

PARENTS SUE TEACHER FOR DISCRIMINATION AGAINST BLACK STUDENTS: ACCUSE PRINCIPAL OF LACK OF SYMPATHY OR CONCERN



Parents of Heights Community School have filed a lawsuit that is now moving to the federal courts, claiming that Timothy Olmsted, a teacher at the school discriminated against black students. The school said it is investigating the charges and has placed Olmsted on paid leave, pending investigations. Olmsted a sixth grade teacher at the school has since resigned. Parents complained to the school authorities that he had called black students, "fat, black and stupid," and ridiculed them saying "you will never amount to anything" and going to the extent of saying "you only have one parent." Parents also claimed that Olmsted forced black students to sit in the rear of the classrooms or sit with the desks facing the wall. The teacher also allegedly forced black students to sit in the back of the classroom, or sit with their desks facing the wall. Latasha Tolbert, mother of 12-year-old Jamia Ware, told WCCO that "He told the whole entire class that it is easier for him to teach rich white folks than poor black people." Tolbert said that she was shocked and appalled when her daughter told her what happened in the classroom and it was obvious that he had a different set of yardsticks for the white students and the black students. Even though Olmsted resigned in March, he is still being paid through the first week of October, much to the parent's dissatisfaction and annoyance. Worse still, he is yet to face any disciplinary action, owing to his resignation. In the suit parents have charged the district for failing to protect their children from Olmsted who they say, verbally and physically, discriminated against their children. Tolbert said that she had made almost a 100 calls to school officials apprising them of Olmsted's abhorrent and prejudiced classroom behavior, but for reasons that belie comprehension, no one acted until January. She, [Jayne Ropella, the school principal] never really took me seriously," Tolbert said. "All they [school officials] were trying to do was keep me quiet until the end of the school year." Parents say that the Principal is difficult to work with and petitions had been made with the district earlier seeking her removal. This year too, parents, aggrieved by her reluctance and apathy to allegations against Olmsted, presented another petition, signed by 420 assenting parents asking the St. Paul school board, to transfer Ropella to be transferred from Heights. The district, however, said that Ropella will remain as the principal at the school for the 2012-13 school year. Moreover, parents allege that with a disciplinary record as offensive and obvious as Olmsted's he should not have been employed in the first place and should be kept away from children. His continued employment is hard to understand, they say. District representatives, however, refuted allegations of tardiness and said that an investigation was launched swiftly and without delay and all complaints against the teacher were addressed straight away. However, Olmsted's attorney, David Hashmall notes that the teacher "denies any improper conduct and believes that the claims against him are baseless." The teacher's past actions give credence to the allegations that he acted discriminately. Olmsted has a record of controversial conduct. The St. Paul School District reported in 2002 that he gave a sixth grade girl a birthday card that contained sexual overtones and asked her to read it in class. He was also accused of describing to the class explicit life-like detail of how horses were castrated and flinging testicles into a field for cats to eat. The district says that he was questioned for his behavior and the various incidents and there have been disciplinary actions against him ranging from written reprimands to days of suspension without pay. Students said that, yes, they find his more recent racial comments odd. A student Aylecia Ingram-Jones told WCCO in a separate report, "He would say random things like, when I get out of the shower my dog dries me off." Her father, Miguel Jones, obviously concerned about the welfare of his child has shifted her to another school district. He says that under no circumstances should Olmsted be allowed to continue teaching. The question just does not arise, he emphasizes. "I wouldn't stand for it," Jones said. "Right is right. Wrong is wrong." However, since Minnesota does not have statewide regulations regarding disciplinary action for teachers, the legal process that is followed is based on district decisions and as outlined in the teachers' union contracts. Black children are often the butt of racial jokes and face discriminatory behavior from the teachers and officials. Complaints were made against Kathleen Pyles, a math teacher at North End Middle School in Waterbury, Conn. She was alleged to have inappropriately called a student a "black boy" when she failed to recollect his name. When she called him by a wrong name, he pointed out that was not his name, to which she retorted, "How about black boy? Go sit down, black boy." Parents are calling for her dismissal. In another incident in March, asked the only black student, Jordan Shumate, a ninth-grader, in her class to read a poem aloud. When he was reading it, the teacher at George C. Marshall High School in Falls Church, Va., Marilyn Bart interrupted him and said, "Blacker, Jordon-c'mon blacker. I thought you were black."