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Massachusetts Department of Education Investigation  
of Allegations of Discrimination Filed by the Springfield Branch  
of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People  
Against the Northampton Public Schools

January 8, 1988

SEP 8 1988

Visiting Team Members

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Several incidents occurred in the Northampton Public Schools during the Spring of 1987 which led to the filing of formal complaints of widespread racism with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). From the NAACP investigation that followed a number of scenarios emerged which led the investigators to conclude that "a hostile racial climate exists in the Northampton School system which adversely affects the ability of black, Hispanic and Asian students to fully succeed within the educational system there." The NAACP then filed the complaints with Massachusetts Commission Against Discrimination (MCAD) and subsequently with the Massachusetts Department of Education (MDE) for resolution, the two agencies having jurisdiction.

The Massachusetts Department of Education initiated an investigation in mid-June with a review of data and interviews with administrators and guidance personnel. After summer vacation the investigation recommenced with further interviews of teachers and students and review of data. Five staff members from the Springfield Regional Office of the Department of Education conducted interviews with 22 teachers, guidance counsellors and supervisors, 21 students, 2 principals, 2 central office administrators and reviews of over 100 records during a six month period. These are the findings.

#### 1. Complaint (From NAACP)

Until recently, and for an extensive period of time, black and Hispanic students at Northampton High School have suffered racial affronts in the form of the words "Nigger" and "Spic" defacing bathroom walls and stalls and other areas of school property.

##### Finding 1

At the High School, students interviewed acknowledged that occasionally racial/ethnic graffiti has been found in boys' and girls' bathrooms and on lockers. MDE investigators observed a racial/ethnic slur on an Asian student's locker. All but one teacher interviewed stated they had not observed racial/ethnic graffiti but indicated they never go into students' bathrooms.

#### 2. Complaint

Although the majority of white students are fair and cordial in their relationships with black and Hispanic students, a large number numerically remain hostile, reflecting the values of their parents and historical racism of the greater society.

### Finding 2

Interviews indicated that some teachers now are aware that minority students have experienced racial slurs and innuendos made by white students. The minority students apparently have tolerated these in order to "fit in" or to "get along" with the white students. Staff and students also were concerned about the minimal amount of social interaction among students of varied social/ethnic backgrounds, with Asian students being the most isolated.

In the Spring of 1986 several faculty members held what were called "Counseling sessions" at the High School for minority students, in order to "give the minority kids a chance to air concerns". The concerns most articulated were "some teachers dump on us for our color, and some for our 'stupidity'"; "people look down on us"; "people hear us but don't really understand". Students said they'd like to be on the Student Council but don't think they'd be elected; they said they get cut from sports or are not allowed to play if they do make the team. According to interviewees, recommendations were developed by this group and submitted to the administration. However, there is no evidence that any of these recommendations were implemented.

### 3. Complaint

**Certain teachers and school officials express hostility to black and Hispanic students, treating them in such a way as to make them feel different and inferior.**

### Finding 3

Several teachers said they had no knowledge of hostility to black and Hispanic students or any maltreatment of them. However, other teachers acknowledge hearing occasional racial and ethnic slurs in the teachers' room. Most teachers interviewed did not believe there was any overt racism in the schools, but did admit to "subtle forms of racism" such as minority students being ignored, and insufficient outreach to include minority students in areas such as extra-curricular activities and Student Council where they are significantly underrepresented. Some staff expressed the belief that students who participate in athletic programs controlled by community groups for elementary and junior high age groups were given preference for participation in high school athletics.

### 4. Complaint

**At a recent sports event between Northampton High School and a regional high school, a black player was taunted with the terms "Nigger" and "Buckwheat" by a spectator or spectators, which incident was brought to the attention of officials of the Northampton School Department without a favorable resolution.**

5. Some time ago, when a parent of a student in a public school in Northampton (not Northampton High school) complained to school officials that there were recurring acts of violence and bullying on the school bus, the parent was told that these acts must have been caused by "the black and Puerto Rican kids". However, when the parent explained that it was the white kids who were committing these acts, she was ignored. Only when other parents made similar complaints did these officials then begin to listen to the substance of the complaints and then, expressed disbelief that "students from good families" would do such a thing. One of these "things" was setting a young girl's hair on fire.

#### Findings 4 & 5

While the Department of Education investigation was unable to substantiate these specific events, the interviews with staff and students at Northampton High School revealed the lack of well-defined procedures for resolving such complaints. An indication of this was the fact that most faculty members learned of the discrimination complaints and subsequent involvement of outside agencies via the newspaper and/or rumor. Most faculty members interviewed believed that a stronger communication system between administration and faculty would have enabled the school staff to better address the issues.

#### 6. Complaint

The school curriculum in history, geography, literature and English is practically devoid of any positive images of black and Hispanic persons, focusing almost exclusively on white people and white culture, despite the sizeable contributions of people of color throughout American history, literature and culture. This lack of cultural diversity reinforces racial stereotypes and exacerbates historical racism prevalent within the greater society of the greater community.

#### Finding 6

Some teachers interviewed at the High School and at Kennedy Junior High indicated that no procedures are utilized to determine bias in instructional materials. The Chapter 622 self-assessment and annual update has apparently been unevenly implemented in schools throughout the district, and insufficiently implemented in areas such as:

- a. review of curriculum and instructional materials for bias and stereotyping,
- b. access to courses of study,
- c. extra-curricular activities,
- d. active efforts.

7. Complaint

The teaching staff at Northampton High School is practically all-white.

Finding 7

This allegation is under a separate investigation by the MCAD.

8. Complaint

Black and Hispanic students who have dropped out of the Northampton school system report the prevalence of the terms "Nigger" and "Spic" on the walls of the school, the cultural vacuums in which they must learn, the racial hostility from some students, the almost all-white teaching staff, the lack of positive role models within the curriculum and the adverse racial climate as the contributing factors to their dropping out of school. Some of these students came from other schools where their grades were commendable, but soon dropped due to the racial climate at Northampton High School.

Finding 8

The conclusion reached in this complaint cannot be substantiated through this investigation. However, some of the specific issues outlined have been addressed in previous Findings.

9. Complaint

Many of the black and Hispanic students at Northampton High School must deal with racism in the schoolplace within the context of dealing with racism at other levels of living; housing discrimination at Florence Heights Project where some students live; racial assaults and threats from passing occupants of cars along the roadways and in town in downtown Northampton, sometimes from people of school-age; and the alienation of blacks and Hispanics feel (sic) in a community which reflects the racism of the broader society.

Finding 9

This allegation exceeds the jurisdiction of an investigation by this agency.

10. Complaint

English As A Second Language textbooks, which are necessary in order to teach, were not made available in sufficient quantity.

Finding 10

The review of learning materials for Transitional Bilingual Education (TBE) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes including textbooks, and

Finding 10 (Cont'd)

interviews with teachers reveal that materials are in good supply at the elementary level. Teachers report they are granted all reasonable requests for supplies. No TBE or ESL materials were located at John F. Kennedy Junior High School. Teachers brought materials from the high school for TBE and ESL classes. At the high school, materials were inadequate. Only a few copies of each of several series were available. TBE and ESL learning materials were not available in sufficient quantities at the secondary level.

11. Complaint

**There is inadequate testing of Limited English Proficient students.**

Finding 11

In general, language assessments are inconsistently performed and documented. Northampton is in non-compliance with both their approved LAU Plan and Chapter 71A.

COMMENDATIONS

1. Northampton High School staff is commended for initiating an interdisciplinary revision of the Transitional Bilingual Education curriculum .
2. The teachers and Principal at John F. Kennedy Junior High School are commended for their efforts on behalf of minority students which have resulted in some of these students experiencing success in higher level academic tracks.
3. The Northampton Public Schools are commended for the development of a voluntary De-isolation and Educational Improvement Plan designed to ensure the integration of minority students.
4. The Northampton Public Schools are commended for the development and implementation of a training program for students and staff, designed to raise awareness of cultural diversity and similarities, and issues of racial and ethnic bias and stereotyping.
5. The Administration of the Northampton Public Schools is commended for revising its personnel procedures to include affirmative recruitment measures.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Develop and implement a procedure for resolving complaints, issues and concerns of students and faculty, in accordance with Chapter 622 and Title IX regulations, utilizing all segments of the secondary school community. In addition, develop a crisis intervention procedure to deal with pejorative graffiti and discriminatory incidents.

2. Conduct a thorough and systematic Chapter 622 self-assessment involving all program areas, all schools and appropriate staff members and students.
3. Expand the frequency and methods of communication between the administration and faculty of the Northampton High School.
4. Develop and implement strategies for increasing the involvement of minority students in athletics and all other extra-curricular activities. In addition, review and revise, where appropriate, the role which participation in athletic programs controlled by community groups might play in the selection process for competitive sports in the Northampton Public Schools.
5. Develop and implement strategies designed to decrease the isolation within the school building of Asian and other minority students and to encourage interaction among students from all racial/ethnic/socio-economic groups. For example, form a welcoming club for new arrivals to junior high and high school.
6. Reinstitute the "counseling group" for minority students, and expand to include non-minority students. Develop and implement reasonable recommendations emanating from this group.
7. Since minority students are underrepresented in high level tracks and in certain elective courses, tracking and other grouping procedures should be re-examined in accordance with 8.01 of the Chapter 622 regulations.
8. Since the initial investigation, sufficient materials have been obtained for all levels of the TBE and ESL programs. However, the language assessments are still incomplete at both the junior high and the high school. Therefore, complete all of the language assessments at both schools.
9. Continue the revision of the TBE program for Southeast Asian students so that academic subjects are taught in either the first language or from an ESL perspective, in an organized manner.
10. Continue the implementation of ongoing training of minority and non-minority students, staff members and administrators throughout the Northampton School System in issues of equity which include:
  - a. strategies designed to achieve goals discussed in these recommendations,
  - b. techniques for increasing student interaction,
  - c. awareness and strategies for validating cultural diversity,
  - d. techniques for observing bias and stereotyping in instructional materials and classroom management, and
  - e. the process of second language acquisition.

As one interviewee said, "What we've done is try to put out fires, what we need is an organic change".

It is important to note here that staff and students who were interviewed and also had participated in the training sessions developed in conjunction with Equity House of Hartford, Connecticut, were very positive about the training. Interviewees said the training was most valuable and had significantly heightened awareness of racial and cultural concerns, and issues effecting minority students. They felt strongly that additional training should be provided and other staff members and students should be involved. A group of minority students interviewed at random said that the atmosphere at the high school was better for them this year than it had ever been in the past.

Please submit a plan detailing those actions which the Northampton Public Schools will put into place in order to implement the recommendations contained within this report. The Action Plan is due in the Greater Springfield Regional Education Center within sixty calendar days of the receipt of this report or no later than March 7, 1988.

The visiting team members wish to thank the Northampton Public School faculty, administrators and students for their cooperation during this investigation. We also wish to extend the offer of ongoing technical assistance in the implementation of the recommendations and any other related efforts.