

I, Esther Kempthorne, wish to inform both Washington Academy and the Board of Trustees that I am resigning from my position as Spanish Teacher and Head of the World Language Department at Washington Academy (WA), effective immediately. The school has failed to address pervasive racism and thus has failed to support and keep its student body safe. My resignation stems from my conviction that our community must hold our leaders and our schools to the highest standards of acceptance, integrity, and respect. This letter explains one of the reasons for my resignation as well as background that might be helpful for understanding the circumstances.

In the days following a Black Lives Matter (BLM) demonstration on June 7, 2020 in Machias, during which young counter-protestors staged a hateful intimidation attempt against peaceful demonstrators, we were proud to see members of the community, local and Washington Academy students stand up against discrimination. Our family was not able to participate in the June 7 BLM demonstration in Machias, but our teenage daughter Natalia who is a student at WA has participated in many discussions in person and on social media showing her support for local efforts to stand up for equality. In those social media discussions, we witnessed students and a former student of Washington Academy continue their intimidation campaign. The overt racism and harassment aimed by those Washington Academy students at my daughter inspired her to write a **detailed** letter recounting multiple instances that she has experienced of racial discrimination at WA as a student. Those experiences included jokes about her ethnicity, getting compared to Dora the Explorer, anti-immigrant speech directed at her due to her Hispanic ethnicity, teasing about the border wall (and I.C.E.), kids flashing MAGA undershirts to taunt her and telling her that “if you don’t like it then leave” or “go home.” Her letter, titled “My Experience of Racism at Washington Academy” was sent to Chris Lyford (then president of the Board of Trustees), Judson McBrine (Head of School), Tim Reynolds (Associate Head of School), and Richard Oliveres (Assistant Head of School) on June 8, 2020. Standing up for herself was terrifying, particularly after learning about her classmates' hateful attempt to intimidate the peaceful BLM demonstration in Machias the day prior, and after enduring attacks and harassment from WA students and former students online and in person.

The school’s student handbook notes that WA is required to advise the person who has allegedly been harassed of the various options available to the person: “A Human Rights Commission complaint, a Title IX complaint, a formal request for discipline by the Head of School, and/or the Board of Trustees.” Following receipt of my daughter’s email, WA failed to follow its own procedures. WA has failed to take my daughter’s complaints seriously and did not advise her of options for seeking justice after learning about clear and painful harassment, much of which had taken place on school grounds. The school’s anti-discrimination statement says that WA “condemns all forms of racism, inequality, and violence.” Yet WA chose not to condemn, address, or punish any of the individual members who have committed acts of racism and harassment but let them participate and were celebrated at graduation soon after. The graduation itself was an opportunity to publicly affirm the school’s anti-discrimination values out loud to the community and in front of graduating students who were involved, and such action would have acknowledged the “elephant in the room,” demonstrating true anti-racist support.

As a Hispanic parent and as a WA teacher I am hurt and insulted by the lack of real support for my daughter and other students of color by the leaders of WA. My entire family was shattered by the open racism of those members of the community and the inaction by the school administration, whose lack of a response both in the past and present has helped to perpetuate systemic racism in our school.

Over the last few years, I have noticed the racist, anti-immigrant sentiments of the community and some WA students and staff and I reported it to the administration. For example, the week after the presidential election, I even had a student ask me in class when I was “going back home.” To the credit of the parent and the student, when confronted both later apologized. As the racist anti-immigrant rhetoric became more mainstream, we had to teach our daughters how to defend themselves without our intervention, and they did. However, such self-defense has been exhausting and stressful for my children, and it should not be their responsibility to

constantly deflect harassment; rather they should be guaranteed a safe educational environment by school leaders.

WA has dodged opportunities for growth and has instead shut down discussions about how to create a learning environment safe from racism, instead they continuously made this a banned “political” discussion. In October of 2018, Michael J. Chase, bestselling author and speaker, came to WA to give a speech about kindness to the students and staff. At the end of the speech there was a Q&A period, during which I stood up and asked, “How can we talk about kindness and being kind when we have a leader that provokes bullying and racism?” Chase said that he didn’t agree with our president's approach and that we would be able to talk about that topic during our staff session. During the staff session, I again stood up in front of staff and administrators and let them know how I felt and what I have heard in the community about racism. One teacher confronted me on the spot and said I was being political.

Almost a year later, after continued silence about persistent racism at WA and days after the El Paso shooting in Texas which specifically targeted Mexican people, my husband and I wrote the following email to the Headmaster, the Associate Head of School, the president of the Board of Trustees and a similar email to the Head of Campus at the University of Maine at Machias: *Mr. McBrine and Trustees, The events of this weekend have left us terrified that our daughter, the foreign students, and I could be targets of the same or similar type of attacks. We have recently seen a lot of very racist comments on Facebook in the Machias area, including an employee of UMM (University of Maine at Machias), and would like to know what Washington Academy is planning to do to keep us safe. Please let us know how the administration plans to address this very real problem. Thank you, Esther & Nathan Kempthorne.*

After this email we met with Mr. McBrine and Mr. Reynolds to discuss our concerns. Following the meeting my husband sent a follow up email asking for specific action from WA leadership: a robust security plan that could be implemented in the very real event of an act of white terrorism, which seemed a real and frightening likelihood given a rise in local anti-immigrant and racist sentiments on social media; a zero-tolerance environment regarding racism and anti-immigrant speech or actions at WA; and vocal discussions about racism and discrimination with staff and students not just once in an assembly but as ongoing practice throughout the school year.

Other than a brief statement from Headmaster McBrine against racism at the first 2019-2020 school assembly, no other real steps were made to address the pervasive racism, xenophobic rhetoric and anti-immigrant speech at the school besides delegating the responsibility to the teaching staff with no additional resources or training. My husband even sent a follow up email thanking the school leadership for the statement to provide positive reinforcement to the school administration to continue to vocally address this problem, but it did not result in additional action. As a woman of color and an immigrant and naturalized citizen, and as a teacher I took steps to lead in celebrating diversity and invited a student each day to make an announcement celebrating a leader based on the month (Hispanic Month, Italian Month, etc). The Passamaquoddy tribe also led and brought art to the school and celebrated important tribal leaders. However, individual teachers and students working against racism on campus cannot accomplish the task alone.

As a mother, spouse of a Veteran and a professionally certified educator in the State of Maine, **I will stand against racism, anti-immigrant xenophobia, misogyny, anti-LGBTQ discrimination and all forms of discrimination.** As Washington Academy has repeatedly failed to do the same, I resign immediately.

Esther A. Kempthorne