

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

Representative Tuell,

My name is Nathan Kempthorne and I am the father of Natalia Kempthorne-Curiel, a senior at Washington Academy (WA) in East Machias, ME. Natalia's mom, Esther Kempthorne, has taught Spanish at Washington Academy for the last five years and our oldest daughter is a junior at UMaine in the Mechanical Engineering program, and a class of 2018 Washington Academy graduate. 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, and sexual orientation that has occurred for years at WA. I am very 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 staff repeatedly failing to address reports of harassment by students.

We are a former military family and have moved over 20 times to different posts, and when we arrived in 2014 to Maine we were pleased to find a school like WA that had many of the programs we were looking for as well as a much more diverse student body. In late 2015, the mood in Washington County began to change however, and in the fall of 2016 the racist, anti-immigrant sentiments of the community became very evident. The first time my wife had a Washington Academy student ask her in class when she was going home was the week after the election. In 2017, I noticed more complaints from my children of anti-immigrant speech at school directed at them due to their Hispanic ethnicity. They reported other kids teasing them about the border wall, kids flashing MAGA undershirts to taunt them, and increased racist cyberbullying on social media.

August 3, 2019 a Trump supporter drove 11 hours to El Paso, TX with the goal of shooting as many Mexicans as possible. He killed 23 people. The next day there was another mass shooting in Dayton, OH left that 10 dead and 27 injured. The El Paso shooting left my family terrified. I sat down with my children and told them if they saw anyone with a MAGA hat, shirt or bumper sticker to not speak Spanish in front of them and to not engage, and to quickly walk away. We immediately met with the WA school administration and asked them in person and in writing to create and maintain a zero-tolerance environment for racism and anti-immigrant speech or actions at WA. We also asked them to lead by vocally and visibly standing against racism and intolerance in all its forms, and in particular white nationalism and anti-immigrant speech, throughout the school year. Beyond a very short statement against racism at the beginning of the school year, there was little to nothing done.

On June 7, 2020, around 100 Machias community members held a Black Lives Matter protest, which gave my family some hope they were not alone or unsupported in the community. Sadly, other community members and a few current and former WA students organized an “anti-Black Lives Matter” rally. This group, including the students, 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 the protest off and playing “Dixie” loudly over their truck horn. This was reported to the administration on June 9, 2020. The students involved then bullied and harassed my daughter online because of her support for the BLM movement. My children and wife have often wanted to report racism on campus but feared the administration would do nothing at best, or they would at worst face retaliation. This fear was well-founded because the same students who conducted the anti-BLM rally were celebrated at the Washington Academy graduation on June 13, 2020, while Natalia continued to face online bullying.

On June 8, 2020, the day after the anti-BLM rally, Natalia sent a very detailed recounting of multiple experiences of racial discrimination she had experienced to the WA Board of Trustees and the school administration on Monday, June 8, titled *Natalia Kempthorne-Curiel: My Experience of Racism in Washington Academy*. Standing up for herself was terrifying, particularly after seeing classmates using large trucks attempt to intimidate a peaceful Black Lives Matter protest in Machias the day prior and continue to attack her online. Other than a two sentence acknowledgement of her report by the Head of School, Natalia’s report was ignored for more than a month, until after our family obtained legal counsel.

My wife, Esther Kempthorne is a naturalized immigrant from Mexico and a MDOE certified K-12 Spanish teacher who taught at WA from 2015-2020. She has been very vocal about the need for more inclusivity and anti-racism at WA, and found a noose in her classroom in the first week of March 2020. She was completely unaware of its significance, so she did not report it right away, but it was likely seen by a number of students. When she saw the noose reported in Deer Isle, ME on June 20, 2020, she asked me what the significance of the noose was and told me she had found one in her classroom. I cannot express the anger that I felt, or the fear that my wife and children felt when I explained it was essentially a racist death threat.

My eldest daughter who graduated in 2018 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 she was harassed about the border wall due to her ethnicity. A family member of the Headmaster posted a meme promoting separating Mexicans from “Americans.” She 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.” My daughters heard many racist verbal attacks on minority students, including the use of the n-word and racial slurs directed at Native Americans. My wife and children have also witnessed white students routinely flying Confederate flags on school grounds for years - and as recently as the first week of March 2020-with no repercussions, which made them feel as though the administration accepted the racially intimidating practice. They have also witnessed that the international students who lived in the dorms are routinely racially discriminated against and treated poorly by the administration, staff and students.

After extensive research I have only been able to find one student of color that has graduated as valedictorian in over 227 years at WA, and that was the class of 2020 - and not a single

international student. Multiple family members of school administrators and board members however have routinely made it to the top of the class for years. This is particularly significant considering the number of BIPOC and international students have attended the school, especially over the last 20 years. For example, in 2017, the school reported that nearly 25% of the student body were international students. This systemic racism limits minority students access to scholarship funds they need for college. Additionally, although there are more than 80 people on staff at WA, they currently only employ two people of color.

Natalia developed a Change.org petition that details her demands for social justice reforms at WA titled *Petition for Positive Change at Washington Academy, East Machias, Maine*. In just three weeks she has gathered nearly 1000 signatures supporting her petition, including hundreds from the Machias area. Holding WA accountable is very difficult as they are considered a private institution, however according to Maine DOE they are 60% publicly funded. We believe that if state and local taxes fund the school we should be able to have insight into how that money is spent, especially when they have a clear pattern of not maintaining a safe environment for BIPOC and LGBTQ students and staff. Your assistance in making this school and others in the region safe and secure and more accountable to the community would be much appreciated.

Respectfully,

Nathan Kempthorne
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