

ACLU of Wisconsin: Files lawsuit with Wisconsin ELPH on behalf of students of color in Greendale

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GREENDALE - Last week, attorneys from the ACLU of Wisconsin and the Wisconsin Education Law and Policy Hub (WisELPH) filed a lawsuit in Milwaukee County Court seeking an order holding the Greendale School District responsible for honoring commitments it made four years ago to address racial harassment issues in its schools.

One of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit is Diannia Merriett, a Greendale resident whose daughter, Chanese Knox, experienced persistent racial harassment - including jokes, slurs, and use of the N word - while she was a student in Greendale Schools. In 2019, Ms. Merriett and Ms. Knox filed a complaint with the school district based on these incidents.

After an internal investigation generated extensive evidence of racial harassment among students in Greendale schools, the District entered a settlement agreement with Ms. Merriett and Ms. Knox. Among other things, the District committed to provide supportive services to students who are victims of racial harassment, and to work with a coalition of diverse community members - including representatives of the community organization People Advocating Greendale Equity, or PAGE, who are also plaintiffs in this lawsuit - to provide annual assemblies for all middle and high school students addressing topics of race and diversity. In exchange for these commitments from the District, Ms. Merriett and Ms. Knox agreed to dismiss their complaint.

However, the District has not followed its commitments. For the last two years, it has failed to provide the promised assemblies. It has also summarily terminated its

relationship with the community coalition it agreed to work with. Meanwhile, students of color in Greendale continue to report incidents of racial harassment and discrimination – including 5 documented reports of hate speech during the first two quarters of the 2022-23 school year.

“Greendale School District needs to be held accountable for failing to live up to its end of the bargain,” said Elisabeth Lambert, a Wisconsin education attorney and founder of the Wisconsin Education Law and Policy Hub. “In good faith, Ms. Knox entered into a contract with the Greendale School District, after suffering some severe racial harassment. The contract had clear and direct requirements for the District, which would have improved the climate in schools for all students of color. If the District is allowed to wiggle out of this contract, what is to say that the District would ever have to comply with any agreement it signs with anyone in the future?”

“People Advocating Greendale Equity has worked collaboratively and transparently with Greendale Schools since 2018 to ensure the implementation of meaningful measures to address the climate of racial hostility that Ms Knox’s case highlighted,” said Nat Godley, the Vice President of People Advocating Greendale Equity. “Over time, we came to believe that both Greendale Schools and the village government were working in bad faith and without commitment, undermining the community participation that PAGE members brought to the Greendale Welcomes Diversity program, and taking decisions within their own structures without community input.

“This was especially evident on the Education subcommittee, which was generally only informed after the fact about equity actions within the schools, resulting from decisions taken without the PAGE or other community consultation that had been previously agreed, and generally decided by predominantly or exclusively white decisionmakers,” Godley added. “Ultimately, both the Village and the school district withdrew participation and funding from the GWD program, and ceased all collaboration with PAGE, as well as scaling back and then ending the equity measures outlined in the previous settlement.”

[The ACLU of Wisconsin](#) is a non-profit, non-partisan, private organization dedicated to defending the civil rights and liberties of all Wisconsin residents.

[Wisconsin ELPH](#) offers legal and consulting services to families, community organizations, and school board members seeking fair, inclusive local schools.

This press release and a copy of the lawsuit are available online here:

<https://www.aclu-wi.org/en/press-releases/aclu-wisconsin-and-wisconsin-elph-file-lawsuit-behalf-students-color-greendale>