



## Examining Suspension and Expulsion in the Burlington School District

Photo Courtesy of Amanda Dandridge, 2008. Hunter Dandridge died of SUDEP (a fatal complication of epilepsy) one month after his expulsion from Burlington High School. In an interview with BLMVT, his mother, Amanda told the story of his difficulties with the disciplinary systems at Burlington Public Schools.

In 1998, an elementary school student was crossing the street, looking for his friends. He asked his crossing guard about them.

“What do you mean, those two n\*\*\*\*\* you walk home with?” said the crossing guard. The boys to whom that crossing guard referred were two brothers, Hunter and Jackson Dandridge, a pair of Vermonters, aged 8 and 7 years respectively, who identify as biracial.

That was the beginning of many hardships that the Dandridge family has needed to endure in the face of Vermont racism. After this incident was reported to the school, that crossing guard was immediately fired. But this firing did not eradicate racism from Burlington Public Schools.

“All throughout there was always this underlying feeling of ‘your boy is naughty.’ Just a lot of stuff that I noticed that wasn’t concrete enough to say anything about or do anything about. For a long time I listened to the school and didn’t listen to my boys,” said Amanda Dandridge, mother of Hunter and Jackson in an interview with BLMVT.

Hunter would have graduated from Burlington High School in 2008. He was expelled from the high school for possession of marijuana during his senior year. One month later he died unexpectedly in his bed of an undiagnosed seizure disorder.

When Hunter was eight years old, his father died of cancer. He struggled with ADHD



Amanda Dandridge

and had some trouble in school. “He could be disruptive and was seen as a tough kid. A little outspoken. Leader of the pack,” Amanda said. As her son navigated school, he encountered multiple disciplinary situations “where he would be with other kids and they wouldn’t get in trouble,” Amanda said.

In fifth grade, Hunter’s teacher told him to remove a doo rag from his head because he “looked like a gang member.” Amanda said, “I told him to put it right back on.” Later, in a meeting with the teacher, Amanda said, “If you knew the damage you had done to my son, you never would have said that.”

Amanda admits that Hunter did some things for which he deserved consequences. At the request of a girl, Hunter waited for another boy after school and attacked him, Amanda said. He was suspended for that act. After that “he was definitely marked and watched

and one thing after another I was getting calls for lots of other reasons.”

Hunter received another suspension for possession of marijuana, at which point, Amanda said, he did get the same consequences as the white boy who was caught alongside him. Then in his senior year, a teacher smelled pot in the bathroom. “He and a white boy were both in there,” explained Amanda, “One boy had a two day suspension. Hunter was expelled.” A month later, he tragically died.

“Hunter was very popular. One of the most popular kids in the class,” Amanda said as she described what a huge loss it was for Hunter to face expulsion which took away the camaraderie he enjoyed at school. “His funeral was attended by a thousand people. A kid with disabilities came up to me and told me ‘Hunter was the only kid in the school that was nice to me’.”

“Whenever they would say ‘MOM, they are being racist.’ I would say, ‘Don’t you dare use that as your excuse.’ And I have a lot of guilt about that. A lot of guilt.”

## Suspension Profiles

*BLMVT member Adam McCullough interviewed two Students of Color from Burlington High School who have had adverse experiences with the subjective, arbitrary suspension protocol at BHS. To protect the privacy of the interviewees, their names have been changed.*

According to the BHS School Board’s [website](#), 30% of those suspended are Black, while Black students make up only 14% of the school’s population.

During the 2016-2017 school year, “Kiara” intervened to defend her brother from the verbal abuse of another BHS student. In response, school staff accused her of starting a fight with that student. “I literally did the opposite,” Kiara said. According to her, there was no investigation into the situation, and she was singled out as soon as staff members arrived on the scene. The school suspended a 9th-grade girl for standing up for her brother.

In a similar situation this school year, Kiara was in a verbal argument with another student. There was no physical contact between the two girls, but the argument was broken up by BHS staff and Kiara was sent home for an out of school suspension. The other girl, who is white, was not suspended.

I asked her what she wants the readership of this newsletter and the staff of BHS to know. “I want them to know,” Kiara said of her multiple suspensions, “this isn’t bettering my education. This isn’t bettering me as a person. This isn’t working out.”

Another BHS Student of Color who was suspended this year, “Darryl”, said he was given a 5-day suspension for an interaction that he had with a member of the school administration. The staff member wrongly interpreted a personal conversation between Darryl and a teacher. The sticking point for the administrator was that, as a senior member of the staff, he was entitled to listen in on any conversation in the school.

In defense of his privacy, Darryl resisted the idea of that administrator being in that conversation. Eager to go about his day, Darryl tried to get the conversation over with, but the administrator kept hammering home the point that he could listen to any conversation in the school. Finally in frustration, Darryl pounded his fist into his hand as he walked away from the administrator.

“This staff member knows I have anger issues. I tried to de-escalate the situation more than he did,” Darryl said. “You can see when someone is mad. You can’t try to push their buttons and escalate them until they blow up.” When asked how he wished the staff had handled the situation, Darryl said he’d rather have support to “deal with it so I can stay in school.”

Instead, Darryl was suspended for 5 days.

Black Lives Matter Vermont is concerned about the lack of a clear, consistent, and transparent suspension and expulsion policy in Vermont public schools. The statistics show that Students of Color are disproportionately excluded from class and education opportunities through these punitive disciplinary programs. Bringing equity to Vermont Schools is a pillar of BLMVT’s mission.

## Lack of Suspension and Expulsion Process Leaves Black Students Without Recourse

At the March 16th, 2017 [School Board meeting](#) for the Burlington School District (BSD), BLMVT members leveraged the public comment section of the meeting to bring up a critique of the school’s disciplinary system that bit to the core of the issue: There is no policy on the books which defines or regulates suspension and expulsion.

They pointed to agendas of the school board’s own Diversity and Equity committee on the BSD website, where the public can see that they are examining suspensions at every meeting. They asked that this group release more details to the public, including minutes from those meetings that reflect their plans to address disproportionate ratio of black students facing suspensions and expulsions. They also shared concerns that the reform policy that focused on [Restorative Practices](#) isn’t clear and lacks a sense of urgency that is required here. And they pointed out that there isn’t a clearly defined suspension and expulsion policy. They pointed out that there isn’t a standard, quantified set of criteria that justifies this kind of punitive or serious disciplinary action. There isn’t a policy to provide sufficient documentation

that individual students fulfill standard criteria. They said this gap in process and definition allows for systemic racism or prejudice or preference to affect the application of suspensions and expulsions. Lastly, BLMVT members also called for an accessible process to redact or reverse these punishments.

Yaw Obeng, superintendent of Burlington School District (BSD) said in the Thursday night meeting, “We don’t have consistent procedures around suspensions and expulsions.” He was ostensibly referring to the lack of a written policy guiding the hand of administrators in dealing with perceived disciplinary issues within the school.

At the same school board meeting, all present School Board Commissioners expressed their concern as well as their commitment to addressing role race plays within Burlington School District (BSD) disciplinary system. However, as BLMVT continues to push for reform, a pattern is emerging, where things aren’t changing fast enough.

Here’s what this means: when your child is suspended at Burlington High School, there is no policy the administrators can point to which gives them the power to do it. There is no defined way to appeal decisions. Likewise, there is no research they can point to which shows suspensions and expulsions are a best practice in achieving positive student outcomes. And while black students make up a small portion of the population, they are being suspended a disproportionate amount of the time. The Burlington School District now has the opportunity to put together a policy that allows protection and equity for students of color. All the school board members at the March 16th meeting supported the call for doing this work. BLMVT has formed a team to engage with the Burlington school system on multiple levels to push for these reforms.

## Become a Member of Black Lives Matter Vermont!

Black Lives Matter Vermont is a growing network of individuals, families and businesses invested in the liberation of Black Vermonters, and the deactivation of systemic racism endured by all people of color in our state. Membership is a way to help redistribute money in Vermont and offer resources to the fight for freedom and safety for Black people. It also is a way to build a network of information and support. Our goal is for 10% of Vermont to be members by 2018. It is a big, brave, and we believe, achievable goal.

Support the Transformation at [blacklivesmattervermont.com/membership/](https://blacklivesmattervermont.com/membership/)