

Students Called 'N-Word,' Threatened in Field Trip Slavery Re-Enactment, Parents Claim

The director of an educational program in Massachusetts has responded to the parents of a Hartford, Conn., student who claims she was called the "N-word" during a slavery re-enactment activity.

Seventh-graders at Hartford Magnet Trinity College Academy took a four-day trip last fall to Nature's Classroom, in which they participated in an Underground Railroad activity. Sandra and James Baker say their 12-year-old daughter was terrorized by staff during the re-enactment.

"They intentionally terrorized them and abused them on this field trip," Sandra Baker said in a WFSB report. "It's child abuse as far as I'm concerned."

James Baker told the board of education what his daughter told him, which was, "The instructor told me to run and they would whip me until I bled on the floor, and then either cut my Achilles so I couldn't run again or hang me."

Nature's Classroom on Friday responded to the accusations, saying the Underground Railroad activity has been offered for the last 20 years, and "almost 200 schools see it as a valuable extension of their classroom lessons, and request it as one of their many activities" in a statement posted on its website and Facebook page.

Executive Director John G. Santos explained in the statement, "During the Underground Railroad activity, we ask students to step into the role of an enslaved African trying to escape on

the Underground Railroad. Teachers, administrators and parents from the students' school act as conductors.

"Our goal is to introduce students to some of the complexities and difficulties surrounding slavery, understand the courage it took to run, the courage it took to assist those running, and to draw connection between discrimination and prejudice then and discrimination and prejudice today."

Santos went on, "We were shocked to hear some of the comments included in the complaint. Nature's Classroom does not condone the use of the n-word. We would have taken immediate disciplinary action, including dismissal, had we known of this concern."

Santos concluded the statement with an apology.

"If this complaint does turn out to be valid, we offer our sincerest apologies for the comments made," he said. "Our intention is to empower students to be positive leaders in the face of discrimination, prejudice and bullying in their own lives today. The reaction of this particular child and her family are clearly not in line with our goals for the activity, and we are deeply sorry that this was their experience."

In addition to the Underground Railroad activity, the Bakers say their daughter and other students were packed together in a dark room to simulate a slave ship. Sandra Baker says the school had not informed parents of the activity beforehand.

The Bakers have since taken their daughter from the school district and have filed complaints with the Department of Education, the Human Rights Commission and offices of civil rights.