

February 18, 2016

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Investigation of Violations of BPS Nondiscrimination Policies at Boston Latin School

Background and Scope

This investigation is in response to a video describing possible violations of the Boston Public Schools Nondiscrimination Policy (Equity Circular 5 or EQT-5) and Student, Families and Other Third Party Grievances of Discrimination or Harassment – Uniform Procedures (Equity Circular 3 or EQT-3) on the basis of race brought by students at Boston Latin School (BLS). Two BLS seniors launched a social media campaign, “#BlackAtBLS,” alleging a number of inappropriate race-based incidents at the school and/or involving BLS students. The video raised a number of concerns, including claims that white BLS students posted racial slurs and racially inappropriate comments on social media. When students presented the inappropriate messages in a binder to BLS administrators in November 2014, including Headmaster Lynne Mooney Teta, they allege that nothing was done in response.

The Office of Equity became aware of the content of the video on January 19, 2016. To ensure a comprehensive investigation into the full range of allegations referenced in the video, the Office conducted a thorough inquiry into all race-based incidents reported by students or about students to Boston Latin School administrators from November 1, 2014, the month when students presented the social media binder to administrators, through January 26, 2016, the date when a second set of social media posts regarding the #BlackAtBLS campaign were submitted to BLS administration. The investigation examined the actions taken in response to these incidents in the context of all applicable school- and district-based policies and procedures.

During the investigation, the Office of Equity was not directly contacted by any students, parents, or employees wishing to report an allegation of a race-based incident or a failure to appropriately respond to such an incident. The Boston NAACP alerted the Office about a November 7, 2014 incident, which this office investigated. The investigation was based on viewing the #BlackatBLS videos, following up on the situation highlighted by the NAACP email, requesting administrative records, and interviewing students, parents, teachers, and administrators. All interviews were initiated by the Office of Equity, and were not in response to any individual’s request for such an interview.

The Office of Equity investigated four primary issues: (1) BLS administration’s response to the November 25, 2014 binder; (2) BLS administration’s response and handling of a race-based incident on November 7, 2014; (3) BLS administration’s response and handling of the second set of social media posts received on or about January 26, 2016; and (4) a review and analysis of how BLS administrators received and handled other race-based incidents that purportedly occurred during the investigation period.

Summary of Interviews Conducted and Documents Reviewed

Investigators interviewed a total of fourteen (14) individuals, including: BLS Headmaster Lynne Mooney Teta and Assistant Headmasters Sherry Lewis-daPonte, Malcolm Flynn, and Jonathan Mulhern; relevant BLS staff, including Cheralyn Pinchem and Rose Delorme, faculty cosponsors for BLS Black Leaders Aspiring for Change and Knowledge (B.L.A.C.K.), and Jim Levesque, Director of the Deitch Leadership Institute; and relevant BLS students and parents, including the two students featured in the #BlackatBLS video.

The Office of Equity also obtained and reviewed the following documents:

- Nearly 200 pages of social media posts, including the November 2014 binder presented to administrators and a second set of posts submitted to administrators on or about January 26, 2016
- Boston Public Schools policies and procedures, including the Code of Conduct; Superintendent's Circular SSS-18, Bullying Prevention and Intervention Plan; and Superintendent's Circular EQT-5, Nondiscrimination Policy dated September 2013 and in effect through January 30, 2016
- Boston Latin School policies, records, and training materials, including the BLS Student Handbook, disciplinary records, and professional development modules
- All relevant email and other written communications between November 1, 2014 through February 12, 2016, including correspondence by BLS administrators, central office administrators, teachers, parents, and students
- Other supporting documents, including personnel records, student discipline files, and students' written feedback on the culture and climate at BLS

Allegations and Findings of Fact

BLS Administration and BPS Central Office Response to the November 25, 2014 Binder

Regarding the allegation that BLS administrators did not respond appropriately to the November 2014 binder, **the Office of Equity did not substantiate a violation of the BPS Nondiscrimination Policy (EQT-5) or procedures under the Students, Families and Other Third Party Grievances of Discrimination (EQT-3).**

On November 25, 2014, several student members of BLS B.L.A.C.K. presented BLS administrators with a binder containing tweets purportedly posted by BLS students in reaction to the decision not to indict Officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri. Headmaster Lynne Mooney Teta and Assistant Headmaster Sherry Lewis-daPonte reviewed the binder and determined that the most offensive tweets were not written by BLS students.

This investigation confirmed that conclusion, verifying that the most offensive tweets, such as "If you hate us so much Go Bach [sic] to Africa," the use of a racial slur, and "...they feel entitled to special treatment because their great great grandpa was a slave" were written by students enrolled in two different school districts in Illinois. There was no evidence that BLS students retweeted or otherwise disseminated these messages.

Administrators identified four BLS students who wrote what the school determined to be racially insensitive tweets included in the binder, such as, "The only racism left in the media is reverse racism, there is no coverage of black on white violence, only the opposite." Ms. Teta conducted "individualized interventions" with those four students, which included verbal warnings and a conversation about how their conduct reflected on themselves and the school. No further disciplinary action was taken. None of the four students have been involved in any additional reported incidents since the individualized interventions.



BLS administrators also held several events in response to the binder, including:

- A December 16, 2014 voluntary survey assessing what BLS students were discussing online. In the 121 student responses, Ferguson, Eric Garner, race, and gender were the most pressing topics.
- A voluntary, after-school Community Forum on January 20, 2015 to discuss the topics raised in the survey. Nine students and fifteen faculty members attended the forum.
- On May 29, 2015, Jackie Lamont, Director of Youth Safety and Outreach at the Suffolk County District Attorney's Office, delivered a presentation on cyber safety to all BLS students. Although BLS administrators planned this training as a response to the November 2014 binder, the content of the session was unrelated to issues of race or bias.
- A second community forum on June 9, 2015 to follow up on Ms. Lamont's presentation, where attendees discussed how to have a responsible and respectful cyber presence. Thirty-two students and eight faculty members attended.

On March 23, 2015, at the direction of Interim Superintendent John McDonough, representatives from the Office of Equity, Office of Special Education and Related Services, and the Network Superintendent¹ met with BLS administrators to review the school's response to the November 2014 binder. The group agreed that BLS had taken sufficient action with the four students, but encouraged Ms. Teta to develop a comprehensive plan to address issues of race with their support, including holding a full day of discussion for the entire BLS community. Following the meeting, Ms. Teta reached out to the BPS Central Office for assistance with forming the plan. However, there was no follow up from the Central Office.

There was no school-wide intervention focused on issues of race during the sixteen-month time period covered by this investigation.

BLS Administration's Response and Handling of a Race-Based Incident on November 7, 2014

Regarding the allegations that BLS administrators mishandled a November 7, 2014 race-based incident, **the Office of Equity did not substantiate a violation of the BPS Nondiscrimination Policy (EQT-5). This office did substantiate a violation of the procedures under the Students, Families and Other Third Party Grievances of Discrimination (EQT-3).**

This incident involved a male student (non-Black) who called a Black female student a racial slur and threatened her with a reference to lynching. BLS administrators disciplined the male student, but failed to notify his parents of the incident or the discipline. They also failed to notify the targeted student's parents of the incident. The investigation determined that administrators did not apply the school's Code of Conduct or internal practices on progressive discipline appropriately, nor did they take sufficient steps to ensure the support and safety of the targeted student, even when her parents later voiced concerns about the school's response.

Response to Second Set of Race-Based Social Media Posts on or about January 26, 2016

The Office of Equity did not substantiate a violation of the BPS Nondiscrimination Policy (EQT-5) or procedures under the Students, Families and Other Third Party Grievances of Discrimination (EQT-3) regarding the submission of additional race-based social media posts following the posting of the #BlackatBLS video. None of the racially insensitive or offensive posts could be attributed to BLS students.

¹ The individuals who represented the Central Office at this meeting are no longer employed by the district.



Other Race-Based Incidents During the Investigation Period

The Office of Equity did not substantiate a violation of the BPS Nondiscrimination Policy (EQT-5) or procedures under the Students, Families and Other Third Party Grievances of Discrimination (EQT-3) regarding how BLS administrators handled other race-based incidents during the investigation period.

Between November 1, 2014 and January 21, 2016, there were a total of 267 student disciplinary incidents at Boston Latin School that resulted in a censure or suspension.² Of the 267 incidents, six were race- or ethnicity-based, including the tweets in the binder and the November 7, 2014 occurrence. The Office of Equity reviewed the remaining four incidents, and found the actions taken to be appropriate. This office is unaware of any concerns raised by students, parents, or employees regarding insufficient action related to these four incidents.

Recommendations

The Office of Equity recommends that the Superintendent adopt the following recommendations, with well-defined timelines and reporting requirements.

Recommendations for Enhancing Protocols and Procedures at BLS

- Overhaul and implement investigative protocols to ensure thorough, methodical investigations.
- Institute an effective and appropriate communication protocol to ensure a flow of information regarding bias-based and/or disciplinary incidents from, to, and among administrators, all other BLS employees, parents, and students.
- Consistently apply and document disciplinary procedures, including obtaining parent signatures on all censures.

Recommendations for Improving the Culture and Climate at BLS

- The Office of Equity, in partnership with designees from Social and Emotional Learning, should conduct a thorough racial climate audit at BLS before the close of this school year, and again, approximately one year later, to track progress.
- Immediately launch YWBoston Dialogues on Race and Ethnicity, which provides a highly structured, five-session curriculum for participants to reflect on their personal racial and ethnic identities. Dialogue participants should include Ms. Teta, other administrators, teachers, other staff, parents, and students, including representatives of BLS B.L.A.C.K.
- A representative of the Office of Equity, in collaboration with the Office of Human Capital, will meet with Ms. Teta and others in charge of hiring to provide coaching to increase the number of Black and Latino teachers hired for the 2016 – 2017 school year.
- The Superintendent should initiate a systematic study of current exam school admission policies with the intent to broaden the opportunity for admission, providing access to a larger number of qualified students from a wider demographic pool. The individuals named to complete this study should issue recommendations for the revision of exam school admission procedures to the Superintendent and School Committee by the beginning of the 2016 - 2017 school year.

² More than 80% of these incidents involved disciplinary action for tardies, cutting class, plagiarism, or cheating.



Recommendations for Training BLS Staff and Students and Sustaining an Anti-Racism Initiative

- BLS administrators and other employees, as appropriate, should participate in the following training programs: Equity Protocols, Investigation Skills, Bias-Based Bullying, and Preventing and Addressing Workplace Discrimination.
- At least annually, Ms. Teta should remind students of their rights and responsibilities under the district's Equity circulars verbally and in writing.
- At least annually, Ms. Teta should remind parents about students' rights and responsibilities under the district's Equity circulars verbally and in writing through discussions at School Parent Council, Site Council, and other meetings and print and electronic communications.
- Soon after the release of the BLS B.L.A.C.K. video, Ms. Teta met with representatives of the organization for what participants reported was a very productive conversation regarding next steps. Assuming that the students have fully contributed to and reached consensus on these steps with Ms. Teta, this office recommends full and prompt implementation of all aspects of the resulting action plan. The plan included:
 - a. Holding training conducted by the Office of Equity for all faculty members during the opening of school professional development in late August or early September 2016.
 - b. Establishing a Social Justice Student Advisory Council composed of twenty student leaders to meet biweekly with administrators.
 - c. Holding a Teach-In (full day of workshops for students) developed by student leaders of BLS B.L.A.C.K. in collaboration with other student led cultural/social justice groups.
 - d. Providing faculty with tools to better facilitate discussions about issues of diversity, including race, ethnicity, gender and social class.
 - e. Convening a BLS Site Council advisory group on issues of diversity.
 - f. Facilitating required educational opportunities for students that include space for critical dialogue on issues of race.

Recommendations regarding student or employee discipline or other employment actions are not included in this executive summary due to privacy rights under the law.

Recommendations Regarding Training Boston Public Schools Employees and Students

- All employees should annually review the Equity circulars and be required to indicate that they have read and understood the circulars.
- All BPS school leaders were trained on their reporting and referral responsibilities under the Equity circulars on February 11, 2016. Before the start of the 2016 - 2017 school year, all Central Office department heads, and at least one other administrator or teacher at each school should be trained.
- The district has committed to providing educational programming to any student or employee who is disciplined for bias-based conduct. Implementation should begin immediately.

The Office of Equity

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