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## Alta student learned ‘lesson’ about racism

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The teenager who sparked a racism probe at Alta High School when he wore what resembled a Ku Klux Klan hood is back in class. And his mother is speaking out in his defense, hoping the experience can be a catalyst for conversations with other children who may not fully understand the history and hurt of discrimination.

The boy's mother, who asked to remain anonymous to protect her son's identity, said he became caught up in the frenzy that surrounds the annual "spirit bowl" at Alta. Seniors dress in black, juniors in white and sophomores in red for a battle of the classes. Each class tries to show they have the most school spirit. Some students dye their hair, wear masks or flaunt capes.

The Alta High mother said her son found a shortened, white pillowcase with eye holes sitting on the bleachers and donned it when his friends encouraged a "whiteout." He didn't make the mask or bring it to school. When he ran onto the gym floor raising his arms in the air, she said, he was taunting seniors — not making a "Heil, Hitler" salute.

"Was he thinking about the Ku Klux Klan when he was at an assembly dressed to show school colors? No, he wasn't. He was only thinking juniors versus seniors," she said in an interview with The Salt Lake Tribune. "Is he thinking about it now? Yes he is. ... We're hoping he has learned from this. The single most important thing is that he has learned a very, very important lesson, and those around him have learned it, too."

As the district continues its investigation into other "serious incidents" of racism uncovered after the spirit bowl, Canyons Superintendent David Doty and other district officials are visiting Alta classrooms this week to let students know that racism, intimidation and bullying aren't tolerated at school. Students and employees are being encouraged to report acts of discrimination to the Canyons Office of Civil Rights and Accommodations.

Discussions have included the history of the KKK and why provoking images of the white-supremacist group is hurtful, said Jeff Haney, a Canyons spokesman.

The district has also expressed concerns about cheers of "white power" and "black power" at the spirit bowl, along with red-bedecked sophomores swinging their arms in a tomahawk chop, he said.

Alta High Principal Mont Widerberg and Assistant Principal Mark Montague have been placed on paid administrative leave during the investigation. Widerberg, who has worked in education for three decades, previously announced plans to leave Alta High at the end of this school year to take a job in the district office.

The principal initially suspended the junior who wore the KKK-like hood for one day, the boy's mother said. But later, the student was told he would have to wait until a disciplinary hearing, which was held Tuesday, for the suspension to be lifted. On Wednesday, her son was allowed to return to school after missing seven days of classes.

While the district hasn't specified the other "serious incidents" uncovered by the probe, two Alta students were disciplined for circulating a text message with a photo of a burning cross, a symbol historically used by the KKK to intimidate blacks, the week following the spirit-bowl incident. Those students were cited for an "unlawful act" in a school by Sandy police, said Lt. Craig Watson. The student who wore the KKK-like hood wasn't involved in that incident, but he was also cited by police for his behavior at the assembly.

"We're hoping to get the message out that if you do these stupid things, you're going to be charged criminally," Watson said. "This is something we don't want going on, not only at Alta High School, but in the city of Sandy, the state of Utah or anywhere else."

Sandy police, at the request of the Canyons district, have increased their presence at Alta High this week, backing up the usual lone officer at the school with two or three additional officers each day.

"We're taking an abundance of security precautions," Canyons spokeswoman Jennifer Toomer-Cook said. "As you can imagine, the nature of this investigation is sensitive."

Sam Cosby, whose son, Larz Cosby, voiced the initial complaint about the spirit-assembly incident, said his son has experienced some animosity from other students who disapprove of his decision to speak out. On Tuesday, a police officer at the school intervened when another student attempted to pick a fight with his son, Sam Cosby said.

"There have been statements made to him that he's the KKK. Things like that ... have been thrown at him in the halls," Cosby said. "The whole time, we have taken the approach of dealing with this calmly, peacefully and to our best ability. You try to be constructive. When you're dealing with race, religion, any type of a thing that has such a heavy connotation that comes along with it, it's kind of hard to be looked at as being constructive."

As part of its investigation, Haney said, Canyons also is looking at a number of threats and racial slurs that have been posted among nearly 1,000 comments now on Larz Cosby's blog about his reaction to the spirit-bowl incident. Those could run afoul of the district's cyberbullying and anti-discrimination policies.

But Haney said he couldn't disclose what other incidents of racism the district is examining.

Larz Cosby and the student who wore the white hood at the assembly had a face-to-face meeting Wednesday for the first time since the incident, the suspended student's mother said. Her son apologized for hurt feelings and the meeting had a "positive outcome" that established a "future bond."

Larz and Sam Cosby couldn't be reached for comment Wednesday evening.

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Canyons board meeting

The Canyons district board has invited the U.S. Department of Justice's Community Outreach Office to share information about how to teach students about racism and discrimination on Tuesday. An agenda will be posted online at [canyonsdistrict.org](http://canyonsdistrict.org).