

## Students, parents seek answers after black doll hung at Washburn High

Written by harry-colbert-jr  
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Students, parents, educators and concerned members of the community packed inside the auditorium of Washburn High School hoping to get answers following the hanging of a black doll.

The incident took place on Jan. 11, but didn't fully come to light until nearly a week later. Parents were not informed about the incident until several days after the incident – which led some to say the school and the Minneapolis Public Schools (MPS) were trying to cover-up the disturbing act. A community forum to discuss the shocking incident was held on Jan. 23.

"I grew up in Selma, Ala., where segregation was the rule. This incident has saddened, angered and hurt me personally, but there is an opportunity to learn, grow and advance," said MSP Superintendent Bernadeia Johnson, who is African-American.



Johnson said she was shocked, as Minneapolis is known to be a racially and socially tolerant

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and diverse community.

“I’m not proud of this, nor are our students,” said Carol Markham-Cousins, principal at Washburn. “This will be the beginning of a discussion about race that needs to happen. We’re going to face this head on. It was racist and it’s wrong.”

According to district officials, sometime between 1:40 p.m. and 2 p.m. on Jan. 11, a group of unnamed students hung a black baby doll by its neck from a railing. The hanging doll was seen by several students and faculty, and was also captured on surveillance video. Though the hanging took place on Jan. 11, and pictures of the hanging doll were posted on various social media sites, Washburn parents were not officially notified about the incident until Jan. 16 and Jan. 17. The district blamed the delay on its focusing primarily on the students at Washburn.

Parent Stephanie Young was one of the parents who heard about the hanging almost immediately. Her daughter, Shante` Young, 14, a freshman at Washburn, saw the hanging in real time.

“My reaction was outrage,” said Stephanie Young. “This is 2013. Why are we having to deal with this?”

Stephanie Young said her daughter called almost immediately after she saw the group of students hanging the doll in the hallway. “She was upset. She called me and said, ‘Mom, you’re not going to believe what just happened.’”

According to Shante` Young, she exited her classroom to blow her nose when she noticed four white students – who she knew by name, but who she otherwise had little interaction with – with a couple of the students holding an item.

“I heard one of the girls say, ‘Hang it off the stairs,’” said Shante` Young, who said initially she did not know the item they were attempting to hang was a doll. “At first I thought it was a science project, but when they (those with the doll) looked at me and I saw the skin of the baby I shook my head. I was so upset.”

And though some are saying the students’ act was a harmless prank and the color of the doll was coincidental, Shante` Young disagrees.

“They knew what they were doing and they need to apologize for what they did,” said Shante` Young.

One student indirectly involved with the incident said she was saddened to know that such an incident could have taken place. Lily Quist, 14, a freshman at Washburn said the now infamous baby doll was hers. Quist, who is white, said she brought the doll to school for use in an upcoming play, and the doll was taken from the theater department.

“My heart was broken,” said Quist.

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Washburn and MPS are not releasing any information regarding the offending students – including any possible discipline – citing federal and state student privacy laws. Stephanie Young said she has heard that a total of four students were disciplined, with two being immediately expelled and two being subsequently expelled.

Markham-Cousins would not confirm or deny such speculation.

“My job is to protect these students equally,” said Markham-Cousins.

The Washburn principal said she spoke with all of the offending students and their parents.

“I can tell you this; they are full of remorse. They had no idea how bad this was. Those kids didn’t understand the gravity of what they did,” said Markham-Cousins, who is in her sixth year as Washburn principal. When asked what rationale the students offered for the horrific act, Markham-Cousins said their answers were, “Not anything that would satisfy anybody.”

Several calls from students, parents and community members alike came asking for greater diversity in curriculum. The superintendent and principal agreed that a greater teaching of various cultures is needed and both said they are looking at ways to go beyond what is in the textbooks to teach diversity.

“This is not just a teachable moment, this is a transformative moment,” said Markham-Cousins.