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SOUTH CHICAGO, EAST SIDE

## After Racist Video, Threats And Slurs, Students Walk Out At East Side High School: 'Something Needs To Be Done'

Chicago Public Schools is investigating after George Washington High School students reported racist incidents, including someone writing in a bathroom that a Black student would be burned and hanged.



By Maia McDonald May 19, 2022



Members of the Black Student Alliance at George Washington High School during a student walkout May 18, 2022. Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago

**EAST SIDE** — Students at an East Side school walked out of class Wednesday in a rebuke of administrators they said have been slow to address racist behavior.

Dozens of students at George Washington High School, 3535 E. 114th St., filed out of the building 11:30 a.m. Wednesday for the action. It was planned by the school's Black Student Alliance after three recent racist incidents, including one where a Black student was likened to a monkey in a video and another where a Black student was threatened, organizers said.

George Washington has more than 1,500 students and is 89.2 percent Latino, 5.6 percent Black and 3.8 percent white and 1.6 percent identifying as other races, according to Chicago Public Schools data.

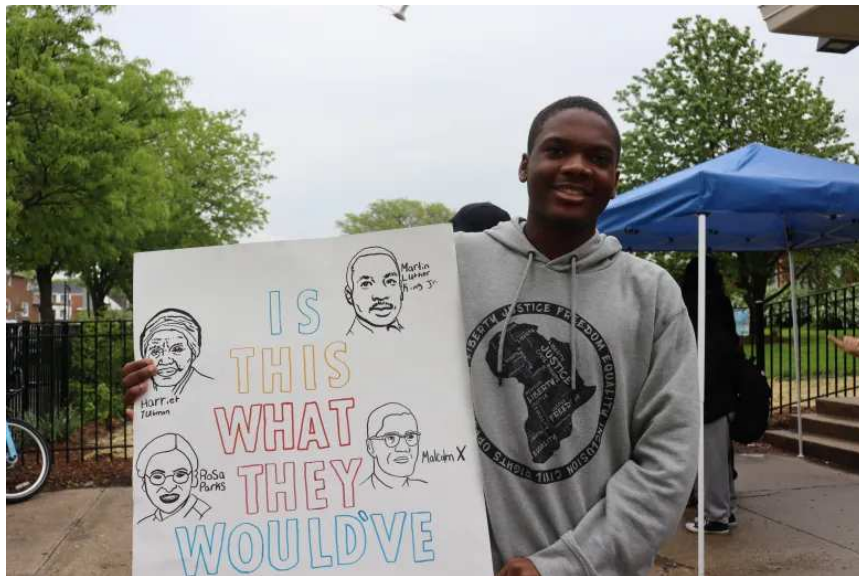
Students said they hope the walkout prompts CPS leaders to intervene.

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"I know there are rules and regulations, but when my classmates are being traumatized, are being harassed, being bullied in the hallway — I'm sorry, that process takes too long," said Greg Miller, who led the walkout. Miller is a sophomore and member of the Black Student Alliance. "Something needs to be done here and now."



Students walk out of class at George Washington High School in Chicago's East Side neighborhood on Wednesday, May 18, 2022. Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago



Sophomore Greg Miller holds a sign at a student walkout at George Washington High School, at 3535 E. 114th St., on Wednesday May 18, 2022. Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago

Members of the Black Student Alliance said Black students feel unsafe and uncomfortable at the school.

“Even if I haven’t experienced it myself — Black trauma — I still know that there’s still trauma there no matter what,” said junior Destiny Vasquez, a member of the Black Student Alliance. “Nobody should experience trauma. That’s not right. So I do whatever I can to support Black students. ... I want to make sure everyone at this school feels safe.”

Vasquez said there has long been racial tension in the school and community.

“I hope all the students can continue to speak out,” Vasquez said. “That’s why really I’m trying to speak out my best and show that your voice really does matter no matter what. Even if administration isn’t agreeing with what you’re saying, your voice and your experiences should be out there if you’re comfortable with it.”

Recent racist incidents have highlighted those concerns, students said. In one, a video circulated on social media showing a Black student dancing at a recent pep rally, but edited to feature monkey noises. Students said someone also wrote a message in a school bathroom saying the student in the video would be burned and hanged, and a

non-Black student used a racist slur toward a Black student teacher.

A CPS spokesperson said the district is investigating the incidents at George Washington.

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CPS “strives to provide a safe and welcoming learning environment for every student. All students are expected to follow the Student Code of Conduct (SCC) and all rules and policies set by the Chicago Board of Education and CPS,” the spokesperson said in a statement.

But Miller thinks school leaders have not done enough to respond to students’ complaints about the incidents. Administrators only sent an email to the community discussing the racist incidents after parents spoke to officials there, Miller said.

Students now want CPS officials to talk to them about what’s happening at the school, Miller said.

“So they can hear it from a student’s point of view, and not the administration sugarcoating things,” Miller said. “We want this to be a resource and we want to be an ally to other CPS schools that are going through things like this. So we can further educate them as well and tell them and help them on things that they could do moving on forward in the future.”



Destiny Vasquez, a junior at George Washington High School in Chicago's East Side neighborhood, spoke during a school walkout on Wednesday, May 18, 2022. Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago

Principal Barbara San Roman said one of the school’s next steps will be to create a collective document designed by administrators, teachers and students outlining how staff and students can report racist treatment. The school also plans to host restorative conversations between the parents involved and meetings with administrators, teachers and students.

“As a school community, it is our mission to create a sense of belongingness and connectedness for all students, as well as create a safe environment for students to engage in both academic and social-emotional growth,” San Roman wrote in a statement. “We have had a few incidents over the last few weeks of racist speech and actions. This is a continued reminder that any form of racial discrimination is in the student code of conduct and must be reported to our deans and administration.”

The Black Student Alliance is also directing and creating a video to discuss racial harm and the impact it has on an individual through the perspective of student testimonials, San Roman said in her statement.

“Honestly, George Washington is really a loving school,” Miller said. “But when we have things like this going on, it just breaks down that school community.”



Students listen to speeches during a school walkout at George Washington High School, at 3535 E. 114th St., on Wednesday, May 18, 2022. Credit: Maia McDonald/Block Club Chicago

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