

The Columbus Dispatch

Conservative group accuses Columbus schools of racism based on a press release

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A press release by Columbus City Schools is the basis of a racism complaint filed with the U.S. Department of Education by a newly formed conservative education advocacy group with a return address at a UPS store rental mailbox in suburban Washington D.C.

The city school board issued a statement April 21, the day after 16-year-old Ma'Khia Bryant was fatally shot by a Columbus police officer while wielding a knife at a young woman, saying the "Board of Education is calling it out and ready to take action to address systemic racism in Columbus."

The district has "taken a strong stance and has begun steps to end the systemic racism that has existed for 175 years within the Columbus City Schools education system" and is dedicated to further reforms, the release stated.

That statement and similar statements in the release formed an "admission of 'racism'" that may violate the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964, the group Parents Defending Education contends in a complaint letter to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights.

"We're taking them at their word," said Nicole Neily, founder and president of the Arlington, Virginia-based group and formerly a public relations person with the conservative Cato Institute. "If they're saying that the district is racist, then they should not be taking federal funds."

"The district is not aware of this administrative complaint," Columbus City Schools spokeswoman Jacqueline Bryant said Tuesday when notified of the complaint announcement by The Dispatch. "It would not be appropriate to comment until we've been contacted by the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, regarding this request to investigate."

The district statement in question said: "We are doing the work and are dedicated to reform... (by) developing culturally responsive staff and equitable policy. We are addressing inequities caused by how Columbus neighborhoods have historically been divided."

It also stated that, "There is systemic racism within our school district" and as well as within the city, police department and court system. School board members called for "leaders, at all levels, to come together to address the very real issue of systemic racism in our Columbus community."

Parents Defending Education's letter lists no one from Columbus involved as a participant. Neily wouldn't disclose where her group gets its funding, saying it keeps all members or donors confidential.

The group has applied to become a federal nonprofit organization, and has no office — hence the UPS Store mailbox return address.

"We just all work from home," said Neily, who is also president of Speech First, a national campus free speech organization. "We're all working moms."

Since its founding in late March, the group has written letters to the federal Education Department asking for investigations into three other school districts in three different states in response to similar public admissions of systemic racism, Neily said.

The Parents Defending Education website says it wants "to reclaim our schools from activists imposing harmful agendas" that are couched in "vague slogans such as 'social justice.'"

The group contends that some school districts are dividing children into "oppressor" and "oppressed" groups.

"To one, it teaches guilt and shame. To the other, grievance and anger. To all students, it spreads unhappiness, radicalism, and failure," the website says.