

## Angry, scared, hopeless

The Pittsford Central School District has 3 percent black students, a large portion of whom attend through the Urban-Suburban program. That is one of the lowest proportions in Monroe County and has led, black parents said, to sometimes-suffocating racism, both overt and implicit. The protest at the April 23 board meeting was set in motion by two recent incidents: the Black History Month snafu and the situation at a track and field practice at Pittsford Mendon High School, where a number of students reported that a white girl continued to use the Nword in reference to some of her black teammates even after other students and the coach told her to stop. A group of 50 parents wrote a letter to Pero and the school board asking them to issue a public statement against racism. Instead, several days later he wrote an email to all district families, referring in general to unspecified incidents of an unspecified nature and asking parents to “talk with your child about the importance of respecting their peers.”

For the parents who had complained, that did not suffice. “He never talked about discrimination; he never talked about the use of the N-word,” said Kim Melvin, an Urban-Suburban parent. “So that’s why we went to the meeting and told him, ‘You need to deal with this, and not through a five-year plan.’” Alyssa Coleman, a black member of the track team, was one of many who spoke at the meeting. She said she was hurt not just by her teammate’s slur, but also by other students who later jokingly retold the story in “angry black woman voice” and, she said, were not forthcoming when school administrators asked them what they saw. “That just makes me feel angry, scared, but also hopeless to respond,” she said at the meeting. “With this sort of barrier, trying to communicate and feel comfortable in the walls of Mendon is feeling more and more impossible.”

The basic difference of opinion between the protesters and Pero was in how he and the district should respond to incidents of racism. Coleman, Melvin, Bonin and others said it was essential to acknowledge the incidents as specifically racist; in an interview Wednesday, Pero said he feels it is important to use a broader lens.

Pero pointed to a host of actions Pittsford has undertaken to combat the problem, many of them under the umbrella of the Inclusivity Advisory Committee.

- An audit of school library books to ensure representation of all students.
- Professional development for several employee groups on topics such as implicit bias, modern-day anti-Semitism, poverty and restorative justice.
- Groups of teachers reading books on racism.
- Redesigning the code of conduct with student input.
- Exchange and communication programs with ROC Achieve Charter School in Rochester and with students in Israel.
- An upcoming survey on people’s perceptions of discrimination in the district.

## ‘It’s not window dressing’

“People need to understand that as it relates to inclusion in the school district, we’re working extraordinarily hard,” Pero said. “It’s not window-dressing. ... We are not afraid to call out racism. But it’s about a systematic approach rather than individual cases, and how you deal with them.” At the same time, he said: “If my child were black and were picked on, I’d probably be at that microphone too. It’s emotional. I can’t fault them at all.” A number of black parents said the advisory committee is, in fact, window dressing, and another effort to maintain the district’s reputation at the expense of real change. “I believe that committee is designed as another marker on the superintendent’s list of what he’s done,” another Urban-Suburban parent, Tanishia Johnson, said. “It’s not really to engage in the deep-level work I feel needs to happen.”

Johnson resigned from the Inclusivity Advisory Committee in protest, saying it was a fatal flaw to have

“If we called every incident out specifically by their category, I feel we’re losing the message of our expectation that every single person who walks through this building deserves to be treated with dignity and respect,” he said. “The word ‘inclusion’ means every one of our kids and families who fall into any category feels welcome and valued.”

Regarding the controversial letter he sent to parents, Pero said the intent was for parents to “make sure they’re going out of their way to make sure kids are feeling a sense of belonging and all those good things. ... I’m not sure how that’s a bad message.”

### **Pittsford not alone**

The Coleman family moved to Pittsford in August 2018. In their first year in the district, Alyssa’s two younger brothers, in fifth and seventh grades, were called the N-word on four separate occasions by four separate classmates, according to their mother, Jessica Coleman. “It’s hard to see your fifth-grade son break down crying, and hold him in your lap for 45 minutes, because for the first time in his life he’s being called the Nword, and now for him, going into that building will never be the same,” she said. “For our family, these are things we have to talk about all the time. It’s an added stress that a lot of their peers don’t have to talk about. ... And at the moment where our superintendent had the opportunity to talk about it, he missed it.” A recent *Democrat and Chronicle*

investigation into racism in suburban Monroe County schools showed Pittsford is far from unique. In every single Rochester-area district, black students are more likely to be suspended and less likely to take Advanced Placement classes.

In Pittsford, for instance, black students were suspended out-of-school six times as often as white students and missed 10 times as many days of class because of it.

a district administrator overseeing it, and that the scope wasn’t focused enough.

Pero dismissed that criticism, saying Johnson had missed nearly every meeting prior to her resignation. Johnson responded that she had missed meetings due to her work schedule but had participated fully in all communications.

### **Parents: Acknowledge racism**

Several parents said Pero’s focus on overall inclusivity represents the “All Lives Matter” mindset, which they argue dilutes the specific harm of racism. Board President Amy Thomas echoed Pero. When asked twice about the district’s response to racist incidents against black students specifically, she said: “One hundred percent, we are here for all students. I want that message to be loud and clear.” Victoria Love, the mother of a third grader who is black and has been targeted because of his race, said the district needs to acknowledge the racism in the community. It has also manifested in the distribution of racist flyers, as well as accusations against Pittsford athletes and fans during games. “(Long-term efforts) are needed for sure, but if we have a racially motivated incident and they’re not even willing to admit that it happened, I don’t see how the rest of it is really helpful,” Love said. “It just seems like a lot of posturing just to look politically correct instead of addressing the problem head-on. We cannot have students being called the N-word; it just can’t happen.” Once the district makes that acknowledgment, Love said, it can help families find the words to talk about racism with their own children.

“Not every parent is overtly racist, but if they don’t know how to talk to their kids about racism then it’s never going to be addressed,” she said.

“This is how you raise a new generation of racists.”

### **Johnson**