

ACLU of WI: Praises DPI decision in discrimination case involving Burlington Area School District student athletes

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BURLINGTON – The ACLU of Wisconsin praised a decision made by the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) Friday, which found that the Burlington Area School District (BASD) failed to follow its discrimination policy when responding to accusations that high school football team members were racially harassing an opposing team.

Last fall, Black student-athletes on the Westosha football team said they were called racial slurs by Burlington high school football players at a Burlington High School football game. When Westosha players went to shake hands with Burlington following the game, they were called the n-word as they encountered Burlington players.

When news of the incident became public, multiple coaches from other schools shared on social media that they had witnessed similarly racist episodes while playing against Burlington. Some even said they forewarn their players about the potential for racial harassment when they play against Burlington.

Frustrated with the football program's history of racism, Burlington Coalition for Dismantling Racism (BCDR), a community organization founded to combat racism in Burlington schools, filed a discrimination complaint and called on the district to take action. The district responded by largely brushing off BCDR's concerns – failing to follow its internal complaint procedures and refusing to disclose any further information to BCDR – even falsely suggesting that it was against the law for the

group to bring a formal complaint. One football player involved was eventually allegedly given a three-day suspension for using inappropriate language, but records indicate that the player was actually suspended for only one day.

“BASD’s primary response to the fact that its high school football team has an established history of racially harassing opposing players was to admonish the people raising concerns and refuse to cooperate with them,” said Elisabeth Lambert, staff attorney with the ACLU of Wisconsin. “Allegations of systemic racism at a school need to be taken seriously, and community outreach should be welcomed, not dismissed or derided. BASD owes it to parents, students, faculty, and the larger Burlington community it serves to invite their input and meaningfully address their concerns.”

DPI has ordered BASD to provide staff training on district discrimination policies and the proper steps to investigate under these policies.

This press release, as well as a copy of the decision, is available online:
<https://www.aclu-wi.org/en/press-releases/aclu-wisconsin-praises-dpi-decision--discrimination-case-involving-burlington-area>