

Kennebunk High Racism Crisis

In March 2016 two students entered the classroom of Rosa Slack, a social studies teacher at Kennebunk High School. One wore a cape fashioned from a Confederate flag with the word “Redneck” scrawled down its middle. The other held a cell phone. It was USA Day of Spirit Week, a time of school-wide celebration. The first student circled the room, the flag waving off his shoulders. The second student secretly captured images of Slack’s reaction, which were later posted to social media.¹

Slack is black. The two students were white. This was not the first time these students had used the Confederate flag to intimidate a person of color, nor was it the first time Slack herself had been the target of racial hatred at Kennebunk High School, but when reports of this episode landed in the media nearly three years later it sparked a public outcry, prompting multiple investigations and calls for the superintendent to be put on administrative leave.

This crisis is ongoing: Just last week the school board hired a Boston law firm to investigate the district’s handling of allegations of race-based harassment and discrimination, as well as how systemic racism is impacting the school district. As such, this paper will focus primarily on sensemaking, decision making and coordinating, and meaning making aspects of this crisis, considering both the period before the public know of the March 2016 incident and after the crisis became acute.

The accounting and learning phases, meanwhile, are clearly still unfolding. Some effort will be made to examine these aspects, but less emphasis will be paid here. This examination perhaps represents part of the learning process, as it aimed at exploring what assumptions led RSU 21 and Kennebunk High School to stumble in foreseeing, understanding and handling this crisis as it unfolded over multiple years.

¹ (2019, February 17). Racist incident at Kennebunk school grows into wider conflict Retrieved May 3, 2019, from <https://www.pressherald.com/2019/02/17/racially-tinged-incident-at-kennebunk-school-grows-into-wider-conflict/>

The Crisis: By the time the incident made newspapers Slack had already left Kennebunk. After two years of feeling frustrated, marginalized and targeted by RSU 21 administrators, and Superintendent Katie Hawes in particular, Slack took a social studies job in Portland in 2018. She then filed a complaint with the Maine Human Rights Commission alleging race-based discrimination and whistleblower retaliation.

It was that complaint that led to the media coverage, but that complaint was based on more than just the March 2016 incident. In fall of 2015, Slack's first year at Kennebunk High School, a student told a staff member they felt like burning Slack's house down. When Slack reported the statement to administrators the student was removed from her class but not otherwise disciplined. The student was eventually found guilty in criminal proceedings. The school, however, had done nothing.

The two students involved in the March 2016 incident were friends with that student. These students were also involved in harassing a student of color, again on USA Day of Spirit Week, again without disciplinary action.

Slack's complaint cited the breadth of these incidents, as well as a lack of support and eventual retaliation by school administrators that followed after she made efforts to assert her rights and stand up to these incidents of racial intimidation: "KHS's administration not only failed to investigate appropriately, but actively covered up the extent of the harassment," she said in the complaint. School officials did not respond to reports of racism, grew hostile after Slack requested bias training, and eventually retaliated against her in performance reviews. "The protracted, humiliating summative evaluation process affected me deeply," she wrote, "bringing back the pain of being threatened by [a student], being harassed with the Confederate flag by his friends, failing to receive support from RSU 21 following both incidents, learning that RSU 21 had allowed pervasive harassment of a black student to persist at Middle School of the Kennebunks and KHS (where I planned to send my own children when they were old enough), and of being attacked for 'wasting student time' and accused of being unprofessional for trying to help fulfill the mission of the KHS Civil Rights Team."²

According to the complaint and the subsequent news reports (which, it must be noted, rely heavily on the complaint), Slack made repeated requests for bias training both for students and for staff. She also set up a Civil Rights Team, "a school-based group of students that works with

² (2019, February 18). Racist intimidation, cover-up alleged at Kennebunk High - News Retrieved May 3, 2019, from <https://www.seacoastonline.com/news/20190218/racist-intimidation-cover-up-alleged-at-kennebunk-high>

faculty advisors to identify and address issues of bias in their school communities,” aimed at working on these issues in the school communities.

These efforts did not get the support of school officials: “I was told very matter-of-factly by (Hawes, the superintendent) that I was too dumb to know what I was doing,” Slack said in an email to a reporter. “I was humiliated relentlessly and repeatedly by someone who had the power to do so, to the point that the harassment, coupled with a charge and conviction of a student terrorizing me, made me realize that my place of work and my home were not safe. I could not live and raise my family in the Kennebunk community.”

Over this period Slack watched as her insistence on her rights impacted her performance reviews: A teacher for two decades and a former assistant principal, for the first time ever Slack received a “below proficient” assessment in several annual review categories. The review questioned whether she “is a team player,” citing “an incident during the 2015-16 school year.” Slack received amended evaluations containing “falsehoods and unfair characterizations,” and her final review described her as “less than proficient in the categories for ‘Integrity and ethical conduct,’ ‘Decision making,’ and ‘Compliance with school and district regulations.’”

“It was clear to me that the superintendent intended to send a message that she did not approve of my opposition to race discrimination, that my future at KHS was in danger because of it, and that RSU 21 was not going to change its ways to protect its black students and faculty from harassment,” Slack said.

So Slack left the district. A short time later she filed a complaint. Then came the newspapers.

The Coverage: News of these events first hit the media on February 17, 2019, in a sprawling story in the Maine Sunday Telegram. The story documents the March 2016 incident, as well as the other incidents of racism at Kennebunk High. A parent is quoted saying the school refused to deal with repeated harassment, so eventually they went to the courts to get restraining orders. The story documents Slack’s version of the struggle with RSU 21 administrators, noting particular the position of RSU 21 Superintendent Kathryn Hawes. Slack reports being bullied and belittled by her supervisor, as well as fearing for her job. Hawes was also quoted, but comes off as cold and bureaucratic in the face of racism and threats of violence.

The story was also featured on the website Seacoast Online, which covers the Kennebunk area. The reporting is less thorough and less dramatic, but Slack still comes across as a sympathetic. Other stories have been published since, but this first piece served as a turning point, the moment the crisis shifted from latent to acute.

“Effective crisis navigation requires leaders to prepare themselves and their organizations to deal with this challenge well ahead of the moment when they find themselves in the ‘hot seat’ of crisis.”

– Boin et al.

Sensemaking

Sensemaking is the act of detecting an emerging threat. It is a leadership responsibility, one that requires leaders be wary for the possibility of crises. They must be forward thinking, able to interpret movement on the horizon effectively, and aware of the possible risks ahead. In this instance it is clear school officials were not adequately educated, experienced or prepared for a crisis involving issues of race and discrimination. Why not?

First, it is important to note where this incident occurred: In a primarily white school in a white town in one of the least diverse states in the nation. Kennebunk High School has an almost entirely white teaching staff and administration. When Slack joined KHS in summer 2015 she was one of two teachers of color. The student body is similarly limited — roughly a dozen students are black or biracial out of 710.

Given such demographics, administrators had limited skills in and understanding of issues of racism, equity and bias. School officials were blind to issues of discrimination and structural racism, even as they were pointed out by staff. School officials lacked training and experience necessary to understand and deal with issues of diversity.

Maine has long avoided racism concerns, largely through a historical want of diversity. That does mean the state was free of racism, but instead protected from rebuke by the dominant (white) culture. Whiteness held so much cultural sway that few challenges to white narratives emerged. One of the excuses for the March 2016 incident, for example, was that the students were “just joking around,” a classic tactic for dismissing racism. In a majority white environment such excuses sometimes pass without scrutiny, but one person of color in a position of power or a white person fluent in the language of bias and structural racism would have challenged such whitewashing. This is what Slack tried to do for two years, but her efforts fell on deaf ears at the leadership team.

A diverse, educated administration could have easily had the tools to comprehend what was happening at Kennebunk High School and responded differently. But the administration lacked such eyes, and as a result their sensemaking capacity was hamstrung. They held tightly to perspectives informed by white privilege, not equity, and as a result lost a capable educator, face

multiple investigations, and suffered tremendous damage to their reputation. They walked straight into this crisis, utterly unaware.

Such ignorance is not excusable, but it is important to note the key incident occurred in March 2016, a moment where conversations around structural racism was just beginning in white communities. The Trump election, the Charlottesville riots in 2017, the rise of white supremacy and white nationalism globally, and the spate of police shootings and retaliatory violence in summer 2016 all happened after this incident. In March 2016 things were different — a black man sat in the Oval Office, and racial tension was only bubbling. It had not yet exploded. National questions about structural racism were not yet common. As such, it is perhaps understandable that RSU 21 officials lacked perspective at that time to understand what had transpired.

By February 2019, however, such conversations on race were widespread. It seems reasonable that sometime in the intervening years a member of the RSU 21 administration might have started to shift their perspective, and that a recognition might have arose. New understandings around issues of racism might have given renewed consideration to these incidents, though it can often be hard for leadership to change direction once a narrative has formed.

And that's exactly what happened. When the news first broke Superintendent Katie Hawes released the following in a statement: "Many of you may have read the article in last Sunday's Maine Sunday Telegram headlined 'Racist Incident at Kennebunk School Grows into Wider Conflict,' trying to make the case that our District has not taken incidents of racial bias seriously. This is simply not true. RSU 21 has zero tolerance for discrimination or harassment in any form."³ Hawes saw the issue as bullying, not racism. Despite marchers chanting "Jews will not replace us!" on the streets of American cities, the school district was unwilling to re-examining its position on. Their capacity for sensemaking was trapped by old and simplistic understandings, blinded by a narrative that placed more blame on Slack for being troublesome than on the students behaving in racist ways.

That inability to see Slack's point of view, however, was not shared by the residents of the district. Upon learning of the incident they did their own sensemaking, and it didn't match that of RSU 21 leadership. When residents read about the March 2016 incident, and the other episodes documented by the newspaper, they were outraged. One week after Hawes published her statement the school board held an emergency meeting to a packed room. At first they said they would allow no public comment, but the public demanded an opportunity to speak. It was at this

³ (2019, February 18). Response to Maine Sunday Telegram Article - RSU 21. Retrieved May 4, 2019, from <https://www.rsu21.net/news/2019/2/18/qbiqm1r221w77md1wbss944xqmmkld>

point that the district began to re-examine its understanding of what had occurred at KHS. Superintendent Hawes read a statement about racism at the school that included the following: "I have learned that the issue is far more pervasive in our community, district and schools than I was aware."

It took three years, a lost teacher, a complaint to the Maine Human Rights Commission, a newspaper article and public outrage for RSU 21 leadership to gain an understand the nature of a crisis that the public understood immediately. A staff member had been saying for three years that racism was a problem, but they were closed to that possibility. Leadership sensemaking in this case was deeply flawed, hamstrung by ingrained narratives. As a result, an incident (and crisis) that could have been addressed immediately through a handful of all-school assemblies and schoolwide bias training exploded.

“Leadership in crisis response will inevitably require a two-pronged strategy: dealing with the events “on the ground” (whether literally as in natural disasters or metaphorically as in an economic crisis) and dealing with the political upheaval and instability triggered by these events. Neglecting one or the other is detrimental to any attempt to exercise public leadership in a crisis.”

– Boin et al.

Decision making and coordinating

Leaders are tasked with responding to crises. In this instance, however, the only response from leadership was to shuffle students around and resist calls for a school- or district-wide conversation about racism. But non-action is a decision, and that non-action led to a wider crisis at RSU 21: The heart of the Slack complaint was not the original March 2016 incident, or any of the other incidents involving students, but the lack of support from school officials and administrators when these incidents were brought to light.

Prior to February 2019, RSU 21 did not think it faced a crisis, so it did not deal with the crisis. To that point the district successfully avoided any public discourse, and through avoidance it managed to postpone any significant political upheaval. In spring of 2017 Rachel Phipps, a member of the community, did learn of the Slack incident, which prompted her to run for a seat on the school board. She campaigned on issues of diversity and equity, and won. Her candidacy is the only indication of any discord. For a time RSU 21 effectively navigated the crisis by pushing it under the rug. And due to ineffective sensemaking, that crisis was understood as a problem teacher, not school racism.

That all changed on February 17, 2019. From that point on the district was clearly facing a crisis, and leaders stepped into action. Their first effort, however, were not in response to a racism crisis, but a public relations crisis. As noted above, Superintendent Hawes’ immediate response was to deny the complaint. She also said the report included “a number of factual errors and unfairly casts the RSU 21 school community in a negative light.” She went on frame the issue as one of bullying, not racism, and criticized Slack for going public about her Maine Human Rights Commission complaint: “I do not think it is appropriate to try this case in the media.” The lack of sensemaking and nuanced understanding of what was occurring continued for at least a short period after the first public unveiling.

A week later, however, at the February 25 emergency public meeting, the tenor of the response had shifted. The district was no longer attacking Slack or the story, and instead moved to

responding with mortification and corrective action. Sensemaking at the district had come into line with the public interpretation of events. Hawes also stepped up as a communicator and began taking an active role in public discourse: On February 27, two days after the emergency school board meeting, she released a letter that began: “Thank you to all of the community members, students, and district staff that came out on Monday night. It is clear that our community is heartbroken, but hopefully, through our grief, we can work together to rebuild a solid foundation based on respect and inclusion, regardless of backgrounds.”

The letter goes on for more than a page, outlining the district’s plan to enlist help wrestling with these issues and immediate steps for community conversations.

The very next day Hawes released another letter, this one addressed to “Friends of RSU 21” that outlined more school-wide steps, as well as further measures involving the community: “Today marked a positive day of moving toward a better future at KHS as teachers and students gathered in the KHS Theater for two assemblies during their advisory block. The difficulties and circumstances expressed in the media over the last few weeks were acknowledged. We used an outline of the student survey to provide an opportunity for students to ask questions; identify what we do well within the curriculum, in clubs and advisories; identify areas, occurrences, and issues that we need to be aware of; and provide input on future steps. The district’s draft Diversity, Equity and Inclusion plan was shared and explained. During advisory block tomorrow (Friday) we will continue the discussion and allow time for students to complete the survey.”

Not only was this effort aimed at the school, but at the community as well: “Next Monday district administration will be hosting a gathering, bringing together our three Town Managers, other leaders from the town offices, and members of local faith based organizations. Recognizing that the diversity, equity, and inclusion issues that we are struggling with affect all aspects of our community, this gathering will be an opportunity for us to collaborate and strategize on what part we all need to play in finding positive solutions for moving forward.”

The letter is signed by Hawes, and indicates there will be another school assembly at the middle school the next day to discuss these same issues. There are also letters from March 1, March 5, and March 8, all hosted on a new webpage dedicated to diversity, equity and inclusion.⁴

In less than two weeks the school district went from prolonged non-action to hosting community conversations on issues of diversity, equity and inclusion and regular communication about actions taken. Superintendent Hawes shifted in a week from denying the crisis that began three

⁴ (n.d.). Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion-Maine Regional School Unit 21 - RSU 21. Retrieved May 4, 2019, from <https://www.rsu21.net/diversity-equity-and-inclusion>

years earlier to aggressively dealing with the crisis and communicating regularly with all stakeholders.

Those efforts have not fully contained the political upheaval, however: On April 1 former RSU 21 school board member Norm Archer called for Superintendent Hawes to be put on administrative leave. On March 18 the school board decided to conduct two investigations — one targeted, one broad — to address questions of racism and discrimination within the school district and how these issues were handled by administrators. The first investigation is expected to cost around \$50,000. No figures were released for second investigation. On April 29 the board hired Boston-based Sanghavi Law Office to serve as an independent investigator.

A critical question the first investigation will likely consider is the role Hawes played in the Slack incident, and whether Slack's treatment was appropriate. Whether or not Hawes weathers this crisis is likely contingent upon these findings, which are not due to until August 2019 at the earliest.

Once the issues were made public and the district was forced to reckon with its role in perpetuating racism and discrimination, Hawes proved an effective leader and a strong communicator. Is that belated response enough? Will she be excused for her treatment of Slack and her lack of perception and understanding on issues of bias and discrimination? Or will the political upheaval cost her her job? These questions remains to be answered.

“Crises are in the eye of the beholder.”

– Boin et al.

Meaning making

This analysis has already discussed the shift in communication strategy employed by RSU 21, and in particular Superintendent Katie Hawes, whose name and signature was at the end of every letter posted following the February 25 meeting. Further consideration of the topic is important, however, to evaluate the role of the media in framing this crisis.

The February 17 article in the Maine Sunday Telegram was a turning point. Before its publication Slack had tried repeatedly to force the district to engage in meaningful conversations about discrimination, to no avail. One article changed that. It sparked the public outcry that forced RSU 21 leadership to reconsider long-held positions on narrative and sensemaking. Within two weeks of publication, the district went from fighting Slack at every turn to aggressively implementing her vision despite her absence from the district.

It is important, however, to again note the timing. The February 17 article did not happen in a vacuum. An article on race and racism in 2019 is poised to carry an impact different from past years, even white places like Kennebunk and Maine. The nature of race conversations has changed. The reality of America’s corrosive race relations is beginning to be widely acknowledged even by those long protected from self-examination, and as a result the burden of equity no longer falls solely on people of color. Racially-motivated violence is on the rise⁵, and it is no longer possible for white people and majority white places to remain blissfully unaware through ignorance and privilege. White people are growing aware of the stretch and reach of racism, and they are speaking up about it.

This was not the case even three years ago when Slack was still at Kennebunk High School. The February 17 article came at a moment where white people were ready to hear and give credence to stories of oppression, and through study had developed enough of an understanding of structural racism to unpack the reality of what had happened. The news article fit within a collective narrative, one that includes leaders of the Blaine House and the White House and other institutions of power nationwide, where coded language and structurally racist policies to perpetuate white supremacy. Writers like Bryan Stevenson, Ta-Nehisi Coates and Michelle

⁵ (2018, November 13). Hate Crimes Increase for the Third Consecutive Year, F.B.I. Reports Retrieved May 4, 2019, from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/11/13/us/hate-crimes-fbi-2017.html>

Alexander had given white americans enough vocabulary and appreciation of the tools of ingrained white supremacy to inform an understanding of Slack's experience. The community, though white, was no longer blind. They were able to see through the thin veil that has always shielded structural racism and allowed it to endure.

This shift is subtle, and built on a new understanding of the word RACIST. No longer a noun — a cartoonish Klansman in a white sheet, or a Nazi skinhead — the modern understanding of racist is a verb, an action, something anyone can do. It is not an ideology, a defining characteristic, but something that plays out between everyday people. It lives small actions, is there and gone, ephemeral, and yet there all the time.

This more fluid understanding of racism has shifted long-established perceptions of society, even among white people. No one ever wanted to be a racist, but now what it means to be racist is changing, and people are understanding it lives in most of us, even in people of color. What was once difficult to understand now makes sense for many Americans, white and black. White people are no longer blinded, recognizing the racism in themselves, their society, and in institutions. The old excuses ("He was just joking around") no longer pass.

This changed landscape mattered in RSU 21. The story of Slack's experience did not fall on deaf ears because of a wide array of media, not just one article. School administrators lacked a nuanced understanding of race and racism, but residents of the Kennebunk community understood. The public instantly recognized what had happened, the bias inherent in it, and they spoke out, loudly. The community was informed and versed in modern understandings because of black writers, diverse media, and access to conversations taking place outside white communities. When it came time to recognize discrimination, microaggressions and structural racism, the task was clear.

School administrators, meanwhile, tried to push against this tide with simple narratives. They did not share the informed perspectives of their community members. They quickly found, however, that they could not compete. They were then forced into new understandings.

So while the February 17 story is worth noting, it is crucial to recognize it followed an atmospheric change around conversations on race. White narratives have been upended by research, scholarship and writing from new quarters. Flawed history is being revised, and the full telling is making it as far into White America as Kennebunk. These new narratives primed the community to understand Slack's story and shape their understanding of it.

Distractions and other considerations

While Slack was nearing the end of her tenure and struggling with school administrators, RSU 21 faced two other serious crises: A Kennebunk High health teacher accused of sexual assault by a student, and a principal forced into retirement that led to public outcry and the eventual reinstatement after board intervention.

How many crises can an organization handle at one time? In order to fully consider the racism crisis it is important to remember there is only so much organizational bandwidth for dealing with emergency situations. Could Superintendent Hawes effectively heard Slack and navigated her concerns had these other crises not been happening? Did the strain of navigating several crisis lead to less than excellent leadership? Was this a case of crisis fatigue that impacted the superintendent's decision making? Also, why were there so many issues at Kennebunk High School? Was there something in the culture of the school that left it plagued by crises?

If so, it is unlikely to have originated with Hawes: Superintendent Hawes was hired in February 2015. Her first year with the school was the 2015-2016, the same year Slack joined the school, the same year as the March 2016 incident. Hawes was not an experienced superintendent when in her first months she faced a complicated racial incident, then another a few months later. Nor was she experienced when there was a sexual assault allegation, which she would have been dealing with while also negotiating with Slack. Over the intervening years tension with Slack persisted. Did other crises take precedence?

Was this a dysfunctional district that Hawes inherited, or is it normal for a school district to have multiple major incidents over the course of three years? These questions are beyond the scope of this paper. But a fair evaluation of RSU 21's handling of the Slack situation would be incomplete without noting the other crises, which could have limited leadership capacity, or, alternatively, been an indication of overall culture of the district and point to the district's dysfunction.

Accounting, Learning, and Conclusions

The three ongoing investigations — two at the district, one at the Maine Human Rights Commission — are likely to inform both the accounting and the learning aspects of this crisis. It seems reasonable to point out this crisis did in fact realign priorities at the district around issues of race and discrimination. The rapid turnaround of RSU 21 leadership in their handling of this crisis, and their aggressive actions in recent months serve as evidence of the district moving towards closure. Clearly more time is needed, but some amount of learning has occurred, and new policies and practices around race are being instituted.

There may yet still be fallout as a result of the long delay in responding. It will have to wait for the conclusion of the various investigations, however, to see how far reaching those are. There are also bound to be economic impacts for the district, both in the cost of the investigations but also in any findings of fault from the Maine Human Rights Commission. These are part of the accounting, and they may serve to drive home the importance of learning on these issues for school districts statewide.

The real question, then, is not about RSU 21, but is more general. It is a question for white communities and majority-white institutions looking to avoid RSU 21's experience: Is it possible to reckon with structural racism without a Slack-like crisis? What does it take to convince a community or an institution to engage in meaningful conversations on race, equity and discrimination proactively, rather than in the face of public outrage and years of failure?

These conversations are happening in Maine, but mostly in places like Westbrook, Portland, South Portland and Lewiston — places where demographic change is forcing the issue, places facing Slack-style crises of their own. In most Maine towns, however, white is still the norm, and there is little exploration of these issues. Like Kennebunk three years ago, they remain blissfully unaware of the potential for serious problems on the horizon.

What would it take to raise the profile of race-related issues so these places do not suffer the same fate? Will the fate of Kennebunk High School be prominent enough for other school districts to start proactively wrestling with questions of bias and discrimination? It seems unlikely. These complex issues are difficult to launch into without a motivating event. While some forward-thinking superintendent might see Kennebunk and decide to make changes in their own district, most will likely need their own incident to make changes. But perhaps in the wake of Slack it will happen at the equivalent of March 2016, and not wait for February 2019.

Kennebunk High School Crisis Timeline

February 2015 — RSU 21 hires Superintendent Katie Hawes.

Summer 2015 — Rosa Slack, a black female educator with 20 years experience, leaves a social studies position at Old Orchard Beach to take a job at Kennebunk High School, a predominantly white school with roughly two dozen black or multiracial students out of a total enrollment of 710, about 3 percent. Slack's background includes working as a social studies teacher, an assistant principal, and a director of academic affairs.

Fall 2015 — A student tells an education technician he feels like burning Slack's house down. Slack immediately reports the threat to the KHS administration and files a police report.

The student is removed from Slack's class.

According to Slack, "to my knowledge, KHS never independently investigated the threat or took any action other than to remove him from my class."

March 2016 — A friend of the first student enters Slack's classroom on USA Day of Spirit Week with a Confederate flag with the word "Redneck" written on it draped over his shoulders. A third student videotapes Slack's reaction. Slack asks the student to remove the flag and takes it to the administrative office. The students post the video to social media.

Slack later emails administrators to report what happened, as well as a report from a black freshman student who said "those same boys paraded that same flag in front of me last year." The student also reports a student told her he wanted to "kill all the blacks" while at Kennebunk Middle School the year before.

Both students are suspended.

Fall 2016 — Slack forms a Civil Rights Team at Kennebunk High School, "a school-based group of students that works with faculty advisors to identify and address issues of bias in their school communities." Slack serves as one of two faculty advisors. The Team wants to send a letter in support of Casco Bay High School students following a racial incident at that school, but Principal Sue Cressey tells the team RSU 21 Superintendent Katie Hawes "decided we could not send the letter." After an in-person meeting, the letter is sent on non-KHS stationery.

Slack requests anti-bias training and banning the Confederate flag from school grounds. Administrators decline.

Fall 2016 to Spring 2018 — At annual evaluation for the first time in her 20-year career, Slack is assessed as "below proficient" in several categories, questioning whether she "is a team player" and citing "an incident during the 2015-16 school year." Slack receives amended evaluations that "contained falsehoods and unfair characterizations."

Spring 2017 — Upon learning of the March 2016 incident, Rachel Phipps runs for and wins a seat on the RSU 21 Board of Directors.

June 2017 — The student accused of saying he felt like burning Slack's house down was found guilty in criminal proceedings.

June 12, 2017 — Student accuses former Kennebunk High School health teacher Jill Lamontagne of sexual assault. Text messages and social media messages are part of the case.

Spring 2018 — Slack fears for her job. Her evaluation calls her "less than proficient in the categories for 'Integrity and ethical conduct,' 'Decision making,' and 'Compliance with school and district regulations.'" "It was clear to me that the superintendent intended to send a message that she did not approve of my opposition to race discrimination, that my future at KHS was in danger because of it, and that RSU 21 was not going to change its ways to protect its black students and faculty from harassment."

June 2018 — Slack leaves Kennebunk High School for a position in Portland.

July 26, 2018 — Former Kennebunk High School teacher Jill Lamontagne is acquitted of 14 charges of sexual misconduct with a student.

August 16, 2018 — Kennebunk High School principal Sue Cressey submits intent to retire at the end of the 2018-2019 school year.

When asked if the Lamontagne case played a role in Cressey's resignation, Hawes replies, "I can tell you that it would be rare that there would be one incident to recommend non-renewal. More often it is patterns of similar issues. Personnel issues are very private."

Fall 2018 — Residents and colleagues voice concern Cressey is being forced out by RSU 21 Superintendent Katie Hawes.

January 3, 2019 — RSU 21 Board of Directors vote unanimously to allow Cressey to withdraw her resignation.

January 28, 2019 — RSU 21 Board of Directors votes 9 to 3 to a settlement that keeps Cressey with the district through June 2020. Rachel Phipps is one of the opposition votes.

February 17, 2019 — Portland Press Herald publishes account of the incident documenting repeated humiliation by RSU 21 Superintendent Katie Hawes following a formal complaint filed by Slack at the Maine Human Rights Commission.

February 18, 2019 — RSU 21 Superintendent Katie Hawes issues a statement saying the district is being unfairly cast in a negative light and "takes all complaints seriously, investigates them, and takes prompt effective remedial action."

"Discrimination, harassment and bullying are issues that all school districts struggle with and RSU 21 is no exception," the statement says, adding the district has been arranging an "equity audit" to understand where to target anti-bias training and how to provide the most effective training possible.

"I signed an agreement with the Maine Human Rights Commission to keep information exchanged during its investigation of Rosa Slack's complaint confidential as did Ms. Slack. I believe I am bound by that agreement and I do not think it is appropriate to try this case in the media," Superintendent Hawes said.

"RSU 21 takes all complaints seriously, investigates them, and takes prompt effective remedial action."

February 25, 2019 — Hundreds turn out to a special school board meeting about the March 2016 incident, and about concerns of racism more generally within the school district. RSU 21 Superintendent Hawes reads a statement at the start of the meeting that includes: "I have learned that the issue is far more pervasive in our community, district and schools than I was aware."

March 18, 2019 — School board announces two investigations, one targeted, one broad, to address questions of racism within the school district. Cost estimates for the first investigation: \$30,000 to \$50,000. No figures are released for second investigation.

April 1, 2019 — Former RSU 21 school board member Norm Archer calls for Superintendent Hawes to be put on administrative leave.

April 29, 2019 — School board votes unanimously to hire Boston-based Sanghavi Law Office to investigate RSU 21's handling of allegations of race-based harassment and discrimination, as well as systemic racism in school districts.

January 2020 — Deadline for Maine Human Rights Commission investigation.