

CORRECTED LETTER

November 30, 2021

Bristol-Warren School Committee
151 State Street
Bristol, RI 02809

VIA MAIL AND EMAIL

Dear School Committee Members:

Our organization has been watching with interest and concern the controversy over the school committee's recent decision to reject a teacher training grant, based at least in part on stated concerns about racial equity, and the consequent objections from some Bristol-Warren students who have raised broader concerns about various forms of race and other discrimination that they face at their schools.

The ACLU of Rhode Island takes no position on the resignation demands made by the students. However, we felt it important to point out, in no uncertain terms, that – at least in the matter of disciplinary practices – students' declarations of racial bias in the school district have a clear factual basis. In light of the committee's publicly stated concerns about ensuring students are treated equally, this issue also deserves the school committee's immediate and serious attention.

As you know, state law requires all school districts to submit detailed data on their school disciplinary activities. We examined those statistics for both the Bristol-Warren School District generally and for Mt. Hope High School in particular for the last three full in-school years (2016-2017, 2017-2018, and 2018-2019). The picture they painted was a very troubling one.

In each of those years, Black students were disproportionately suspended by immense margins compared to their fellow white students. For example, in 2018-2019, even though Black students made up only 2.2% of the school district's population, over 8% of all out-of-school suspensions that year were given to Black students, meaning that they were over three-and-a-half times more likely to get suspended than their makeup in the school district population. White students, on the other hand, were *less* likely to be suspended than their presence in the school population would predict.¹ Similarly disproportionate statistics apply for the previous two years.

For Mt. Hope High School, the statistics (though examining an admittedly smaller population, but still demonstrating very consistent trends) are even more stark. In 2018-2019, even though Black students comprised only 1.9% of the student body, they were given 9% of all out-of-school suspensions, meaning they received nearly five times the number of suspensions which would be expected for their student population. Once again, white students at the school represented a smaller part of the suspension population than their presence at the school would predict. As with the district-wide data referenced above, significantly disproportionate suspension figures for Black students at the high school were also present in the two prior school years.

¹ White students made up 85.61% of the student body, but 70.97% of all suspensions.

This past month's controversy over the teacher training grant appeared to founder over questions from some committee members as to whether the consultant or the project would treat all students equally on the basis of their race. We trust that the committee will be as deeply distressed about these racial disparities in school discipline and recognize the need to act expeditiously to address the issue. The continued implementation of a disciplinary system that has such a disparate impact based on students' race is clearly not a system providing equal opportunities to students. While your school district is far from alone in the state in meting out unequal punishment to students of color, the contretemps over the proposed hiring of Ms. Simpson-Thomas provides a seamless segue for the school committee to examine, and address, the incontrovertible disciplinary racial disparities that exist in your district.

Indeed, despite the disparities that can be found consistently in the data over a period of years, the Bristol-Warren School District, to our knowledge, has never filed a report identifying these disparities and outlining a strategy to mitigate them, as required by R.I.G.L. § 16-2-17(d).² It is well past time for the district to do so. In that regard, we also urge the committee to review all school district suspension policies and practices to ensure that, in accordance with state law, out-of-school suspensions are used only for serious disciplinary infractions,³ to take action to tighten current suspension standards, and to promote restorative justice in the district's schools in order to promote equal opportunity for all and avoid contributing to the well-known "school to prison pipeline."

I look forward to hearing back from you about this at your earliest convenience. We are more than willing to make our organization available to offer concrete suggestions on addressing disciplinary policies that may be contributing to these troubling racial disparities.

Thank you for your consideration of this important matter, and we hope it will receive the critical attention it deserves.

Sincerely,



Steven Brown
Executive Director



Hannah Stern
Policy Associate

cc: Supt. Ana Riley
Dr. Deborah DiBiase

² This is not the first time we have had occasion to look at the school district's disciplinary data for signs of discrimination. When a controversy arose in 2019 over student misconduct at the Kickemuit Middle School, we ran the disciplinary data for the school at that time and, like the Mt. Hope data, it showed that Black students were much more likely – and white students much less likely – to be suspended proportionate to their population in the school.

³ See R.I.G.L. § 16-2-17.1.