

Students walk out in support of Nashville teacher victimized for assigning homework on the ‘N-word’

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A high school English teacher from the Metropolitan Nashville Public Schools (MNPS) has been placed on leave after assigning students a homework assignment asking them to critically analyze the use of the “N-word” in a popular play. Students and parents have rallied to the teacher’s defense after learning he was facing disciplinary review despite working with the district since 2015 without receiving any disciplinary actions.

Steven Small, who is white, gave 30 students at Cane Ridge High School an assignment discussing the 1987 Pulitzer Prize-winning play “Fences.” The play centers around a black head of household who struggles to provide for his family and with the bitterness he feels towards racial divisions and barriers in the 1950s. “Fences,” written by playwright August Wilson, explores many themes including race relations and the experiences of black Americans in the struggle for civil rights.

The homework asked students to write a one-page essay on the play’s frequent use of the “N-word,” including descriptions on how it is racist and how it is deployed in the play. The prompt further asks students to explain why the play’s main character used the slur, given its negative connotation, and how it could be both empowering and self-derogatory. The questions were designed to spark intelligent and critical thoughts on race and racism, but a parent expressed concerns over the assignment.

The parent, who chose to remain anonymous, said that she was hurt by the assignment and felt that conversations about race and derogatory slurs should be had at home. She stated that she wanted to raise more awareness about the issues involved and wanted prior

notification of such assignments.

In a statement, MNPS Director Dr. Adrienne Battle sided against Small, “The homework assignment given out at Cane Ridge High School was offensive, inappropriate, and out-of-line with the standards of MNPS. I sincerely apologize to students, families, and community members who may experience pain or trauma as a result of this incident.”

Despite this, Small has received an immense amount of support from students at the school. On Friday, hundreds of students staged a walkout in support of him. A video posted on social media shows students gathered outside the school chanting “Mr. Small.”

“It’s difficult for sure in this particular context if the assignment is appropriate, but based on what I see, those are the kinds of questions we need to engage with our young people,” Vanderbilt Professor of Education Richard Milner told local news station WTVF.

Milner added that having serious discussions on complex subjects in the classroom is essential and can be beneficial in helping youth engage in difficult conversations outside of school environments.

An online petition, started by student Kathleen Madu, defending Small has gained over 1,100 signatures from students and parents alike.

Madu wrote that she was disheartened to learn that Small was on leave because he “discussed the origin of the n-word in the context of a district approved text.” She noted that Small is one of the few teachers actively engaging students in critical thought and societal lessons.

Her petition is worth quoting at length:

I, myself, am an African American student, and I wish that incidents where teachers are being falsely accused like Mr. Small in this case would stop. We have so many good teachers losing their jobs or having their characters being questioned because they are willing to be honest with us and help us think about the real world and not just the protective bubble we live in at school. The n-word has a painful and tragic history behind it, but I am a firm believer in the fact that if history isn't discussed, it will repeat itself, and the pain and suffering will continue. That's why it is my deepest wish that teachers like Mr. Small will stop being persecuted for trying to prepare us for the real world by gifting us with the ability to think critically.

Many parents also offered their support.

Grin Olsson wrote, "I am a parent and the teacher's conduct & teaching methods are totally appropriate. Put the teacher back to work & let him do his job!"

"If you never fully understand the historical roots of the deeply offensive term, can you ever really truly appreciate why the word will never have a place in our future?" asked Jason Fleming.

Another parent quipped, "I guess it's inappropriate to challenge students to think for themselves, is dangerous and unacceptable?"

According to Madu, Small returned to Cane Ridge after the student walk out but she made the decision to leave the petition online "to show what kind of impact this situation had" and to spread awareness about the freedom of learning in classrooms. This seemingly small incident is indicative of a wider hostility among youth and workers to the racist preoccupations being promoted by the Democratic Party and the *New York Times* in its 1619 Project.



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