

Pittsford students denounce racism

Walkouts at two schools target district's response

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Several hundred high school students in Pittsford walked out of class Wednesday morning to protest what they called an ineffectual response to recurring racist incidents in the district.

The most recent such incident was a video by a Pittsford Sutherland student where he pulled an air gun from his waistband and said he carried it to “kill (racial slur).” It circulated widely among students over the weekend.

At about the same time, the district learned of a text message exchange among middle school students about enrolling Black people in “slave training” so they could “be on the field working like (expletive)s should.”

Pittsford has been plagued by similar issues in the past, including in a highly publicized episode in 2019 where nonwhite students shared dozens of examples of discrimination and harassment in public listening sessions.

Early this week, an unofficial student



A group of students take part in a walkout at Pittsford Sutherland High School in protest of recent racial issues. JAMIE GERMANO/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

group called Diversity Pittsford decided on the walkout. Students left both Pittsford Mendon and Sutherland high schools Wednesday morning.

The district sought to frame the walkout as an “act of solidarity” rather than a protest, according to an email to families from the two high school principals.

Student leaders, though, said the main target was the district itself and what they saw as an unwillingness to crack down on racism.

They chanted “safety over rep” (reputation) outside Pittsford Sutherland and demanded greater transparency and accountability, both for students and staff.

“It’s because of the apathy toward these situations that the school has shown,” said Ameera Duarte, one of the student organizers. “They just brush aside these issues; this video was just the catalyst.”

Superintendent Michael Pero apologized to students at Pittsford Sutherland and agreed the district needed to do more.

“If they’re saying it, we have to look at what we’re doing,” he said. “There have to be aspects of truth in that. ... We have to use this as an opportunity to be better.”

The student who made the video has been suspended, Pero said. One of the students’ demands was that he be expelled, a drastic step that school districts almost never pursue.

Pittsford has an array of formal and informal committees working on diversity and inclusion. It has revamped its code of conduct, examined its policies and audited its school library book inventories, among other things.

Still, a 2019 survey showed that Black students reported much greater concern over their emotional and physical safety in Pittsford school buildings than their white peers. Students at Wednesday’s walkout said the situation has not improved noticeably since then.

Duarte called the district’s efforts “just a lot of words.” She said her friends have become resigned to not reporting racist incidents because they don’t believe the district will act.

“We don’t feel heard in terms of reporting racism,” said Jaylen Wims, another Pittsford Sutherland student leader. “This walkout today is really a message to the Pittsford district.”

In Pittsford as in other local districts, the issue goes beyond harassment from other students. Black Pittsford students are much less likely to enroll in advanced courses, and much more likely to be suspended, than their white and Asian peers.

As in 2019, there will be an upcoming set of open forums for students and parents in response to the most recent racist incidents.

The anti-racism group Pittsforward is holding a unity rally from 3 to 4:30 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 3, in front of the town hall.

“We need to do a better job of listening to students and students’ stories,” Pero said.



A student photo shows the walkout protesting racism Wednesday at Pittsford Mendon High School. PROVIDED

