



RSU 23
Old Orchard Beach School Department
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September 28, 2021

Dear RSU 23 Community,

Yesterday a student brought several do-rags to school to share with classmates. A do-rag is a close-fitting cloth cap tied around the top of the head. Late in the school day we observed several students wearing the do-rags. Some questions arose among staff members as to whether do-rags were appropriate to wear in school.

After school, we contacted University of Southern Maine Professor Rebecca Nisetich. She serves as co-chair for the Intercultural and Diversity Advisory Council to the USM President, and leads antiracist practice groups for faculty, staff, and USM leadership to discuss the clothing question and gather more information. We scheduled a Zoom meeting for this morning at 10 AM. This morning prior to the meeting with Dr. Nisetich, I was alerted to an Instagram post that depicted several of our students wearing do-rags in a photo while smiling and demonstrating hand signals. I immediately met with and explained to the student who posted the picture how the image could be interpreted. He was apologetic and took down the post.

I then attended the scheduled meeting with Dr. Nisetich, along with Elizabeth Roe, our Guidance Director, and Dean Plante, our Athletic Director. We learned that our students wearing the do-rags can be considered cultural appropriation. Cultural appropriation is the unacknowledged or inappropriate adoption of an element or elements of one culture or identity by members of another culture or identity. I want to be clear that although our students participated unwittingly in an action we now know is inappropriate given the Instagram post, we believe that these behaviors were not racially motivated in any way.

The students involved in this situation listened intently as I explained what was learned and why their actions were inappropriate. They were accountable, apologetic, and helpful in sharing ideas as to how we can approach greater education and understanding. They are eager to use this as an opportunity to learn and I am proud of them.

Our students could have made a better choice, and we have to do a better job of educating ourselves. We will use this incident as an opportunity to learn and grow. We are first and foremost an educational community who takes pride in our ability to experience these moments and use them to expand our knowledge. Our schools will be better as a result of this occurrence. Thanks for reading and please reach out to me with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John Suttie".

John Suttie
RSU 23 Superintendent of Schools
Principal, Old Orchard Beach High School