

Re: SCASD racial harassment incident

To the members of the Penn State Psychology community,

As some of you may be aware, a 16-year-old Black male student from State College High School (SCHS) was criminally charged with felony aggravated assault, simple assault, as a result of a racially charged incident that took place on February 1st. The White student that took part in the altercation has a history of posting antisemitic and anti-Black hate speech and even coming to school with swastikas and the N-word written on his person. What is more, there is a long and documented history of racism and racial bias in the school district, with little to no intervention from its leadership. Freedom of speech does not equal hate speech. The repeated harmful actions of the various instigators and failure of school officials to intervene in months of racial cruelty directly contributed to the confrontation between the two students. Yet, it was the single event that led a Black student to receive a disproportionate punishment, whose effects could be lifelong.

This incident is just a part of a larger pattern of disparities in the treatment and unfair discipline of Black students, especially Black boys, in the country (e.g., Riddle & Sinclair, 2019). Additionally, research has demonstrated that Black students perceive school discipline as unfair because their voices are ignored (Bell, 2020). This highlights the need and importance for educators to engage in anti-racist teaching practices, ensuring equitable treatment of students, that all voices of students are heard, and that our community and schools are a safe place for all. A [letter](#) written by education scholars at Penn State emphasizes the role that educators and community members have in responding to events such as these.

As our department has made increased commitments to center Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, an important part of these ongoing conversations is acknowledging our ethical obligation as professional psychologists to engage in advocacy and social justice efforts. Our belief is that our role is that of [citizen psychologists](#)—a term coined by the APA to emphasize an ethical mandate to not only provide quality, culturally-informed care to clients but also actively advocate for social justice. Such advocacy is an essential part of building [multicultural competence](#) by actively engaging with our communities to improve the lives of marginalized group members that we serve through whatever means available to us. Critical to these endeavors is building awareness of ongoing issues of systemic injustices faced by our own community members and taking an active part in improving our communities.

Therefore, what is our role as members of the State College community and psychologists dedicated to social justice?

- Knowledge: Inform ourselves of the whole story and recognize that State College is not immune to racial injustice; it is happening in and affecting our immediate community.
- Support: Those who are able can support the family [financially](#) for the legal fees that have arisen as a consequence to how the school and police responded.
- Advocacy: We can join in existing community efforts to challenge the unjust criminal charges placed on the Black student by signing petitions to drop the charges [here](#) and [here](#), and add your name to the letter written by PSU faculty to the school district [here](#).
- Prevention/education: Simply raising awareness is not enough to prevent such incidents from happening again. We need to strive toward being an Anti-racist community, but what does that really mean? [Learn more through Anti-racism resources.](#)

If you have any questions or feel the need to process these events with others, please reach out to our BRIDGE TA Sara Albrecht Soto to schedule a peer support hour.

In Solidarity,  
BRIDGE diversity alliance

References:

Bell, C. (2020). “Maybe if they let us tell the story I wouldn’t have gotten suspended”: Understanding Black students’ and parents’ perceptions of school discipline. *Children and youth services review, 110*, 104757.

Riddle, T., & Sinclair, S. (2019). Racial disparities in school-based disciplinary actions are associated with county-level rates of racial bias. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, 116*(17), 8255-8260.