

Eastridge students walk out amid protest

Former teacher shares allegations of sexual misconduct on Facebook

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A fast-developing furor over the handling of sexual harassment and assault allegations in the East Irondequoit Central School District led to student walkouts Monday and Tuesday at Eastridge High School, with students accusing the district of condoning misconduct.

The students said Tuesday afternoon that they hope to keep pressure on the administration to address the issue. Eastridge Principal Timothy Heaphy, meanwhile, wrote in a letter to parents that “no more protesting will be allowed.”

On Nov. 21, former East Irondequoit Middle School science teacher Alyssa Rutherford shared a lengthy public message on Facebook, saying that she’d left the district after a fellow teacher sexually harassed her and that district leadership, including the principal, failed to address it.

Rutherford said the other teacher, a male who occupied the classroom next door to hers, made inappropriate comments and gestures about her body and her recent experience losing a pregnancy. Among other things, she said, he suggested her baby had died because she got the COVID-19 vaccine while pregnant.

Rutherford said she told the interim middle school principal, Chris Sloane, about the issue, and that Sloane responded that it wouldn’t be worth moving the teacher to another room because she then would need to move a different male into the neighboring classroom, “and if I’m being honest he would probably treat you the same way.”

She further claims that Sloane became angry when she filed an official sexual harassment complaint, and that the district conducted a half-hearted investigation.

The district responded in a statement: “The school district thoroughly investigated each of the allegations that were reported, and the situation was resolved in accordance with the investigation findings, district policies and the school district legal obligations. Due to personnel privacy rights the consequences of an investigation is not released to the other employee.”

Rutherford had taught in East Irondequoit since May 2019. She resigned in September and now teaches at East High School in Rochester.

In an interview Tuesday, she said she debated whether to go public with her claims but felt that doing so would be a way of standing up for herself and other women.

“I was afraid of being labeled a troublemaker,” she said. “But I didn’t make any trouble. ... I just wanted to have a safe place to work.”

Story touches a nerve with students

Rutherford’s claims touched a nerve with students at Eastridge High School and led several female students to publicly share their own anecdotes about instances when the district allegedly ignored claims of sexual harassment or assault. A few dozen students walked out of school Monday and Tuesday, protesting the district’s inaction in Rutherford’s case and also cases of alleged sexual assault among students.

“There were so many stories from girls who had gone to the administration and nothing happened,” said Gabriella Flores, 15, one of the student leaders. “It was eye-opening. ... We need to feel safe in school, and the teachers don’t even feel safe, so how are we going to?”

At one point Monday, a female student accused a male student of assaulting her and others in the past. The boy was in the crowd and there was a near-altercation between two factions. The boy’s mother then showed up at the school, escalating things further.

In interviews Tuesday afternoon, several of the protesting students said Heaphy, the Eastridge principal, failed to listen to their concerns and seemed most interested in shutting down the public dissent.

They shared video of an emotional speech Heaphy made Monday to some of the protesters in the auditorium. In it, he threw his clipboard to the floor and scolded the students for making him call police to the school and put the school into a shelter-in-place.

“There are serious things going on, and I understand that,” he said. “I hear you. But this is over.”

The district said that Heaphy “intervened to keep students safe and guide them back into the building.” He only called the police, they said, once “an unauthorized visitor came onto school grounds and threatened a student.”

Irondequoit Police Chief Alan Laird said the police responded “to help provide a safe environment for all the students,” and made no arrests.

More generally, the district said in its statement: “Self-advocacy is something that we encourage as long as it is peaceful and not dangerous or harmful to others. When this happens, these actions become counter-productive and may be dealt with according to our code of conduct.”

Superintendent Mary Grow spoke with some of the protesting students on Tuesday, and they came away with the impression that she supported their right to protest. In its statement, though, the administration said that “the school district will not permit any additional disruptions of the school day.”

Heaphy wrote to parents that he and another contingent of students had met productively and agreed on “a framework for an anti-harassment program working with Bivona (Child Advocacy Center).”

The protesting students said they’re not sure what their next steps will be. They want to maintain pressure on district leaders for change, but are concerned about missing additional class time.

“They take us speaking up as a threat,” 15-year-old Armonée Delaperriere-Moore said. “Like, ‘Oh no, this might go public, we’d better do something.’ ” *Includes reporting by staff writer Will Cleveland.*



Students stage a walkout at Eastridge High School in protest. ROBERT BELL/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE



Some of the Eastridge High School students who protested the district's handling of sexual misconduct claims. From left: Zion Brown; Gabriella Flores; Lydia Turner; Armonee Delaperriere-Moore; Nariyah Hazzard. JUSTIN MURPHY/ROCHESTER DEMOCRAT AND CHRONICLE

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