

Pittsford sorry after students falsely taught slaves came to US by choice

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As far as some children in Pittsford have heard, Africans voluntarily came to America as part of a multiyear employment contract.

That's according to a worksheet distributed this winter to fourth graders at Jefferson Road Elementary School. Superintendent Michael Pero on Tuesday called it "in no way an accurate description of slavery during Colonial Times and ... highly insensitive in tone."

The same worksheet has drawn complaints across the country and apparently remains in use throughout Monroe County. Parents in Webster complained about a version of the same thing in February, triggering an apology from the school district.

The worksheet, which accompanies a lesson on slavery, asks four questions, including "Why did slaves come to America?" and "What jobs did slaves have?"

The Pittsford version, a fill-in-the-blank answer form, gives some insight into what students learned in the lesson. It reads, beneath the question of why enslaved people came to America: "As an exchange for the trip to America, African Americans agreed to work for colonists for _____ years, but then were kept as slaves."

It also suggests that one of the main "jobs" that enslaved people had was churning butter, according to a filled-in version of the worksheet provided to the *Democrat and Chronicle* by a parent.

The school district did not make anyone available for an interview. Pero said the district has "taken steps to remedy the situation," including reteaching the unit and apologizing to parents."

Pittsford is the wealthiest school district in the Rochester area and has 3% Black students.

It, like other suburban school districts, has faced repeated criticism from parents over racist incidents. Much of that frustration boiled over in 2019 when dozens of students and parents spoke out at a school board meeting.

At a contentious meeting earlier this year, many Pittsford teachers and other members of the Parent Teacher Student Association voted down a proposal by some parents to consider adding a volunteer diversity, equity and inclusion position. The district is a part of the countywide anti-racist curriculum writing project, though it has not been fully implemented yet. Pero concluded his statement by saying: "This is something we take seriously and are (committed) to continuous improvement."

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