



A current BVNW student and alumni share their experiences regarding racism and discrimination in the Blue Valley School District.

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Walking through the halls of BVNW as a freshman, 2020 alumna Sasha Mitchell said she heard a word she never thought she would hear come out of a white person's mouth: The N-word.

Mitchell said she heard that word on a weekly basis during her four years at BVNW. The normalcy and frequency with which she heard this word was sickening, she said.

"Every single time I've confronted a person, the answer has always been, you know, 'Oh, it's just a word, oh, I don't understand why I can't say it,'" Mitchell said. "But the thing for me is that, you know, [using that word means] you literally don't care about the culture or the history that's behind that word."

At BVNW, Mitchell said she only had two adults that she felt comfortable talking to about issues she faced regarding race, both of whom were coaches.

"It's really just opened my eyes, especially at Northwest, because being in a predominantly white neighborhood, it was hard because, you know, the Black population at Northwest is pretty much slim to none," Mitchell said. "I really didn't have anyone to talk [to] about these issues."

Talking to counselors and teachers, Mitchell said, never led to change in the way students were disciplined for their racist actions and comments. Mitchell said there was no change in the treatment of Black students by the administration or the student body over the course of her four years at BVNW.

Mitchell is not the only student who has experienced discrimination in the Blue Valley School District. Thousands of current students and alumni of all races shared their experiences

on Blue Valley Schools' Instagram post June 3. In this post, then superintendent Todd White, current superintendent Tonya Merrigan and Board of Education President Tom Mitchell released a statement regarding racism in Blue Valley. The post sparked a conversation about racism and discrimination across the district.

The Blue Valley School District used these comments as a professional development learning opportunity. Director of Professional Learning for the district Kelly Wessel said she took samples of Instagram comments and had Blue Valley staff members analyze them to see what experiences students and alumni have had in the district. She said a data analysis protocol was used to analyze these comments to determine thoughtful action to bring about change.

Class of 2020 alumna Makenzie Iszard shared her experiences with discrimination in the Blue Valley School District. Iszard said that for her, racism began as early as kindergarten at Harmony Elementary School.

At a Girl Scout event, Iszard said she found all of her school friends on a swing set, yelling at her that she couldn't join because she was "chocolate" or

a "brownie."

During her years at Harmony Middle School, Iszard was a part of the choir. One of the songs she was required to sing was titled, "Pick a Bale of Cotton," about slaves working in cotton fields.

*BVNW alumna Makenzie Iszard reads a poem written by alumnus Jadon Wise at the diversity asseby, March 6. (Grace Miller)*



Iszard said singing this song in front of parents and teachers was humiliating and enraging because it made slavery seem enjoyable and fun.

"[This song] paints my history as a joke, and that is why I think when we come to incidences like today with George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, people laugh at it, because they're lacking that empathy from a young age," Iszard said.

At BVNW, Iszard said she had many racist or discriminatory experiences, from hearing the N-word in the halls, at cheer practice and in English classes to witnessing students and teachers perpetuating Black stereotypes.

"I think that we, the Black people in my grade, had a mutual understanding of, 'this is what Northwest is, and it sucks that it is this way, but we have to deal with it,'" Iszard said.

Rather than trying to bring about change at the administrative level, Iszard helped establish the Black Student Union at BVNW, giving Black students a place to share their experiences.

"I have not gone to administration, purely because I understand that nothing will get done," Iszard said. "I'd rather not harbor onto that anger and frustration of seeing that no one's going to do anything."

In response, BVNW Principal Amy Pressly said she could not speak on behalf of students who did not feel comfortable coming to the administration, but she wants to

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-Makenzie Iszard



*Class of 2020 alumna Makenzie Iszard speaks during a Black Lives Matter protests held by the Black Student Union, June 12. (Photo by Mitri Krishna)*

validate their feelings.

"If they're saying they feel that way then that concerns me and that tells me that I, as well as my other administrators have ongoing work to do," Pressly said. "But I want kids to hear me say that I am here, and that I want to know your experiences. That's the best way for us to make Northwest

better."

In regard to the Blue Valley School District's post, Iszard said seeing the comments was painful because of the way she could relate to them.

"I know that [Blue Valley] does care about their students," Iszard said. "But I think that when students were being ignored, seeing this statement saying that [Blue Valley had] been doing everything they can, that they've been trying their hardest, was just not the truth."

Alumnus Oscar Hampton, class of 2004, said his experiences with racism in Blue Valley are very similar to what he believes it to be like today.

"[Racism in Blue Valley] is the same," Hampton said. "It's not different. I don't want to say it's worse, that's not the right thing to say here, because I think the only thing that was happening when I was in school there was I think people were a lot quieter with their racism. It was there, but they weren't as explicit about it."

Hampton said he experienced classroom conversations surrounding the N-word where he was the only black person in the room, as well as being called names, such as "Oreo."

"At that point in time, [being called an Oreo] wasn't really a big deal to me because I didn't understand the gravity of that statement and it's been

something that's been said to me since I was probably in like, third or fourth grade," Hampton said. "Now looking back, [I realized] that you don't get to label a person that because they speak a certain way."

In an effort to bring about change to discrimination in the district, Hampton wrote a letter to former superintendent White in 2019. Hampton reached out to Blue Valley alumni to hear their experiences and sign the letter.

"There needs to be a call to action about what is happening in Blue Valley when it comes to how minority students are being treated, how Black students are being treated," Hampton said.

After sending his letter to White, Hampton said the feedback he received was very political and the response did not contain much substance. Because of White's retirement, no one at the Blue Valley District Office was familiar with Hampton's letter.

Senior Raymond Marongedza shared his thoughts regarding Black stereotypes he has faced living in a predominantly white area. He said in eighth grade at Harmony Middle School, he was made fun of for having

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-Oscar Hampton

## IN-SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS AT BVNW

Black Students

12.5%

White Students

55%

Other

32.5%

Black students at  
BVNW

3.8%





big lips and a big nose.  
“When I was younger, I would always get the questions ‘Why don’t you act Black, why don’t you act like this, why don’t you act like that,’” Marongedza said. “I got made fun of because I didn’t fit the stereotype for things like being good at sports, being tall, or always having a pick in your hair because I have an afro.”

Marongedza said he experienced racism not only within the BVNW community, but outside of school as well.

“The way I’ve seen students act and the way that the Blue Valley community tries to push [racism] away like it’s not a problem is damaging,” Marongedza said. “The things I’ve heard from students’ mouths and parents’ mouths are things that are not acceptable.”

Sasha Mitchell, Iszard, Hampton and Marongedza all agree that racism exists in Blue Valley. Mitchell said she was fascinated to see thousands of comments about people’s experiences

regarding racism not only at BVNW, but throughout the district.

The lack of education surrounding Black history in our school system, Iszard said, is the root of the issue of racism. She said that what is taught sugar coated and does not exploit the brutal realities of Black history.

## White students at BVNW

73.6%

## IMPLICIT BIAS

Implicit bias is the idea of having certain attitudes toward groups of people and topics, without consciously doing so. The media has a large effect on implicit bias, causing people to act and speak in ways that perpetuate racial stereotypes. For example, studies have shown that white people will commonly relate criminality to Black people, without realizing they are doing it.

In the fall of 2019, all staff members across the Blue Valley District were required to undergo implicit bias training. Going forward, the District plans to have all new staff members go through this instruction as part of new teacher training. Implicit bias training is an ongoing process that will continue for years to come. As part of their initial training, Blue Valley staff members were required to take a test from Project Implicit made by Harvard.

CLICK [HERE](#) TO TAKE THE IMPLICIT BIAS TEST FROM PROJECT IMPLICIT.

Project Implicit is a non-profit organization founded in 1998 by researchers interested in implicit bias cognition. The goal of Project Implicit is to provide an education to the public about unseen biases.

## OUT OF SCHOOL SUSPENSIONS AT BVNW

Black Students

19%

White Students

52.4%

Other

28.6%