

EDUCATION

Swastikas appear at Kansas City prep school, yet no one is punished, parents say

BY MARÁ ROSE WILLIAMS
UPDATED FEBRUARY 01, 2021 3:54 PM



Survivors of the Auschwitz concentration camp returned there on January 27, 2020, the 75th anniversary of its liberation, to mark International Holocaust Remembrance Day.
BY PRESIDENT OF THE REPUBLIC OF POLAND VIA STORYFUL



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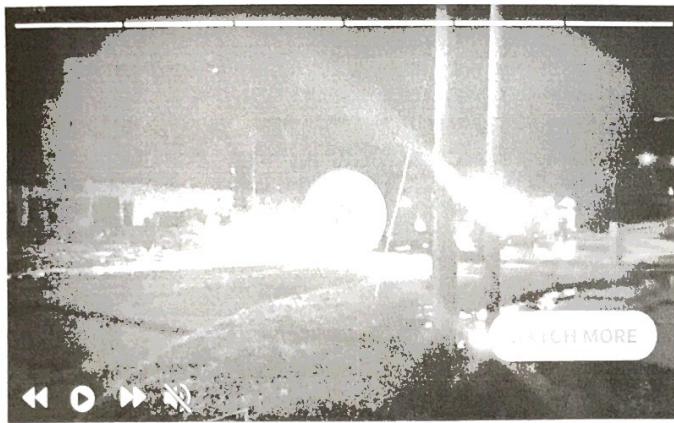
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Monday update: Kansas City prep school leader says whoever was behind swastika incident will be punished. [Story here.](#)

On the day [Pembroke Hill School](#) recognized [International Holocaust Remembrance Day](#) this past week, a swastika was discovered on a student's desk.

It wasn't the first time the symbol has appeared at the Kansas City prep school, yet parents say no students have been punished.

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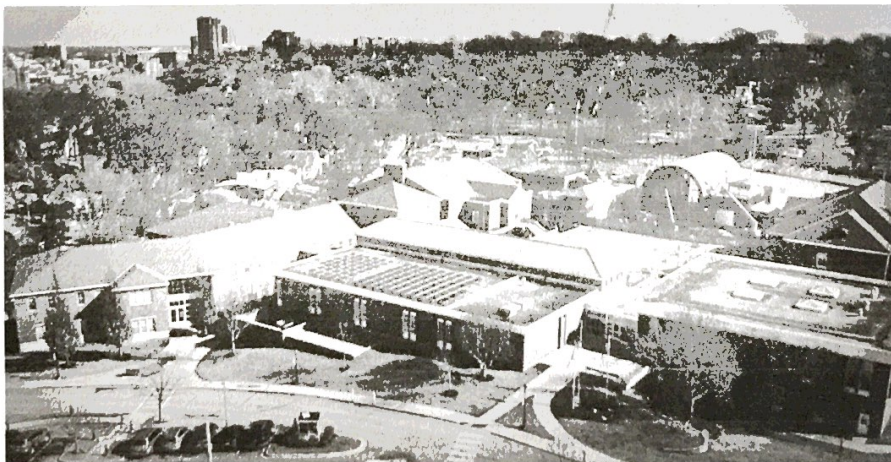


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“It’s sickening,” said one Jewish parent, who was one of three who spoke to The Star on the condition of anonymity because they worried about reprisals against their children. “It would be one thing if this were an isolated incident. But it’s a pattern, and I don’t understand why discipline isn’t enacted on a student who does this sort of thing.”

In a letter to parents Wednesday, Brad Shelley, the head of school, said that in addition to the swastika, an offensive reference toward members of the school’s LGBT community was found in another classroom in Pembroke’s high school that day.

School officials declined to give specifics on what exactly was left in the classrooms. They also declined to say whether they have identified the person responsible or if any disciplinary action would be taken.



Pembroke Hill School, 5121 State Line Road, is contending with incidents of anti-Semitism. Rich Sugg
RSUGG@KCSTAR.COM

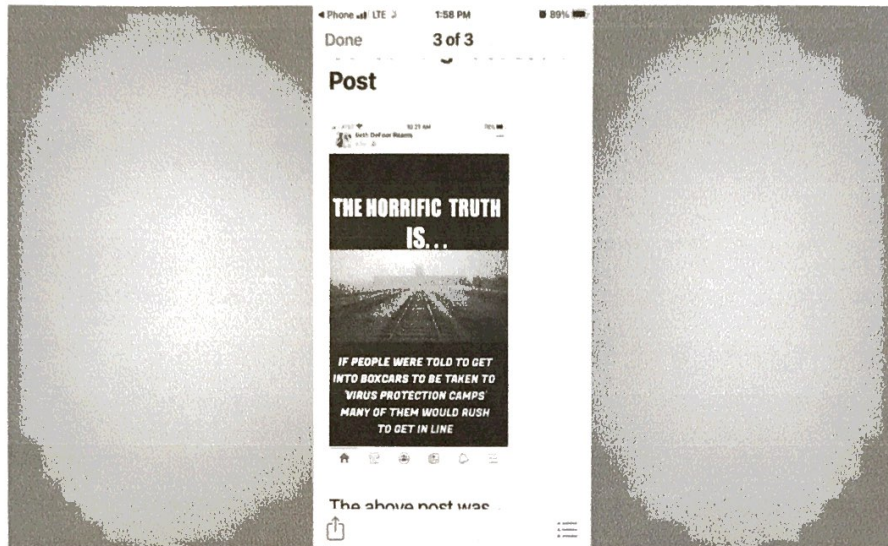
The letter said the school is “focusing on how we can use this situation to further educate our community and to help our students gain an understanding of the pain inflicted by intolerance and the importance of being empathetic to others. ... There is no place at Pembroke Hill for hatred or any actions or symbols that reinforce any forms of bigotry.”

Parents told The Star that a few years ago they faced several incidents of anti-Semitic

behavior at Pembroke, including swastikas drawn on a Jewish student's locker and a bathroom wall. One student raised his arm in a Nazi salute while calling a Jewish student an offensive name.

Last summer, a Pembroke teacher posted on a private Facebook page a photo of train tracks leading to the [Auschwitz concentration camp](#) with the words: "The horrific truth is ... if people were told to get into boxcars to be taken to 'virus protection camps' many of them would rush to get in line."

Parents say the teacher is still at Pembroke.



Screenshot of a Pembroke Hill teacher's 2020 Facebook post about the coronavirus pandemic. FACEBOOK

"You would think that any form of anti-Semitic behavior would be swiftly and severely dealt with," another parent said. "Pembroke should be the shining light of everything positive. But they sweep things under the rug. If you don't send a message that hate is wrong on any level you are actually enabling it."

In his email to parents, Shelley said the school had observed Holocaust Remembrance Day, held on Jan. 27, the anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. The letter did not say how the school commemorated the day.

After the swastika incident, the email said, the high school's principal, Mike Hill, spoke to an assembly of students about unity and "the impact of all slurs and symbols of hate" and the need to build a climate in which all individuals in the school "feel respected, cared for and safe."



Brad Shelley, head of school at Pembroke Hill School. *PEMBROKE HILL SCHOOL*

At the assembly, the school showed a video created by several students after they learned about the incident, followed by a discussion among students and school leaders.

Parents told The Star they are afraid to speak out for fear their children may end up targets in school. They said they were glad the head of school sent the email but hoped more would be done to educate not only at the high school but also in lower grades at the pre-K through 12th-grade school. According to [Pembroke's website](#), [tuition](#) at the high school is \$26,620 a year.

Last spring, then-senior Phinney Sachs, who is Jewish, delivered a speech to his graduating class with unity as its theme. "I think it is obviously pretty disappointing that this is happening," Sachs, now 19, told The Star. "It's disgusting, but it's not new. This is happening across the country."

At a school in Northern California last fall, [Jewish students were harassed online](#), and police launched an investigation to identify students who had started a list of all Jewish students in their high school

According to the Anti-Defamation League, Jewish organizations on hundreds of college campuses have reported [a significant rise in anti-Semitism since 2016](#).

But Sachs said he doesn't believe the students committing the acts at Pembroke truly understand the full implications of their actions.

"I think it is much more a product of ignorance than actual hatred," he said. Sachs said he believes education could change attitudes at his alma mater, but "what is lacking is consistency."

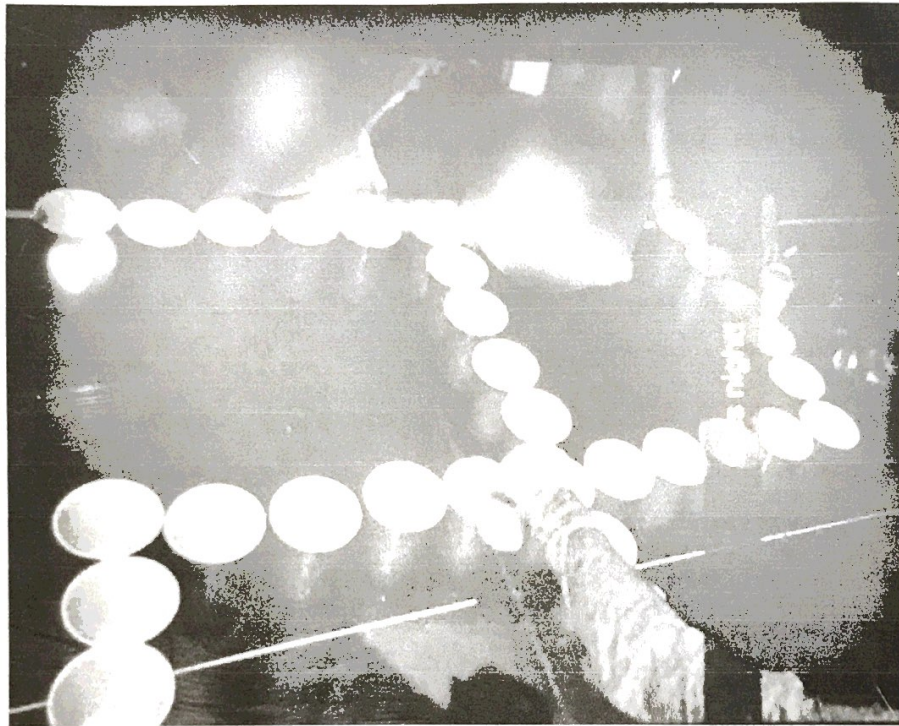
After the anti-Semitic incidents during his years at the high school, Sachs said, school leaders followed the same process they have this past week. They held an assembly and talked about the Holocaust and racism and not tolerating discrimination, "but there weren't extra steps taken to be proactive."

"Education comes between ignorance and hate, and it is the safeguard that prevents ignorance from growing into hate," Sachs said. "Education can bring empathy."

Private schools in Kansas City handle discrimination and racism much differently than public schools do.

The Pembroke incidents echo one in 2017 at [St. Teresa's Academy](#), an all-girls Catholic school. Nine students were seen on social media posing with their beer pong cups arranged in the [shape of a swastika](#). And a Black student complained about racial micro-aggressions there. The students involved were required to participate in a day of reflection, as well as several school discussions about acceptance, tolerance and forgiveness.

School leaders said they frowned on disciplining students and preferred using the incident as a teaching opportunity.



This photo of a swastika made up of beer pong cups has been altered to not reveal the St. Teresa's Academy girls involved. *FILE PHOTO*

By contrast, after a [noose made out of white shoestrings](#) was found hanging in a boys bathroom at a Platte County public school in 2019, officials moved to toughen discipline against students involved in racist behavior.

In 2017, Blue Springs South High School spent 90 man-hours investigating after a [racial slur was scrawled on a biracial student's paper](#). Officials declined to tell The Star how the perpetrator was disciplined. Last year, district officials changed policies to address teachers who are racially offensive and changed the curriculum to include conversations about race and culture.

And two years ago, the [Blue Valley school district fired a head dance coach](#) within 24 hours of learning about multiple incidents of racial discrimination against a member of the Blue Valley Northwest High School dance team.

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act protects students, including Jewish students, from discrimination based on race, color and national origin at public and other federally funded schools. Schools violate the law if they don't take immediate and appropriate action to respond to complaints of discrimination, including harassment or bullying.

This story was originally published January 31, 2021 5:00 AM.

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Mará Rose Williams is a member of The Kansas City Star Editorial Board. She has written on all things education for The Star since 1998, including issues of inequity in education, teen suicide, universal pre-K, college costs and racism on university campuses. She was a writer on The Star's 2020 "Truth in Black and White" project and the recipient of the 2021 Eleanor McClatchy Award.



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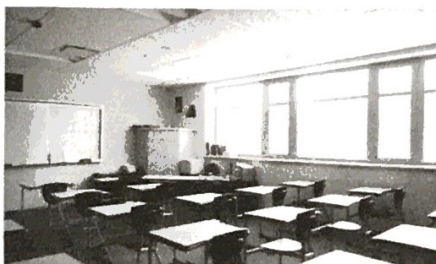
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"North Kansas City Schools was notified of allegations against a staff member regarding an inappropriate relationship with a student," a district spokeswoman said.

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