

District gets hard lesson on racism

Pittsford sharpens focus amid growing criticism

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Rochester Democrat and Chronicle USA TODAY NETWORK

An emotional school board meeting in Pittsford last month has escalated into a communitywide examination of racism and privilege in Monroe County's most exclusive suburb, particularly in its well-regarded school district.

District leaders have defended its efforts to make its schools more welcoming for all students, while also acknowledging that racism is a greater problem than they had realized. Motivated students and parents plan to ensure that action steps happen as promised.

If you haven't been following the story,

catch up here:

How did it begin?

Two incidents this spring stand out. In one, an elementary school hallway was decorated with posters celebrating black inventors for Black History Month — including several instances where children had printed out pictures of white people instead. The mistake wasn't noticed until a black parent walking the halls brought it to the school's attention. In the other, a white student on the girls track and field team at Pittsford Mendon was disciplined after repeatedly using the N-word and other racial slurs in relation to her black teammates. The district now faces a potential lawsuit over its handling of that incident. Those two events spurred dozens of parents and students, both black and white, to attend a school board meeting April 23 and protest the district's response, and its perceived lack of attention to racism more generally.

How well did the district respond?

Superintendent Michael Pero pointed in particular to the work of its Inclusivity Advisory Committee, saying the district is committed to "ensur(ing) that every student feels respected, validated, appreciated and has a sense of belonging while in our school community." For many parents, though, he and Board President Amy Thomas were too reluctant to call out racism in particular. They pointed to a letter he sent to families after the track and field incident where he referred only to unspecified "disparaging behavior."

Pero initially defended that approach, saying: "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."

In the face of continuing criticism, though, including at several wellattended public meetings, Pero and the district have sharpened their focus on racism in particular and pledged to work with students and parents on a more immediate action plan.

What has happened since then?

It has been a busy month for Pittsford, for good and bad reasons. The district collected voluminous notes from participants at a public hearing May 2 and has pledged to incorporate them into its ongoing efforts.

At the same time, parents have continued to organize: the PTSA Diversity and Inclusion committee has emerged as a vigorous advocacy voice within the district, while parent leaders Tanishia and Cory Johnson have also

created an outside group, Pittsford SOARs, with 12 demands for action within the next six months. “We’re really supportive of what they’ve come out with so far,” Tanishia Johnson said. “We just want to see a concrete timeline around that.” Last week came news of another incident: the principal at Pittsford Mendon reported having found a swastika and the N-word written on a desk at the school.

Is Pittsford unique?

Pittsford stands out in Monroe County for its affluence and its lack of black students (and residents). By all indications, though, instances of racism are commonplace in schools throughout the region and beyond. A recent *Democrat and Chronicle* investigation found widespread discrimination against black and Latino students in terms of academic advancement and discipline — but also evidence of racist interactions with peers and adults alike. “Every day there’s lot of racial comments made at school, directed basically to anyone who’s not a straight white person,” Mark Simmons, a student in Hilton, said. Black students in several districts said it is commonplace to hear the N-word from white students, and that mostly- white teachers and staff rarely intervene.

“School districts are a microcosm of greater society,” Penfield Superintendent Thomas Putnam said. “Disparities are a given; our job as school leaders is to find ways to fix that.”

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