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Community leaders share concerns about student's use of n-word at Frank Allis Elementary last year

By Scott Girard

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A white student allegedly called multiple black teachers the n-word last school year at Frank Allis Elementary School.

PHOTO BY MICHELLE STOCKER

A pair of black leaders in the community emailed Madison Metropolitan School District officials and the School Board earlier this month outlining incidents last year in which a white student at Frank Allis Elementary School allegedly called multiple black teachers the n-word.

Rev. Alex Gee and Kirbie Mack, a former president of the NAACP Madison branch, wrote in the Nov. 4 email, obtained and published by Madison365, that they were “not aware of corrective action taken or required on the student or parent’s part.”

“Reportedly, the principal of Allis and District was notified, though no action on behalf of the victimized teachers and staff was addressed,” they wrote.

According to the Behavior Education Plan for elementary school students, which was updated last year, “use of racial slurs, or protected class references directed toward a staff member” is a level two or three violation. Those can require support staff intervention, an in-school suspension or an out of school suspension.

District interim chief of staff Michael Hertting responded to Gee and Mack Nov. 8, and said the district would investigate the apparent incidents.

“Our team has already begun a review of our practices around the use of hateful speech and how we work through those situations, both with our staff and with our students,” he wrote.

MMSD spokeswoman Liz Merfeld wrote in a statement emailed to the Cap Times Wednesday that “The investigation into this matter is ongoing.”

"We are committed to the practice of anti-racism within our schools, and this includes protecting staff from harm and holding those doing the harm accountable," Merfeld wrote. "While we cannot comment about individual student incidents or on personnel issues, consequences for students using racial slurs against staff are outlined in our Behavior Education Plan."

Discussion in MMSD around the n-word and the district's practice of firing or suspending teachers who use it, which began last year during a rash of incidents, heated up last month when West High School security guard Marlon Anderson, who is black, was fired. The firing drew international attention after Anderson reported he had used the word after a student called him a "b**** a** n****" and was telling the student not to call him the word.

Anderson was reinstated within a week of his firing after more than 1,500 students and staff marched from West to the district's Doyle Administration Building and leaders of the school's Black Student Union met with district superintendent Jane Belmore, School Board president Gloria Reyes and School Board member Savion Castro.

The following week, a Nuestro Mundo social worker shared her story of being given a disciplinary suspension for using the word during a staff meeting in trying to get staff ready to deal with students' use of the word that she said she had overheard previously.

Mack told the Cap Times the Anderson incident sparked conversations about the use of the n-word in schools, which led to her and Gee hearing about the Frank Allis situation.

“That topic came up and the more I talked to other people about it, the more we became extremely concerned that the policies and practices of the school district seem to be rather inconsistent in how they address that issue when the occurrences came about in different schools,” Mack said. “The more we looked into it, the more people were giving us various examples of what happened in their classroom.”

The initial email from Mack and Gee indicated the teacher who was first called the n-word “felt such a lack of support from the principal, he had to reach out to the teachers' union for action,” with the student eventually being removed from the class. Madison Teachers Inc. executive director Doug Keillor confirmed the union worked with the teacher on the case, though he did not comment on the outcome for the student.

“We represented the teacher involved in that matter,” Keillor wrote in an email. “MTI President Andy Waity actually worked extensively with the teacher as they worked to address that issue.”

Mack and Gee's email, which also mentions the student trying to hurt one teacher with scissors, asks the district to take five steps: investigate Allis principal Sara Cutler's response; investigate the student remaining at the school and if there have been any other incidents related to the n-word or violence toward black staff members; survey black teachers and staff on their working climate; review policies,

procedures and practices related to hate speech; and report on the district's actions in response to the student's "repeated violation of the district's behavior education plan."

Mack said the survey would be especially important, as she "can't believe it's just happening at West High School and it just happened at Frank Allis.

"I think the environment is very toxic for African-Americans," she said.

She also hopes for training for staff beyond a speaker coming in for a day, she said, and a big picture look at the policies — not just the practices — the district has on the use of the n-word.

"I'm just appalled, in this day and age, that the school district doesn't have a better handle on how to appropriately go about addressing these matters in a fair and equitable manner," she said.

A Nov. 25 follow-up email indicates the pair heard the district had not contacted any of the teachers involved in the incidents.

"Can you tell me when you will investigate to verify that the teachers were actually called the N-word, as reported to you and the District on November 4, 2019?" the email states. "I understand that you have not, as of yet, reached out to the teaches which were affected.

“As of today, can you assure us that the white student has not repeated these actions, of calling African Americans at Frank Allis Elementary School, meaning: teachers, staff and students the N-word? If not, when and what actions have you or the Board taken to speak with the staff or students in MMSD who have been subjected to being called the N-word while on school grounds?”

Share your opinion on this topic by sending a letter to the editor to tctvoice@madison.com. Include your full name, hometown and phone number. Your name and town will be published. The phone number is for verification purposes only. Please keep your letter to 250 words or less.

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