

Baltimore school police officers face felony charges for assaulting student

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Baltimore City Schools police officers Anthony Spence, 44, and Saverna Bias, 53, face felony assault charges after a cell phone video emerged last week showing them assaulting a student on the stairs of REACH! Partnership Academy, where both officers were on duty. The video, taken by a witness, shows Spence slapping and kicking an unnamed youth as Bias stands by, not bothering to stop the attack.

School officials initially sought to play down the assault, alleging that the “young man,” who is obviously school-aged, was not a student and had been trespassing on the campus. According to Mike Davey, Spence’s attorney, an altercation ensued between the officer and the youth which led to the slapping incident caught on film. On Friday, after meetings with the boy’s family and attorneys, officials were forced to admit that the youth, whose name has not been released, was “believed to be a student on the school’s roster.”

“They were trying to find anything they could to point the finger at the victim,” stated Charles Gilman, an attorney for the boy’s family. According to attorney Lauren Geisser, who spoke to the *Baltimore Sun*, injuries sustained to the youth’s face and ribs required a trip to the hospital after the incident.

Eyewitness accounts cited in the court filings stated that Bias had encouraged Spence’s violent actions, proclaiming “you need to smack him [the student] because he’s got too much mouth.” Spence has been charged with second-degree assault, second-degree child abuse by a custodian as well as misconduct while in office, while Bias received charges for second-degree assault and misconduct in office as well. School Police Chief Marshall Goodwin and both of the officers involved have been placed on leave due to the incident, while Spence and Bias face arraignment in early April.

Baltimore’s municipal police department, which is separate from the school district’s officers, has announced that it will conduct a criminal investigation of the incident. This has occurred while the municipal police force is under federal investigation for its conduct relating to the April 2015 death of Freddie Gray, a Baltimore man who died after being given a “rough ride” in the back of a police wagon. Gray’s death resulted in mass protests against police brutality in the city, which the state’s National Guard was called in to suppress and during which a citywide curfew was declared.

Baltimore city officials immediately went into damage control after the latest assault became public. Democratic Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake declared the officers’ actions were “appalling,” raising “significant concerns.” Schools CEO Gregory Thornton said he was “completely appalled and disappointed” by the video. Baltimore city schools spokeswoman Edie House Foster stated Spence’s behavior was “absolutely appalling” and “is not how our police interact with students, administrators or anyone in our school communities.”

Officer Spence had been involved in a number of violent altercations prior to the March 1 assault at REACH!, including a tasing incident of a construction worker in 2003 which led to his being fired by the city’s sheriff’s department. In 2011, Spence’s girlfriend at the time requested a restraining order against the officer after he physically assaulted her during an argument.

The city of Baltimore is wracked by an epidemic of police brutality. According to the *Baltimore Sun*, from 2011 to 2014 the city was forced to pay over \$5.7 million in restitution for cases stemming from police misconduct. In 2005, as a product of then-Democratic

Mayor Martin O'Malley's "zero tolerance policing" policy, the city reported over 108,000 people, roughly a sixth of Baltimore's population, had been arrested during the course of the year.

In October, Baltimore schools resource officer Lakisha Pulley pleaded guilty to three charges of second-degree assault stemming from a 2014 attack in which an officer clubbed three students with a baton, requiring one to receive stitches. In 2014, Baltimore officials enacted a curfew law for youth under the age of 14, requiring parents of children caught outside after 9:00 pm on weekdays to pay a fine of up to \$500. Since 2012, the city has cut over \$6 million from after-school programs.

"This is something that goes on far too much, the only thing different about this time is that the beating was caught on camera," said Antoine Harris, a Baltimore parent who spoke to the *World Socialist Web Site* about the incident. "You can tell by the officer's behavior that he was very comfortable doing what he did, he didn't even seem to mind being filmed."

Continuing, Harris stated, "The one thing taught to kids in these schools [like REACH! Partnership] is to obey authority, even more so than learning an education. The only thing different about this time is that the 'political correctness police' in the media have picked up on the video, so now the city officials are making these statements so that things will quiet down and go back to the status quo."

With more than 85,000 students, the Baltimore public school system is the state's largest. Eighty-four percent of students in the city's public schools are classified as "low income" and eligible for free lunches according to city statistics. A 2014 study released by Johns Hopkins University reports that, in contrast to groups of teenagers from New Delhi, Johannesburg, Shanghai and Ibadan, Nigeria, youth in Baltimore "appear to experience the most severe health consequences" stemming from poverty.

The police assault on an unnamed youth comes as the trials for the six Baltimore police officers responsible for the death of Freddie Gray continue. On Tuesday, Maryland's Court of Appeals ruled that Baltimore police officer William G. Porter, the only officer to have yet seen a trial, can be compelled to testify against all five other officers in the case. In December, Porter's case resulted in a mistrial, which forced prosecutors to

place the other trials on hold while Porter was compelled to turn state's witness. According to a *Washington Post* investigation released last year, out of the police-involved killings which occurred from 2005 to 2015, only 54 officers have ever been charged and even fewer have been found guilty.



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