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Community Leaders Denounce Anti-Gay, Anti-Women, Anti-Jewish Acts in Darien

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Community leaders on Friday denounced graffiti found this week in a boy's bathroom at Darien High School that insulted women and threatened gay people. They also denounced an anti-Jewish comment made in an online Darien chat group.

"The incidents this week have been reported to the Darien Police Department, and the [school district] administration has aggressively used all the tools legally available to conduct its investigation," the leaders said in a letter sent to parents and staff in Darien Public Schools.

"There is no place for sentiments of hate, bigotry, anti-Semitism or religious discrimination of any kind in our schools or community," the letter said. "These behaviors are very disturbing and unacceptable. [...] All of our students deserve to feel safe and welcome in our schools. We owe it to them to make sure that is a reality."

Darienite
News for Darien
<https://darienite.com>

The letter (full text, below), was signed by Schools Superintendent Alan Addley, First Selectman Jamie Stevenson, Board of Education Chairperson David Dineen and Police Chief Donald Anderson. The letter was sent out electronically and received by Darienite.com at 4:20 p.m., Friday. (It was not posted on the town government or school district websites.)

"The incidents do not represent the values of our student body, school district or town, and the message for those involved remains unequivocal; there is no place for sentiments of hate, bigotry, anti-Semitism or religious discrimination of any kind in our schools or community."

The anti-Semitic statement was posted on a "Darien Superfans" Facebook group, according to a discussion on the "Darien Local Politics" Facebook group, which couldn't be found in a search of Facebook on Saturday morning (although Darienite.com found it there on Friday). A screenshot of the comment was posted to the second group but later taken down by an administrator of that group.

Other incidents involving anti-Semitic graffiti have occasionally been found in Darien schools and elsewhere in town in recent years.

The message from school and community leaders discussed what the school district is doing to discourage bigotry and made a general suggestion to parents and students about what they can do individually to counter bigotry.

The letter mentioned that the school district recently has worked with organizations promoting tolerance to promote values discouraging bigotry.

"The Board of Education recently adopted a strategic plan explicitly identifying equity, diversity and inclusion as a goal and part of its core values," the letter said. "Such change, however, takes time [...]"

The school district recently also set up a "Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Team" to "serve as a guiding coalition to engage in this work and serve our community well."

"The district's new adopted vision is to prepare students today to thrive in a changing world tomorrow. The changing world transcends our differences, politics, neighborhoods and individual family dynamics. We have heard from DHS alumni that readiness for the diverse world is an area where they could have been better prepared. That is a challenge we need to accept, not only to prepare our students for life after high school, but to foster a culture of inclusivity and tolerance for our students and larger community each and every day."

The community leaders gave this general advice for adults and students:

"We must also act together now. This begins with our own actions when we witness events that marginalize others. Standing up in the face of adversity is challenging for adults and children alike; however, opening the dialogue and engaging in difficult conversations are not obstacles to be avoided if we are going to make the changes needed for all to feel welcome in Darien as members or visitors to our great town."

Statements from Party Committee, Board of Ed Candidates

In a separate announcements Friday (full text, below), the Darien Democratic Town Committee and campaign Facebook accounts for Democratic and Republican candidates in this year's Board of Education campaigns released statements about the incidents.

The "BrownWurm for Board of Education" Facebook account, representing Republicans David Brown and Tara Wurm, [posted a statement](#) at 12:01 p.m., Friday, apparently from one of the candidates (who didn't identify himself or herself).

"Reports of the alleged actions of a minor child at the high school yesterday, raise serious concerns. Pursuing a mental health degree has given me incredible insight into the complexities facing our children and adolescents. Navigating life at this age and especially during this moment in time is confusing and difficult. That being said, there is no place for hatred in any sector of society, least of all our school systems. I condemn the actions of any hate-filled and intolerant speech, always. However, I believe minors should not be tried by adults over social media, ever."

At 4:23 p.m., Friday, the Facebook account for Democratic Board of Education candidates Julie Best and Stacy Tie posted this statement:

"We learned today about yet another incident of vandalism in one of our schools; graffiti that is hateful and hurtful to members of our beloved community was found in the high school bathroom.

Darienite

News for Darien

<https://darienite.com>

We are scared for the kids who were targeted by this vandalism, who now feel even more marginalized, more isolated, and more afraid.

We are sad that this keeps happening. We must have a zero tolerance policy.

We are worried for our community. We must work together to do better. We must support efforts for Diversity, Equity and Inclusion."

The Democratic Town Committee condemned the graffiti and bigoted online comment and said the incidents show that people in town need to support efforts to fight bigotry:

"[T]he recent incidents and those occurring in the not-too-distant past illustrate exactly why we need to teach diversity, equity and inclusion in our schools as we prepare our children for their future.

"Darien residents and public officials need to do better. This is why local elections matter."

(Two of the community leaders who signed the letter that went to school staff and students — Stevenson, the first selectman, and Dineen, the Board of Education chairperson — are Republicans. The letter they signed was emailed six minutes before the news release from the Democratic Town Committee.)

Full Text of the Letter from Community Leaders

Dear Community Members,

Just as we come together during times of celebration, it is especially important that we work together as a greater community during times of adversity.

This week has been particularly challenging and disappointing for our school community. Graffiti was discovered in a high school boys' bathroom that objectified women and threatened those who identify as gay, and an anti-Semitic comment was posted on social media. These incidents are particularly upsetting as they follow a series of similar acts that have occurred over the past few years in the elementary, middle and high schools.

The incidents this week have been reported to the Darien Police Department, and the [school district] administration has aggressively used all the tools legally available to conduct its investigation. The incidents do not represent the values of our student body, school district or town, and the message for those involved remains unequivocal; there is no place for sentiments of hate, bigotry, anti-Semitism or religious discrimination of any kind in our schools or community.

These behaviors are very disturbing and unacceptable. Recent efforts to address such topics have included collaboration with the National Conference for Community and Justice and the Anti-Defamation League. However, these are complex societal issues and not simply school issues. As educators, parents and community members, it is important that we collectively serve as role models for our children, providing

Darienite

News for Darien

<https://darienite.com>

guidance and education on issues of diversity, prejudice and inclusion.

The Board of Education recently adopted a strategic plan explicitly identifying equity, diversity and inclusion as a goal and part of its core values. The core values and goal represent a shared commitment that this work is essential. Such change, however, takes time, and we are hopeful that the establishment of the district's Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Team will serve as a guiding coalition to engage in this work and serve our community well.

While shifting culture and operationalizing the strategic plan will take time, we must also act together now. This begins with our own actions when we witness events that marginalize others. Standing up in the face of adversity is challenging for adults and children alike; however, opening the dialogue and engaging in difficult conversations are not obstacles to be avoided if we are going to make the changes needed for all to feel welcome in Darien as members or visitors to our great town.

The district's new adopted vision is to *prepare students today to thrive in a changing world tomorrow*. The changing world transcends our differences, politics, neighborhoods and individual family dynamics. We have heard from DHS alumni that readiness for the diverse world is an area where they could have been better prepared. That is a challenge we need to accept, not only to prepare our students for life after high school, but to foster a culture of inclusivity and tolerance for our students and larger community each and every day. All of our students deserve to feel safe and welcome in our schools. We owe it to them to make sure that is a reality.

Moving forward, the district will continue to look for new ways to partner with parents, members of the Darien community and/or outside agencies to assist us in addressing these complex issues in order to ensure a respectful and safe learning environment for all our students.

Darien is a town characterized by service and volunteerism. Let us come together in that spirit of service and volunteerism to support our schools and children in this important work.

Sincerely,

Jayne Stevenson, First Selectman

David Dineen, BOE [Board of Education] Chair

Alan Addley, Superintendent of Schools

Donald Anderson, Darien Police Chief

Democratic Town Committee Statement

The Darien Town Committee distributed this news release in an email received by Darienite.com at 4:46

p.m., Friday:

DARIEN DEMOCRATIC TOWN COMMITTEE DENOUNCES EXPRESSIONS OF HATE & INTOLERANCE DISCOVERED WITHIN THE DARIEN HIGH SCHOOL COMMUNITY

The Darien Democratic Town Committee and all Darien Democrats stand united against hate speech in any form. We are saddened to learn of the misogynistic and homophobic graffiti discovered at Darien High School this week. In another incident, also this week, a Darien High School student posted anti-Semitic language on a closed Facebook page. While many will argue these are isolated incidents, in 2019 swastikas were scrawled on a desk and external windows at the Middlesex Middle School on two separate occasions.

These appalling incidents highlight that the increasing polarization and animosity towards underrepresented groups that has permeated much of this country has now found root in Darien. These behaviors and actions reflect poorly on our community and leave many Darien residents disheartened and concerned about our town's future.

The discriminatory and abusive behavior and actions within the Darien High School community this week are appalling and must be condemned by all students and adults. But much like "thoughts and prayers," condemnations will not solve the problem. Words are not enough.

In recent weeks we have seen parents, candidates, and elected officials question the need for a curriculum that espouses Diversity, Equity and Inclusion. They have attached themselves to the national outcry that learning about those who are different from us may hurt their children rather than open their minds. A common refrain heard at the recent Board of Education meeting was that the discussion and education of our students on these topics belongs at home. However, the recent incidents and those occurring in the not-too-distant past illustrate exactly why we need to teach Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in our schools as we prepare our children for their future.

Darien residents and public officials need to do better. This is why local elections matter.

September 24, 2021

Darien Democratic Town Committee