

Listening to the minority

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While the Rockwood School District has policies in place to address racism in schools, some minority students say they have faced racist comments throughout their time in the district.

Currently, the district is continuing the work of making sure that when confronted with racism and racial injustice, students' voices are heard. By the 2022 to 2023 school year, the district hopes to have required Unconscious Bias training and Culturally Competent teaching training for every teacher.

However, these future plans do not change how racism has previously occurred in the district. Principal Dr. Emily McCown said issues involving race come about as a reflection of what is occurring in St. Louis.

"Race issues in school will sometimes mimic what we may see in our community and St. Louis. When there is racial tension in the community, you will sometimes see that reflected in our schools," McCown said. "There are policies in place for actions that would be considered racial or discriminatory. Those policies include discriminatory or demeaning language/conduct, harassment, or disruption of the school environment."

Consequences for these conflicts include up to ten days of out-of-school suspension, in-school suspension, or three 180 days out-of-school suspension, expulsion, and possible documentation in the student's discipline record, according to the 2020-21 handbook. Even so, these policies have not stopped racism from occurring.

Four students have shared their experiences in encountering racism throughout their time in the Rockwood School District. Their names have been invented to protect their identities.

Christina:

With an Indigenous grandmother, Christina grew up learning about her grandmother's heritage. Christina said that her grandfather's love for the culture caused her to grow to love her heritage.

"I have only a little bit [of] Native American heritage. I wouldn't claim to be full Native by any means. The Native blood I have is from my mother's side. My grandpa was obsessed with Native American culture, even though it was my grandma who had Native blood and not him. His love for the culture really rubbed off on me, and even though I only have a little Native blood, I still admire and like participating in parts of the culture," Christina said.

However, with her brown hair, brown

eyes, and tan skin, Christina tends to get mistaken for different ethnic groups. The mistake causes her to face comments, including an instance where a White student compared her skin color to Christina's.

"One day, this girl in the class came back with a strong, orange-ish spray tan. She proceeded to walk up to me and suddenly put her arm next to mine to compare our skin tone. Now, if this was a friend of mine, I usually wouldn't care, but I barely knew this girl, so it really caught me off guard. She then said, 'Look! We are the same color now!' Her statement came off as blunt and pretty rude. This made me pretty annoyed because her tan made her look orange, and she was comparing her fake skin [color] to my real skin color. Now, I don't have a problem with people getting spray tans and stuff. It doesn't [affect] me, so I usually don't care, but this girl came off as blunt and ignorant to me," Christina said.

Nonetheless, Christina said she tries to deflect these comments through the use of satire.

"If people say rude things to my face, I either just walk away, try to laugh it off, or deflect it with humor [and] sarcasm. I

do not take racist incidents seriously when they are addressed.

"They said they would keep me updated and that the problem had been handled but I don't believe that. I do not feel like things will get better for minorities at Summit. When students speak up about discrimination only some teachers and staff acknowledge it, but most are very ignorant to the racism that goes on here. They make it a big topic, like during Black History Month for example, and then it's just forgotten about," Emma said.

As the only Black student in her classes, Emma also said that being surrounded by students that do not look like her makes her uncomfortable at times because they seem to want to get a rise out of her.

"You can tell which ones just want a reaction out of you, and they will not get one from me because I know they will make it seem like I was the one in the wrong," Emma said.

Jane:

Jane, who is also a Black Muslim, said she began experiencing racism in elementary school, but while in high school, her racist

school would do is suspend the person for a period of time, but I doubt that would effectively solve anything. The person would probably still do these things, have these ideas, and perpetuate this behavior outside of the school environment," Jane said. "I think education is better to save future instances like mine from happening, like teaching White students the true history of people who don't look [like] them."

Olivia:

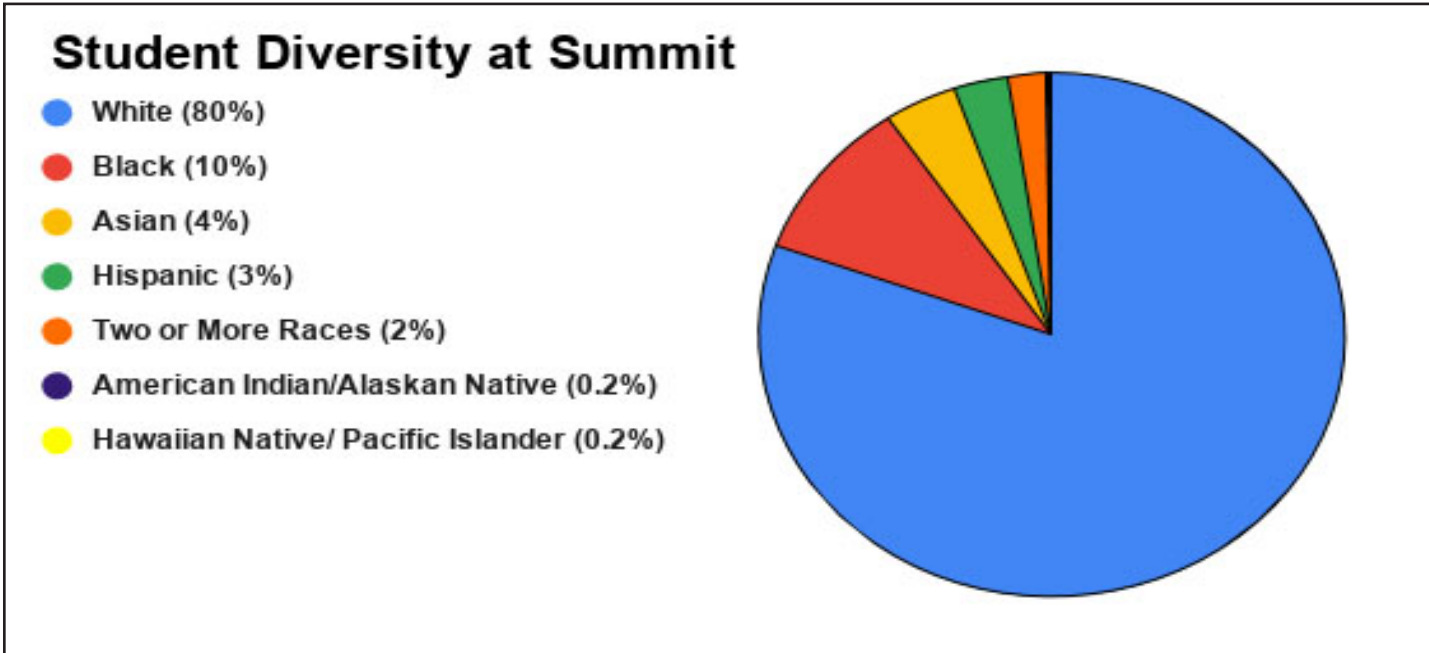
Ever since elementary school, Olivia, an African-American, has experienced racism and said racist instances occur, at most, every week. She said that the occurrences tend to be pushed aside when reported to administration.

"These situations or comments in our school probably happen once or twice a week. I would think the longest I've gone without having an issue involving race might've been a month. Often situations at our school involving race [get] swept under the rug. For example, if a student of color and [a] teacher get into a disagreement, the student always seems

to be the person in the wrong. But when it comes to White students and teachers, the situation is solved in a more peaceful manner and their voices [are] heard. Also, when students report other students for saying racial slurs, nothing is done," Olivia said.

In classes, with lessons regarding race, Olivia said she felt treated differently as her classmates would stare, singling her out.

"[With] lessons regarding people of



Each year, U.S. News provides the percentage of student diversity in public schools; the current total White enrollment is 80 percent of the student body. Some minority students, in the remaining 20 percent, have said they have encountered some form of racism in school. (Infographic by Taya Abraham)

know that what these people are saying reflects who they are and not who I am," Christina said. "Most of these comments just come out of ignorance or confusion, so I know that what they say is not a reflection of me. What they said was rude, and it did offend me at the time, but I learned [to] just laugh it off and remember to take pride in my appearance. I love having tan skin and dark curly hair, so I won't let other people take that away from me."

Emma:

Emma, a Black Muslim, has faced racism in high school more than once, but she said her more recent experience has affected her the most.

"Last year one of my classmates called another person the N-word. This wasn't her first time doing it because I saw another video of her saying the N-word with the hard r earlier in the year. When I confronted her about it, she said that it wasn't in a 'racist way.' She then proceeded to gaslight me and still say the word. She was not remorseful at all and that's what made me angry. I was already exhausted with the racism happening around the world at the time and the situation just added more stress," Emma said.

When she spoke to administrators about it, Emma said she felt like nothing happened to the student because she believes teachers

experiences have become more subtle.

"[In elementary school], I would be called skinny or starving because I'm African. Kids would tell me I drink dirt or muddy water- things like that even though I was born in America," Jane said. "But in high school, it's more micro-aggressive. For example, I've witnessed a few White girls say the N-word, and when I [confronted] them about it, they started to get confused and aggressive with me. I think it's maybe because they didn't think of me as Black, so they thought they could say [the word] with no repercussions; especially the way they said [it], being derogatory with a hard r. I of course was going to confront them about it, and then they told me I wasn't even Black, and if I was, then I shouldn't care because I wasn't African-American Black."

Yet, when asked if she reported the experiences to administration, Jane said she believed that there were no efficient repercussions for racist actions. Instead, she said students should be more educated on the history of African Americans and other people of color.

"I thought the school wouldn't do anything that would stop [the comments] 'cause it's just kids being kids, I guess. I think racism is normalized in our school, and I think the school doesn't have any good consequences for people who report occurrences like mine. I think the most the

color, I'm treated like I'm gonna break, or I feel like [my classmates] tread lightly, and it gets really uncomfortable because you kind of feel singled out. And they always ask how [you] feel about [the lesson], and you can't really give your honest opinion because if a bunch of people in class disagree and you're the only one with the opinion, it'll just be discarded and won't even be recognized," Olivia said. "I think students might stare because they want to see how you're going to react or your emotions during the situation. To be honest, I really just don't care. It's something that's happened my whole life with conversations like those."

In order to minimize the frequency of conflicts, Olivia said that teachers need to recognize when issues involving race occur.

"I feel like teachers need to be more open-hearted and more open-minded because a lot of teachers in [the] school are closed off to only their opinion and what they think actually happened, and it just makes you feel unsafe and not valued or like your emotions are not valued," Olivia said. "And they are valued, but when no one listens to you, it's stressful, so I feel like they need to be more understanding and be more open to knowledge and [know], yes, things like this in our school [do] happen."