



NEWS

How Riverside Unified is grappling with racist behavior, including at Earhart Middle

Administrators outline a plan to respond to incidents there and at nearby King High School



Amelia Earhart Middle School in Riverside was the site of a meeting Thursday, March 5, 2020, to discuss campus racial incidents. (Photo by Beau Yarbrough, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

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Riverside Unified knows that racist behavior is a problem on its campuses and is addressing it.

“We see this happening at a lot of schools and schools are at different places in their ability to tackle it,” Jacqueline Perez, Riverside Unified School District’s assistant superintendent of equity, access and community engagement told parents at Amelia Earhart Middle School on Thursday night, March 5. “What we saw at King this year is something we’re tackling in a systemic way this year.”

The meeting came a week after Earhart [students chanted the N-word in a call-and-response chant](#) at lunchtime and almost a month after some [Martin Luther King High School students posed in a photo with a Confederate flag and a swastika](#). The video and photo circulated widely online. Earhart is [one of two middle schools that feed students to King](#).

“This is not who we are as a school, as a district, as a community,” Earhart Principal Amanda Chann said Thursday

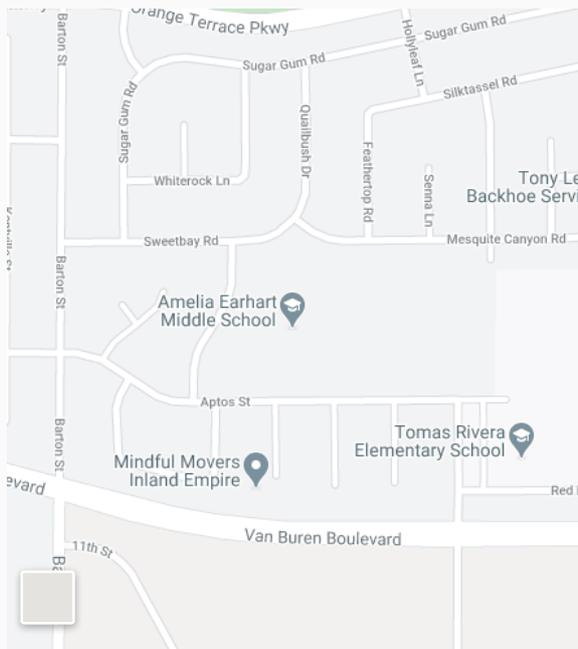
night. “I live a mile and a half away — this is my community, too.”

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Earhart has 78 African American students, [according to the California Department of Education](#). That’s 8% of its 926-student body, which is 38% Latino and 36% white. More than half of those at Thursday’s meeting were people of color, and they expressed concerns over their student’s safety and a desire for the district to break down barriers of misunderstanding between groups on campus.

School officials received copies of the chant video, as recorded on the Snapchat social media app, and used school video surveillance footage to identify the students involved.

“We took appropriate disciplinary steps with these students,” Chann she said. “And it’s a continuing process, not a one and done.”



Perez has been on the Earhart campus, “pretty much every day,” Chann said. And following the incident at King High, the district has been working with education consultant [April Clay](#) and is talking with the Anti-Defamation League about possibly using its [No Place for Hate anti-bias and anti-bullying program](#) in Riverside Unified schools.

During the rest of the school year, Clay and Perez will lead a number of programs at Earhart, some previously planned, others added after the chanting incident, to improve the school climate and teach students about the lasting consequences of social media posts.

“These are a group of kids who just did not think,” Chann said. “When they were faced with the gravity of what they did, their eyes got giant.”

The district was already working on stamping out bias and racism at its campuses before the King photo circulated, according to Perez. Administrators at each school began new multicultural awareness and tolerance training last school year, she said, and the program will be rolled out to other employees in coming years.



Amelia Earhart Middle School in Riverside was the site of a meeting to discuss racial issues on campus. (Photo by Beau Yarbrough, The Press-Enterprise/SCNG)

One family at Thursday's meeting says Earhart has more problems with racism and bias than just the recent chanting.

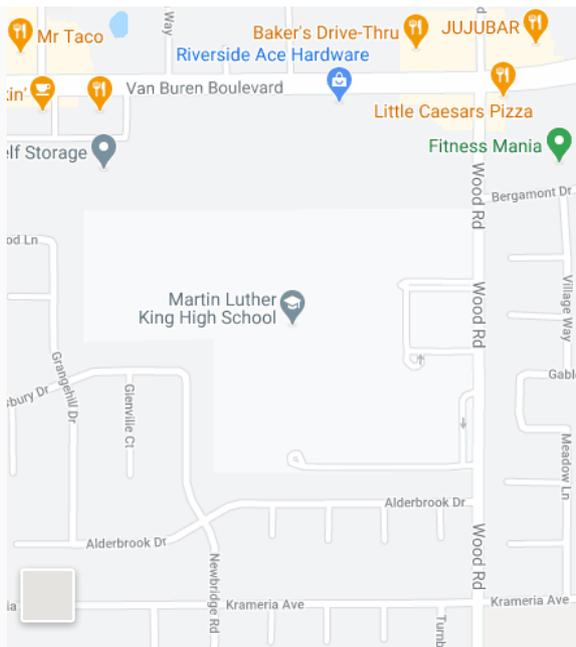
Eighth grader Asia Martin, who is black, said history teacher Randy Jensen has repeatedly expressed political views in class, displays Confederate flags in his classroom and, last week, told African American students they should be called “Negroes.”

Jensen declined to comment.

“The Confederate flag was there all year, because he’s got a bunch of flags in his classroom. It’s, like, all the flags of American history,” said Martin, 13. “He just told us that people made it a bad flag, and it’s not really a bad flag.”

On Monday, Feb. 24, Martin said she had an English assignment to talk to teachers about the use of the word “Negro,” as part of a unit on the writings of Martin Luther King Jr.

“I asked (Jensen) if he thought it was OK to call a black person ‘Negro.’ And he said ‘Yes, because we don’t have anything else to call your luscious dark skin,’” Martin said. “I said ‘What about African American?’ And he said, ‘No, because you guys aren’t African.’”



According to Timothy Walker, Riverside Unified School District's Assistant Superintendent of Pupil Services, Jensen is within his rights to display the Confederate flag in his classroom.

"If they were in a history class for context and historical perspective, I can understand that," Walker said.

Referring to black students as "Negroes" isn't against the district's policies or guidelines, but it is discouraged.

"In practice, the district encourages and expects employees to use students' preferred racial identifiers (like 'African American'), and would not condone use of a disfavored, antiquated identifier," he said.

Martin's mother, Vanessa Peters, drew a direct line between Jensen's classroom practices and the chanting incident.

"The leader of that chant is in that classroom," she said. "If he's listening to the teacher talking like that, what is he supposed to think?"

Martin said Jensen has not been in class since Tuesday. But, according to Walker, no Earhart teacher has been placed on leave in the past two weeks.

Generally, Martin said she doesn't recall experiencing much racism at Earhart, which is what made the chanting incident so painful.

"The people that did it, you'd

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never expect it. I'm friends with half of them, and it was kind of hurtful," Martin said.

Students at the school throw the N-word around, she said.

"They'll be like 'my N-word' and stuff like that," Martin said.

And, even after the chant and its repercussions,

the slur is still being used on campus, she said.

"Today, I heard the (chant) leader, he said it again," Martin said. "And me and my friend heard it and said 'He didn't even learn his lesson.'"

After February's incident with the photograph, she's asking her parents not to send her to King next year, the closest high school to their home.

At Thursday night's meeting, Chann said she and her staff understand the seriousness of the situation and that all complaints are being taken seriously.

"This is just the start of the process," she said.

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Beau Yarbrough | Reporter

Beau Yarbrough wrote his first newspaper article taking on an authority figure (his middle school principal) when he was in 7th grade. He's been a professional journalist since 1992, working in Virginia, Egypt and California. In that time, he's covered community news, features, politics, local government, education, the comic book industry and more. He's covered the war in Bosnia, interviewed presidential candidates, written theatrical reviews, attended a seance, ridden in a blimp and interviewed both Batman and Wonder Woman (Adam West and Lynda Carter). He also cooks a mean pot of chili.

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