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AREA

Monona Grove High School student files lawsuit against staff for alleged 'racially motivated' search

By Lauren Henning lhenning@hngnews.com
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A Monona Grove High School student filed a civil rights lawsuit on May 23 against four district staff members after they allegedly attempted an “unparticularized” and “racially motivated” search during a Black Student Union field trip last month.

In April, Monona Grove High School Black Student Union members, along with chaperones, took a field trip to tour historically black colleges in the New Orleans area and other cultural sights.

On the trip home, the bus transporting Monona Grove students stopped at a McDonald’s in Amite, Louisiana, the lawsuit complaint said. The plaintiff, known only as M.N. in the complaint, alleges that staff members Molly Rilling, Tanya Green, Scott Groff and Emily Hunn, all white, forced him and five of his peers, all Black, to empty out their pockets in public and front of their peers, then attempted to search their bags after smelling marijuana.



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UNITED STATES DISTRICT COURT
FOR THE WESTERN DISTRICT OF WISCONSIN

M.N.,

Plaintiff,

v.

MONONA GROVE SCHOOL DISTRICT,
MOLLY RILLING, TANYA GREENE,
SCOTT GROFF, AND EMILY HUNN,

Case No: 3:22-cv-289

Defendants.

COMPLAINT

Plaintiff M.N., a minor, by his attorneys, Strang Bradley, LLC, for his complaint against Defendants Monona Grove School District, Molly Rilling, Tanya Greene, Scott Groff, and Emily Hunn, states:

INTRODUCTION

1. Plaintiff M.N. is a black student at Monona Grove High School ("Monona Grove").
2. M.N. is a member of the Monona Grove Black Student Union.
3. M.N. attended a field trip with the Black Student Union, in which students from the union, along with several chaperones who were Monona Grove staff, toured historically black colleges and other culturally important sights.

In Louisiana, marijuana is decriminalized, and the drug could faintly be smelled in the air at the McDonald's, according to the complaint and Rick Resch, an attorney representing M.N.

"The defendants humiliated him — in public and in front of his peers — for no reason other than that he's a black male," Resch said in an email. "Everyone on the field trip smelled a faint smell of marijuana in the McDonald's. The defendants then assumed it must've been the boys on the trip because they were black males. There was no other reason to suspect any student of anything."

Loreen Gage, the Monona Grove school board president, read a written statement addressing the lawsuit during a May 25 board meeting.

"We know that more than likely you'll have some questions, but we are unable to address them at this time," Gage said. "While that may feel unsatisfying, we cannot provide any details or any additional information. Please know that we do take this very seriously. And we will follow the process laid out ahead of us."

Two other chaperones, Toren Young and Turkessa Hayes, the advisers of the Black Student Union and the only Black staff members on the trip, allegedly stopped their coworkers from completing a bag search at that time, the complaint said, stating that if a student was suspected of possessing marijuana, all of the students should be searched.

As the trip back to Wisconsin continued, the students demanded answers, the complaint said.

"Back on the bus, the students were irate," the complaint alleges. "On the way back to Wisconsin, they demanded answers. The teachers huddled and discussed amongst themselves. Half-hearted apologies were made."

At one point, students reportedly asked the chaperones if the bags would have been searched if it had been a ski trip instead of the Black Student Union. One chaperone, according to the complaint, said no.

The complaint said students on the trip allegedly had to agree to have their bags searched before leaving, with nothing of interest being found. The complaint alleged that Monona Grove sports teams do not have to have their bags searched before they travel.

The trip, organized by the Black Student Union and fundraised for by student members and community groups, was meant to make college feel more accessible to the minority students, and give students a chance to see themselves in a higher education setting, staff members have said.

In addition to touring historically black colleges and universities, students visited the Whitney Plantation as one of the final stops of the trip. The plantation is the first museum in America and "only museum in Louisiana" with an "exclusive focus on the lives of enslaved people," the museum's website said.

Toren Young, one of the advisers, had told The Wisconsin State Journal the importance of the trip for Black Student Union members back in October. Young's comments were cited in the lawsuit complaint on the significance of the trip.

"For the first time, our students will see professors that look like them, staff members that look like them and students that look like them," he said in a quote cited in the complaint. "It makes (college) feel like a realistic dream. It makes them feel like they belong a little bit more."

On Wednesday, district administration had no further response to the allegations against staff members.

"We take any allegations of this nature very seriously, but are unable to comment on pending litigation," Olsen said.