

Food fight: Seeking a recipe for school safety, respect, and inclusion

Written by Harry Colbert, Jr.
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Minneapolis School Board Member Hussein Samatar and the South High School Somali-American students are calling on Minneapolis School District to better provide for their safety and to hire Somali speaking staff members.

Samatar said the students feel South High staff is not addressing the students' safety concerns. At a press conference last week, Samatar said school board is well aware of safety concerns at the school.

"The students have come to me about their concerns and I have shared it with the (school) board," said Samatar, who said eight percent of the student population at South is Somali-American. "I ask these questions (of how to address safety concerns) all the time on the school board."

What started on Feb. 14 as a food fight between a couple of girls ended in an all-out melee.

According to students who attended a press conference to discuss the incident, the brawl that

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sent several students and at least one staff to the hospital was the latest in a long history of daily bullying. The students said they are in constant fear and are calling on the administration and school board to act. Equally disturbing, according to the students, is that bullying is not only coming from fellow students, but staff as well.

"It's beyond a food fight. This has been going on for years. Nobody has been listening to us," said 16-year-old junior Kowsar Mohamed. "We go somewhere for an education and we don't feel safe."

Sophomore Anisa Ahmed, said ethnic tensions have been a constant issue at the school and the South administration is well aware of the problems.

"We've been telling them (administrators) all along and they do nothing," said Ahmed. "We feel we do not have a voice."

According to reports, during a lunch period, a food fight began between two girls. During a later lunch period, the earlier incident spawned a larger fight that involved several dozen students. By the time order was restored, at least four students and a staff member required medical attention, but none of the injuries were considered serious. According to the group assembled at press conference, all the students who needed medical attention were of Somali descent.

Ahmed said once the Minneapolis Police were called, they targeted the Somali-American students as the aggressors and many were assaulted and maced by police. Ahmed and others said police targeted the Somali-American students because an officer assigned to South participates is abusive toward Somali students, even using ethnic slurs to refer to some Somali-American students.

Multiple calls to the Minneapolis Police Department went unreturned.

Students said school administrators have them write out essays on the alleged bullying and how it makes them feel, but little else is done.

Steve Flisk, associate superintendent of the Minneapolis Public Schools said he had not heard of any such incident of bullying or harassment.

"Anything that was supposed to have happened prior to (the brawl), I'm not aware of," said Flisk.