

Good afternoon. You're tuned in to 91.9 FM KPTZ on your FM dial here in Port Townsend Washington. I am Simon Jaynes, bringing you your local news for March 24, 2022.

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Administrators and staff at two Port Townsend District schools had to respond to incidents of racist graffiti in school bathrooms this month. These incidents which occurred at Salish Coast Elementary and Blue Heron Middle School, are the latest in a handful of events involving racial slurs and hate speech in the schools of Port Townsend during the 2021-22 school year. As part of the district's immediate response, an email from the superintendent went out to parents which mentioned an "Equity Committee" that has begun work on a multi-year process to promote racial literacy among staff and students.

I spoke with Port Townsend Superintendent Dr. Linda Rosenbury yesterday to get a better understanding of the work this committee is engaged with. According to the Superintendent, Salish Elementary and Blue Heron Middle Schools have each seen at least two incidents of racist graffiti and two incidents of spoken racial slurs this year. She acknowledged that some students are likely not comfortable reporting these events so it is hard to know exact numbers on what is happening among the students. At the high school level, it appears incidents of racism and cyber-bullying are happening more in the social media space, and then sometimes spilling over into conflicts at school.

In her email to families on March 10 Rosenbury said, "We will use this [incident] as an opportunity to remind ourselves why we are here. This is an opportunity for education, a time to remind ourselves that we, as a school community, stand for respect and inclusion. We must be a place where all are free to learn in a safe and welcoming environment."

In our conversation, Rosenbury was quick to point out that this email to all staff and student families within the district was the first of its kind. Noting that, "In the past we only notified the students who were involved, but what we heard from our families of color was that they felt everyone in the district should be notified and be part of the response." The dynamic nature of the responses from the district over the past year has been driven in large part by the work of the Equity Committee. This school district committee was formed in July of 2021 with some facilitation from the Mandala Center, a local organization dedicated to social justice, community dialogue, and societal healing. By October of 2021, staff had been invited to join and provide suggested areas of focus for the committee, and staff of color met with the Superintendent to provide historical context.

In November of 2021 the committee drafted a document known as an "Acknowledgment of Harm," that called out the impacts of systemic, institutional, and individual racism on past and current generations of our students. As Superintendent Rosenbury put it, in order to invite people to partner with them in this process, they needed to name the problem and acknowledge that it has been an issue in peoples' lives here to begin with.

The Equity committee has identified four major areas of development where racial equity and justice need to be considered. These are: Professional Development, Curriculum, Disciplinary Strategies, and Student Supports. But the committee has found that listening to the needs of students in the community often puts real-time action ahead of slower structural changes. Rosenbury says, "We have heard both things – we have heard that we need to go slow and listen and learn and create this statement... and then we have heard that this statement is empty without action that and our students are experiencing harm now and we need to start doing things... so we are hearing both messages from our communities of color and we are trying to balance those needs simultaneously..."

What the Equity Committee has heard from BIPOC students that they want immediately is: increased representation (staff, contractors, volunteers); training on and acknowledging of micro-aggression; and

restorative practices with regard to discipline. The general idea with restorative practices versus more traditional disciplinary measures is that, in a restorative approach, all sides of a conflict are ready and willing to listen to one another and to recognize the nuances of the situation rather than viewing it as a simple dynamic of victim and a perpetrator. As far as curriculum is concerned, there is currently a pilot program in grades 6, 7 and 8 every Wednesday where students are receiving diversity lessons. If these go well, the schools will decide whether they want to continue such trainings in other grade levels.

There are parents who have spoken out against the racial equity initiatives, with a fear that the dialogue will be divisive or make their white students feel guilty or ashamed. Rosenbury says in response to this, “It is very important to our district that this work, while it can be uncomfortable at times, has the intent of helping students develop a positive racial identity... and that includes white students.” According to Rosenbury, they have figured out how they want to do the work, which is student led, what strategies they want to prioritize, and what students want them to focus on for next year.

The next step will involve the District Board of Directors reviewing documents from the committee and making an equity statement of their own. That is when the work would become more a part of the public dialogue. Items from the Equity Committee’s work will also begin showing up in the District’s strategic plan, which the Superintendent says they will start sharing with the public later this Spring, probably in May.

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And that is it for the day’s news. I’m Simon Jaynes, thanks for listening and have a great day.