

Tweet prompts school rule changes, diversity

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TUALATIN (AP) — What a change a tweet can make.

In 2014, just 12.4 percent of Tualatin High School students polled in the Oregon Student Wellness Survey said they had experienced racism.

But this year, nearly 42 percent of students who participated in a student-led survey said they've seen racism at Tualatin High School.

District officials attribute that sharp rise to the aftermath of a single tweet, shared hundreds of times, just weeks before TuHS Unity Club students conducted their classroom surveys. The tweet's content shaped some of the discourse on race and bullying in the school, and prompted the Tigard-Tualatin School Board to adopt district-wide policy changes to allow for discipline related to hateful off-campus, online speech.

"Really it's just been a process of figuring out what the right thing to do is," said Susan Stark Haydon, spokeswoman with the Tigard Tualatin-School District.

In February, an image showing the Tualatin High School website manipulated to be portrayed as "White Supremacist High" and "Home of the KKK" was making rounds on Twitter.

"It was kind of heartbreaking to know that the people you go to school with, they're

not the people you thought they would be," said Evelin Gutierrez, 16, an incoming senior at Tualatin High School.

The school website wasn't hacked. District officials said the image appeared to have originated on someone's computer and was shared initially on Snapchat.

More than 100 people retweeted the image, which received more than 200 favorites and countless responses — some of which appeared to find the image funny.

Administrators immediately reached out to the students who shared the image, according to Stark Haydon, who added the district hadn't seen something like this before.

"When they talked to the students who tweeted it, they seemed very sincere that they didn't understand the racism aspect of it," Stark Haydon said. The students appeared to be more attracted to the technological aspect of having created the image, she said, rather than the content.

Parry Aftab, a nationally-recognized cybersecurity expert from New York, inferred as much.

"It's far less about radicalization, and more about 'look at that; isn't that funny,'" said Aftab, founder and executive director of Wired Safety.

Members of the TuHS Unity Club said the offensive tweet became an opportunity to get timely feedback

in a project they had been working on over the past two years. The club had been putting together a packet of activities and questionnaires to collect data on student attitudes in three categories: oppression, teen issues, and school culture.

Just a few weeks before club members went into classrooms, the tweet had already been circulated dozens of times among students.

Unity Club advisor Bret Bunke said that may have skewed the results.

In the teen issues category, students were asked if they've experienced or seen someone face an array of topics from depression to racism. Students could pick multiple topics, but bullying/cyber-bullying, depression, alcohol and drug use, and racism were listed as top issues, according to results from the student-led survey.

On the other hand, in the oppression category, students were asked what type of oppression they've seen. Racism was listed higher than topics such as heterosexism and classism.

The Unity Club students were quick to explain that the results are not definitive of student attitudes at Tualatin High School. Stark Haydon also pointed out that the results vary from the Oregon Student Wellness Survey, a state-sponsored and research-based survey of Oregon students in grades 6, 8, and 11.

"With any survey it's hard to get 100 percent truth and it's hard to get everyone to participate... but I think the data we got was pretty good," said Tualatin High School incoming junior Allison Mo, 15, one of more than a dozen students who led the Unity Club project.

The Unity Club students went back into classrooms during the last two weeks of school to present the results and "have a courageous conversation over some of these issues."

Additionally, the students shared resources to address some of those concerns.

The survey data will be used to help create an agenda for the school's annual Unity Week, which takes place in February and is put on by the Associated Student Body in conjunction with campus clubs, including Unity.

The response to the tweet also prompted Tigard-Tualatin School District to address hateful speech within the virtual environment, something the district had never done before.

At first, school officials treated the incident as a disciplinary one — aimed at finding the person responsible and punishing them accordingly. About a month after the image went out on Twitter, the school and district issued a statement condemning the racist content.

"There was a delay" in responding to the image, said

Superintendent Ernie Brown. "That was a mistake on our part. We did not respond as quickly as we should have. I think part of that is embedded in how we initially approached the situation."

It was the same type of action administrators would have taken if they found graffiti on campus.

"One of the things we want to do is make kids feel safe, so first we want to get rid of it — make it seem like it was never there," Stark Haydon said, adding the district was not able to find the person who created the image.

"The part we missed is to think about the impact this had on other people," Brown said.

Tigard Tualatin School District now has an Equity Compliance Officer position to review discrimination complaints, whereas before students were encouraged to talk to a teacher or counselor. Currently, the job will be assigned to district's human resources director.

The Student Rights and Responsibilities Handbook is also being updated to address off-campus speech that "creates a disruption to the school environment."

Those changes, which include disciplinary action for similar speech in the future, were adopted unanimously at the TTSD Board meeting on Monday night.



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