

*“Not everything that is faced can be changed, but nothing can be changed until it is faced.” -*

*James Baldwin*

**Washington Academy Board of Trustees and Administrators,**

I am writing to report a disturbing pattern of systemic racism and institutionalized oppression, harassment, and bullying behavior based on race, ethnicity, country of origin, gender, sexual orientation and class that has occurred for more than a decade at Washington Academy. Why do I use the words “systemic” and “institutionalized”?

- Institutionalized or systemic racism is “The collective failure of an organization to provide an appropriate and professional service to people because of their colour, culture, or ethnic origin. It can be seen or detected in processes, attitudes and behaviour that amount to discrimination through prejudice, ignorance, thoughtlessness and racist stereotyping which disadvantage minority ethnic people.”<sup>1</sup>
- Institutional or Systemic Oppression is “the systematic mistreatment of people within a social identity group, supported and enforced by the society and its institutions, solely based on the person’s membership in the social identity group.”<sup>2</sup>

I am concerned that harassment based on students’ race, sex, sexual orientation, and other protected characteristics will be allowed to continue unchecked, and we are especially disturbed by accounts of staff failing to address harassment by students, or even engaging in discriminatory behavior themselves. The stories below were collected via email and via a Google Form I developed. These stories are from current and former students and teachers. These are certainly not all the stories, but they provide a sample of the type of behavior that students have experienced. If Washington Academy is committed to investigating these reports, I would be glad to provide further information.

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<sup>1</sup> [Institutionalized Oppression Definitions](#)

<sup>2</sup> [Institutionalized Oppression Definitions](#)

Among the stories collected are many first- and second-hand accounts of:

**Race Discrimination:**

- Current Native American students reported being called racial epithets and being mocked for their culture, and multiple students corroborated those first-hand reports. They reported white students making racist statements like “you get paid monthly by the government” and that Native Americans are “greedy alcoholics who lost a war.”
- Students reported feeling harassed and intimidated by students who organized a “anti-Black Lives Matter” rally on Sunday June 7, 2020. Students and former students at the rally lined up their trucks with big American flags waving in the back and drove past the Black Lives Matter protest multiple times yelling “Go Home”, flipping them off and playing “Dixie” loudly over their truck horn.
- A Latina former student relayed that she was told by a fellow student “Mexicans only come over to America to rape women to get them pregnant or to become pregnant by an American so that they can stay” and harassed her about the border wall due to her ethnicity. A family member of the Headmaster posted a meme promoting the border wall that said it was very "American" to separate Mexicans from “Americans.”. The same Latina student also had racist phrases directed to her by other students such as “go back to your country” and “if you don’t like how we run things then leave”.
- A Black former student stated that a former math teacher, Pete Rensema, “admitted to believing that women were less intelligent than men, and he was regularly far more strict with the international Asian students than the American students.”
- A Latina former teacher who is an immigrant from Mexico found a noose in her classroom in the first week of March 2020. She was unaware of its cultural significance, so she did not report it right away, but it was likely seen by a number of students.
- A current student who participated in the Black Lives Matter protest on June 7, 2020, relayed that she witnessed racism and bullying regularly at Washington Academy by a group of well-connected, white male current students. She reported that multiple international students mentioned to her they were afraid to report acts of racism or xenophobia because they feared retaliation, and because the perpetrators would not be

held accountable for their actions on campus. The white students also participated in the “anti-Black Lives Matter” protest on June 7, 2020, She reported this to the administration in person on June 9, 2020, but the same students were celebrated at the Washington Academy graduation on June 13, 2020.

- A Dorm parent reported that the Residential Director David Mercer, who is white, used the n-word during a disciplinary meeting in which black students were being disciplined for using that word. When the students indicated that they were upset by his use of the word, Residential Director David Mercer, complained to the students that it was unfair that they could use the word but he could not. Although this incident was reported to administrators, the offending employee was kept on staff and even returned the following year.
- A former teacher relayed a story of two international students from Bermuda going to the headmaster’s home to report a list of racist actions by Residential Director David Mercer, (who kept his job the next year).
- The same former Residential Director reportedly harassed an international student multiple times by denigrating his country to him, and was not fired.
- A former teacher alleged that Washington Academy staff take international students who arrive to the campus on a tour of the town to show them what houses they are not allowed to walk by and streets they are not allowed to walk down because specific people in town “don’t want to see them.”
- Multiple students spanning thirteen years relayed that the international students who lived in the dorms were routinely discriminated against and treated poorly by the administration, staff and students.
- Multiple students reported that white students routinely flew confederate flags on school grounds over the last thirteen years, and as recently as the first week of March 2020 with no repercussions, which made students of color feel as though the administration accepted the racially intimidating practice.
- Many students and teachers reported that many staff members are seemingly unaware and untrained to teach students of color, and have made racially or ethnically insensitive

comments to students when talking about their culture or ethnicity. A Black former student reported being routinely confused with another Black student by a current study hall monitor employee. She also reported being called “colored” by a former WA guidance counselor, and targeted for discipline, including detention, by a current WA teacher because of her race. She relayed a story of a white student harassing her on the Washington Academy bus by whispering "white power" every few seconds for the entire 30-40 minute ride. At least five other students witnessed this and did nothing to stop the harassment.

- Multiple current and former students reported hearing racist verbal attacks on minority students, including the use of the n-word and racial slurs directed at Native Americans.
- Multiple current and former students relayed that they wanted to report racism on campus but feared the administration would do nothing at best, or they would at worst face retaliation.

### **LGBTQ Discrimination**

- A transgender male former student reported being asked by a teacher about his gender identity “(i.e. if I was planning on getting surgeries)” and reported feeling “very cornered in that moment which isn’t a way any child should ever feel around a teacher.” He was targeted with multiple transphobic slurs that when reported were dismissed as “just some words.”
- An asexual biromantic student who relayed being verbally attacked on the school bus and called “ the f-slur and the d-slur, and told me that r\*pe would fix me.”
- A former WA student stated the school actively fought the establishment of the GSTA and attempted to silence the voices of the LGBTQ students.
- Multiple students reported that staff and administration members refused to call students by their pronouns, and instead used pronouns based on “the way they look.”
- Multiple current and former students stated homophobic slurs were directed at them and others, leaving them feeling terrified.

### **Sexual Harassment:**

- A Latina former student reported being sexually harassed by two male former students, one who engaged in inappropriate touching, and another who sent crude images, such as pictures of himself naked and of his genitalia on Snapchat and asking girls for nude pictures.
- A current female student reported being sexually harassed over and over again by a male student who made sexual comments and hand gestures to her on campus.

### **Bullying**

- Multiple stories of in-person or online bullying that was reported to an administrator with little or no resolution.

### **Classism**

- Multiple students described classism and favoritism that was tacitly or implicitly supported by the administration, who allowed students of well-connected or well-off white families to do things for which other less connected, minority or international students would receive punishment. For example, many minority or less-connected female students reported that the dress code was selectively enforced and that the well-connected white female students were able to wear clothing that would have resulted in disciplinary action against them.
- The school allowed religious groups to actively proselytize on school grounds even after multiple students complained that it was offensive and made them uncomfortable. These groups even told students that being LGBTQ was “an abomination.”
- A Black former student relayed that “The day after Obama was elected in '08 I attended my first period advanced math class taught by Pete Rensema. Rensema had made his disdain for Obama incredibly clear since the start of the school year. Rensema was in a sour mood that morning due to Obama's victory, and a student (Matthew Jenkins) said something along the lines of "I know how you feel" to him and then literally said "And I'm going hunting tonight!" and made the gesture and sound effect of cocking a gun and he and Rensema laughed for at least a full minute. When I and a couple other students said that that was absolutely not ok, Rensema told us to stop being sensitive. Rensema is a huge bigot in basically every way.”

The stories summarized above are just some of the experiences of current and former students and teachers who were courageous enough to come forward and report on what is clearly systemic and institutionalized racism and oppression of marginalized groups at Washington Academy. To begin to address this situation I ask that Washington Academy immediately order an independent, non-school affiliated fact-finding investigation into discrimination at the school. As these allegations span more than a decade under the same administrators, the independent fact-finding investigation should look into the school's handling of allegations of discrimination and harassment each of those years.