

Bay Area school kept employees in the dark on racist video

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A Black employee of Tamalpais High School argues in a lawsuit he would have responded differently to a fight he helped break up if school officials had informed him about an earlier racist incident.

Scott Strazzante/The Chronicle

Kenneth Wayne Price was a campus safety supervisor at Tamalpais High School in October 2023 when he was badly injured trying to break up a fight between Black and white students, injuries that still cause him severe pain. It all could have been prevented if the school district hadn't concealed the cause of the fight — racial tensions on campus — from its Black employees, including Price, he argued in a lawsuit filed last week.

Three weeks earlier, Price's lawyers said, school officials were informed of a six-second video showing a white student using the "n-word" multiple times while other white students joined in and laughed. Officials feared racial clashes and notified parents and most of its staff — but not Price or other Black employees, the suit said.

Price, who had grown up and gone to school in the Marin County community and worked as a safety supervisor since 2017, said he was called to go to a campus restroom where students were lingering after class had started. He saw two Black students and told them to go to class, but then a white student appeared and yelled at the two Black students, and a fight began.

Price said he stepped in to stop the fight and was struck twice, suffering searing pain in his left arm and shoulder. He screamed, the fight stopped, and he walked the white student to the principal's office.

Then, he said, he encountered a white teacher who told him the fight was "probably about the 'N-word' video. Did you see the video we got?" All he could think of asking, Price said, was, "What video?"

"Based on his training and experience as a Campus Safety Supervisor, it is beyond question that he would have approached the situation differently had he been provided the information about the racist video and racial tensions on campus, and that he could have prevented the fight altogether and avoided the catastrophic injury he suffered," attorneys Aaron Fischer and Tamarah Prevost said in the lawsuit. It was filed in federal court Friday and seeks damages from the Tamalpais Union High School District.

Fischer said Price, 46, has been diagnosed with cervical radicular pathology, with pain in his left side, neck and back, and — more than a year after the incident — was unable to lift and hang decorations for the birthday party of one of his two children.

Officials of the school and the district were not immediately available for comment.

Unwillingness to discuss or disclose racial conflicts on campus, the suit said, is "a continuation of the District's decades-old pattern of failing to protect Black students and staff from racism at Tam High," where Black students make up less than 4% of the population.

As a freshman at the school 30 years earlier, his lawyers said, Price was the only Black student in a class that was reading Mark Twain's "Adventures of Huckleberry Finn." When another student refused to read the "n-word" aloud, the suit said, the teacher turned to Price and asked, "Hey, Wayne, how do you feel about us using that word?"

Price said he was shocked. But when he reported the incident to school officials, they transferred him to another class and took no action against the teacher, he said.

More than 100 students, led by the Black Student Union, held a protest walkout a week after last year's incident, and the school's principal, Kimberly Clissold, addressed students in a webinar that denounced the racist video. But the suit said racism on campus did not disappear.

A month after Price's injuries, his lawyers said, the same racial slur was found carved on a railing in the student center. And the school football team was put on probation last month after reports of racial slurs directed at a Black teammate.

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Bob Egelko has been a reporter since June 1970. He spent 30 years with the Associated Press, covering news, politics and occasionally sports in Los Angeles, San Diego and Sacramento, and legal affairs in San Francisco from 1984 onward. He worked for the San Francisco Examiner for five months in 2000, then joined The Chronicle in November 2000.

His beat includes state and federal courts in California, the Supreme Court and the State Bar. He has a law degree from McGeorge School of Law in Sacramento and is a member of the bar. Coverage has included the passage of Proposition 13 in 1978, the appointment of Rose Bird to the state Supreme Court and her removal by the voters, the death penalty in California and the battles over gay rights and same-sex marriage.