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Investigation Underway As Parents, Players Accuse Cheyenne Football Coach of Bullying, Retaliation

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By Jennifer Kocher, Cowboy State Daily

The parents of some Cheyenne Central High School football players have been joined by two legislators in asking Laramie School District No. 1 to look into allegations of bullying and excessive verbal abuse by a coach toward student athletes at Central.

At least two parents also allege that after they told Central High administrators about their concerns surrounding Michael Apodaca, their children were targeted for retribution — prompting them to ask the school district itself to look into the allegations.

The lack of response by Cheyenne Central also moved Sen. Affie Ellis and Rep. Jared Olsen, both R-Cheyenne, to voice their concerns in a Nov. 30 letter to district Superintendent Margaret Crespo.

In their [joint letter](#), the legislators said they had received “multiple reports” from parents of student athletes regarding Apodaca’s conduct.

“Parents have expressed a lack of trust in the administrative process for addressing bullying complaints, and thus, have asked for our help to find protection for their children from an improper culture of harassment occurring on school grounds by Laramie County School District #1 (district) staff,” they said in the letter.

These complaints specifically, they continued, were related to “numerous reports that student athletes were subjected to abusive and personally degrading verbal attacks that went far beyond anything that could be construed as providing constructive athletic coaching.”

The legislators added although the abuse was seemingly targeted at select students, the whole team by extension suffered under a “persistent, abusive environment of harassment which affected every student athlete who witnessed such abuse.”

The letter continued to say Central High School Principal Fred George and Athletic Director Chad Whitworth took no action to resolve the issue, to the best of the legislators’ knowledge. Instead, athletes allege they were retaliated against for their parents’ complaints, including having their playing time reduced or being benched entirely.

Apodaca’s actions, the legislators said, were in violation of Wyoming’s Safe School Climate Act that prohibits harassment, intimidation or bullying.

Ellis told Cowboy State Daily that she had been contacted by at least three different parents who voiced concern that the process for looking into complaints about the coach was not being followed.

She added the retaliatory action taken against select students prompted her to intervene.

“We try to be respectful of local decisions and local school boards,” Ellis said, “but as a legislator, I thought it was appropriate to ask the district to weigh in given the parents’ need to stay anonymous out of fear of retaliation against their student athletes.”

Olsen, in a post on his Facebook page, said if the issue is not “properly addressed,” lawmakers may be prompted to take action to amend the Safe School Climate Act.

“The Wyoming Legislature is proud of its longstanding history against student harassment, intimidation, and bullying,” he wrote. “If there are gaps in our laws which fail to adequately protect our students, we need to make it a priority to address those gaps as soon as possible.”

Central High School Principal Fred George told Cowboy State Daily that the administration does not comment on any personnel issues.

“Egregious” Bullying

Speaking on the condition of anonymity out of fear that his son will be retaliated against, one father said his son was subject to “pretty egregious bullying” that went beyond what might be construed as productive feedback.

“(The coach) would embarrass or humiliate the kids for things that were unrelated to football and would do it in the locker room or on or off the field,” he said.

This included calling a player “dumb” or attacking an overconfident player by exposing his vulnerabilities in targeted attacks aimed at demeaning and embarrassing him in front of the other students.

Another father, who also asked to remain anonymous for the sake of his son’s position on the team, said he isn’t sure how many players were targeted though he personally knew of more than half a dozen.

Both men said the verbal comments from the coach went far beyond what could reasonably be construed as constructive.

“He (Apodaca) exerted power and beat these kids down to the point that made them not sure how to feel about themselves as young men,” one father said.

It’s had a lasting impact that his son will feel for the rest of his life, he said, and his son is still visibly angry and rocked by the demeaning nature of the experience.

“It’s not just a lost or losing season,” he said. “My son missed out on an opportunity to have a positive mentor in a football coach, and he will always remember it for the wrong reasons.”

Several kids quit the team over the course of the season, he added, while others – including parents – were afraid to speak up.

Anonymous Surveys

Those parents and student athletes voiced their concerns about Apodaca and his coaching style in the end-of-season surveys that are regularly filled out and shared with the district.

Both of the fathers interviewed for this article said they had discussed the survey with their sons and other parents and players and all had agreed to be honest about their experiences.

At least one parent hired legal counsel to file a public records request with the school district on Dec. 8 asking for any documents containing one of five key phrases, including “Apodaca bullying, Cheyenne Central football bullying, Apodaca inappropriate, Apodaca intimidation and Apodaca parent complaint.” The request also asked for the results of the anonymous surveys.

Speaking on the condition of anonymity, one parent responsible for hiring legal counsel to initiate the request said it was done as a precaution to ensure that all information the public is entitled to review is made available.

“This school district has struggled with transparency in the past, particularly with personnel matters,” that parent said in a statement to Cowboy State Daily. “Due to the severity of bullying we’ve experienced from the football coach, we used every tool possible to ensure public oversight of our taxpayer funded program.”

An initial response sent Jan. 5 from the district’s counsel, O’Kelley H. Pearson, rejected the request for the survey results, saying the survey revealed concerns with the Cheyenne Central football coaching staff that led to an employee evaluation.

It added that concerns regarding staff conduct were raised before the survey was conducted, resulting in an investigation into alleged violations of personnel policies.

As a result, Pearson wrote, the survey results can be withheld under Wyoming's Public Records Act because they deal with a personnel issue.

On the issue of documents sought using the key phrases, the district said its search of the terms identified revealed no documents containing any of the phrases.

However, L. Cooper Overstreet, legal counsel representing the public records request for the undisclosed client, said Monday that he's already been in touch with the district's counsel and believes they will soon reach an agreement regarding the request.

"Initially, there was some push back," Overstreet said, "but we're hopeful that we've made some progress since their response on Jan. 5."

To this end, Overstreet cited the June 2019 Albany County District Court ruling in favor of several Wyoming media outlets who had requested public records related to the firing of former University of Wyoming president Laurie Nichols.

Judge Tori Kricken granted the media's request for documents related to Nichols' dismissal.

In her ruling, Kricken cited exceptions to the public records request for public employees, who by virtue of their position are subject to increased scrutiny and notoriety, particularly for those who voluntarily accept positions of public prominence in which that person has willfully relinquished their right to certain privacies.

District Response

Although the response to the public records request alluded to an investigation currently underway by the Laramie School District No. 1, it did not explicitly identify Apodaca as the subject.

The district, likewise, refused to comment.

"This is a confidential personnel matter, and the District does not comment on confidential personnel issues," Vicki Thompson, assistant superintendent of human resources, said in a statement to Cowboy State Daily, through Creighton Grove, marketing specialist for the district.

Several of the parents interviewed, however, said the players were called to speak to human resource personnel who came to the high school to inquire about their responses to their surveys.

Apodaca, who was hired in 2018 after a 15-year career coaching in Colorado, is a Cheyenne Central alumnus. He did not return Cowboy State Daily's email request for comment prior to publication.

The Cheyenne Central Indians ended their 2021 season with a 2-8 record.

Apodaca returning as Central football coach after investigation

- [By Jeremiah Johnke WyoSports](#)
- Mar 1, 2022
- [Comments](#)



Mike Apodaca
Jeremiah Johnke/WyoSports

CHEYENNE – Mike Apodaca will return for a fifth season as Cheyenne Central’s football coach.

The school had [started](#) an investigation late last year after some parents and players accused Apodaca of verbal abuse and threatening players who voiced concerns to Central administrators with reduced playing time and non-football punishments. Attempts to reach Central Principal Fred George on Monday and Tuesday were unsuccessful.

WyoSports obtained a copy of a letter Apodaca sent to parents, players and coaches. In the letter last month, Apodaca said he spent the months during the investigation reflecting on the situation. He wrote that he now understands his comments “may have been perceived in a way that they were not intended.”

“I take responsibility for this, as I know that word choice, tone and emotion matter in communication,” Apodaca wrote. “In addition, this

process reminded me that communication is an individual interaction, and having a better understanding of each athlete's communication needs is something I will continue to make a priority."

Apodaca added that his top priority as a coach is developing meaningful relationships with his players both on and off the field.

"I want each person in our program to leave each year feeling valued and appreciated, even when the wins and losses, team placement or playing time may not look the way (players) envisioned," Apodaca wrote. "I am committed to identifying areas of improvement within myself and the program to make sure these relationships are developed.

"Moving forward, it is my intent to be clearer in my communication with both players and parents to foster an environment of mutual trust and understanding."

Apodaca politely declined on-the-record comment on the investigation or specific portions of his letter when reached by telephone Monday night.

"The district completed (its) investigation, and I will be retained as the head coach," Apodaca later wrote in a text message to WyoSports. "I look forward to continuing to work with the student-athletes at Central for the upcoming football season.

"Valuable lessons can be learned in every situation, and this is no different. We will use these lessons to improve our program moving forward. GO TRIBE!"

Multiple people aware of the situation said several current and former Central players, as well as former players from Silver Creek High in Longmont, Colorado, voiced support for Apodaca to Central administrators. They were describing their perspective of his treatment of players and the impact he had on their lives.

Apodaca – who graduated from Central in 1989 – returned to his alma mater after a 15-season stint as head coach at Silver Creek. He also spent five seasons as the Raptors' head baseball coach.

Apodaca has coached Central to a 19-21 record over four seasons. The Indians have reached the Class 4A playoffs each season, including a semifinal berth in 2019. That was the school's first semifinal appearance since finishing as runner-up in the 2009 state championship game. Central was 2-8 this past season.

https://www.jhnewsandguide.com/news/schools/local/school-abuse-lawsuit-settled-for-295k/article_ec415607-c510-51e1-b9c7-e2faefee34c6.html

School abuse lawsuit settled for \$295K

- [By Ellen Gerst Casper Star Tribune](#)
- Jan 22, 2022

A \$295,000 settlement has been reached in a sexual abuse lawsuit against the Teton County School District in which a former student alleged she was raped and sexually assaulted by two fellow students.

The Jackson Hole High School student, referred to in the suit as “Rachel Roe” to protect her identity, said in her complaint that she was also subjected to “severe” harassment and retaliation after reporting the assaults to district officials.

Following the settlement, the federal case was dismissed earlier this month.

The suit, originally filed at the end of 2020, alleged that the district and its leadership had violated Roe’s Title IX rights by failing to adequately investigate her reports.

“It is difficult to fully comprehend how sexual harassment and abuse affects the survivor and all other people involved,” said Kaden Canfield, an attorney for Roe. “The community should be proud that Ms. Roe was willing and brave enough to come forward and share her story. I hope the resolution of this case can help Ms. Roe on her path to recovery, which can truly take a lifetime.”

(This article contains description of sexual assaults. Those who feel they need support can call the Community Safety Network at 733-SAFE. — Ed.)

The complaint alleges that in 2017, Roe was assaulted twice by the same student. The suit says he raped her after the school homecoming dance, then sexually assaulted her again a few weeks later on school grounds during a football game.

According to previous reporting from the Jackson Hole News&Guide, the suit says that in February 2018, when Roe’s parents met with the high school counselor about her declining grades, Roe “confided to her mother that she had been sexually assaulted ... and that the assault and subsequent sexualized rumors at JHHS were the cause of her sudden change in behavior.” In July 2018, the suit says, Roe attempted suicide and was admitted to in-patient therapy.

Two months later, the suit alleges, Roe was raped by another student who had given her alcohol until she was slipping in and out of consciousness.

The incidents detailed in the suit reportedly took place during the same time period as those brought in another case settled by the district last year. In that lawsuit, a Jane Doe alleged that officials disregarded her report of being sexually assaulted by a classmate in 2017.

Both suits accused the district of failing to train its administrators on sexual misconduct between students and Title IX procedures.

“While TCSD does not comment on litigation, we are confident that our teachers, counselors, administrators and staff met their legal and professional responsibilities and duties while focusing on the best interest of all students,” Charlotte Reynolds, spokesperson for the district, said in an email.

Roe’s lawsuit states that she did not report either of the 2017 incidents for several months out of fear of “retaliation and additional harassment at school.” When she did report the first two alleged assaults, the suit says, she was subjected to “embarrassing and harassing sexualized rumors” spread by the alleged assailant and his friends.

The complaint also alleges that school officials failed to report the assaults to law enforcement. Jackson Hole High School Principal Scott Crisp denied that claim in his response to the lawsuit.

The 2018 rape was reported to law enforcement, the suit states.

According to the suit, Roe had talked to other victims of sexual assault at the school, who said they intended to report their assaults to the school until they saw the district’s “poor response” to Roe’s case.

Roe, the suit states, eventually moved out of Wyoming to continue her education.

<https://oilcity.news/community/education-community/2022/04/11/in-wake-of-student-athletes-alleged-sexual-assault-ncsd-trustee-reviews-code-of-conduct-and-sees-need-for-changes/>

In wake of student-athlete's alleged sexual assault, NCSD trustee reviews code of conduct and sees need for changes

By BRENDAN LACHANCE

April 11, 2022



The NCSD Board of Trustees held a regular meeting on Monday, April 11. (Screenshot via NCSD, YouTube)

CASPER, Wyo. — During the Natrona County School District Board of Trustees' March 14 meeting, family members of one student alleged that the student had been sexually assaulted by a student-athlete in spring 2021 and that the student-athlete had faced criminal consequences.

The family complained that the student-athlete alleged to have committed the crime was allowed to continue participating in school sports, something they said should not have been allowed. Some who spoke complained of inconsistency in how the district handles discipline of student-athletes.

During the March 14 meeting, NCSD's lawyer Craig Silva said that Wyoming law prevents the district and trustees from commenting on disciplinary matters regarding a specific student.

Trustee Dave Applegate said during the school board's Monday, April 11 meeting that the alleged victim is in the "thoughts and prayers" of both himself and other board members. He reiterated that the district and board are unable to discuss disciplinary matters against a specific student.

"That said, this board is responsible for policy in this district, and to that end, I have a few comments," Applegate said.

Applegate added that he had spent time reviewing the district's "[extreme discipline matrix](#)" and its code of conduct ([NCSD Administrative Regulation 5371](#)) after the March 14 meeting.

Applegate said that the extreme discipline matrix was developed in response to questions regarding fairness and consistency of the district's policies that arose a few years ago, and that it has since "been used extensively across the district." He said he thinks that the extreme discipline matrix leaves some discretion up to school administrators and that he thinks the policy has worked well for the district.

Applegate added that the district leaves discipline for behaviors that happen outside of school to parents and, if needed, law enforcement and the legal system.

When turning to the code of conduct, Applegate noted that participation in school sports and activities is not mandatory, though they provide students "unique opportunities to grow and compete and perform." He added that sports can help teach values such as teamwork, sportsmanship, effort and self-discipline.

"To participate, students agree to a code of conduct," he said. "It is an honor code and in many cases it relies on self-reporting of code violations. In reviewing the code of conduct, I have concluded it needs to be revised to better clarify its intent and to better ensure its consistent application."

Applegate said that he thinks the self-reporting requirement in the code of conduct should be made more explicit regarding what information is expected to be provided in the case of a violation.

“Ramifications of not reporting need to be outlined in the code,” he added.

Applegate said that the code of conduct refers to intervention plans when a code of conduct violation occurs. However, he said that “the expectations associated with these plans are not outlined in the code.”

Another shortcoming of the code from Applegate’s perspective is that it lacks clarity in regard to coach and athletic director responsibilities. In addition to making these responsibilities more explicit within the code, he said that the code should “clearly state when school principal and even district legal review is needed.”

“The code needs to explicitly explain to athletes and parents that code violations that occur late in the season have more severe ramifications,” Applegate added. “This is implicit to the code as written but it needs to be explicit and explained to all athletes and their parents.”

Applegate said that he thinks the code of conduct needs to be updated to define different ramifications that stem from misdemeanor versus felony convictions.

“Some violations should clearly result in dismissal from the team and the code currently is not explicit in this regard,” he said.

In addition, Applegate said that he thinks there needs to be discussion about how the code of conduct applies to coaches and people volunteering in athletics and activities.

Applegate said that if other trustees and district administration think there is merit to his suggestion that the code of conduct be reviewed, he thinks such a review process should be undertaken. However, he said that a code of conduct has its limitations.

“While policies and rules and laws are intended to protect society and ensure accountability when not followed, they always fall short,” he said. “They are in the end blunt instruments, and a sense of fairness as reflected by all parties is seldom achieved, but that is never an excuse for not trying to improve them.”

https://www.wyomingnews.com/news/in_our_schools/parents-student-say-lcsd2-has-so-far-failed-to-protect-victims-in-blackmail-case/article_d6809258-b272-53c2-948d-268740986807.html

Parents, student say LCSD2 has so far failed to protect victims in blackmail case

- By Hannah Black Wyoming Tribune Eagle
- Apr 24, 2022



An exterior view of the Burns Junior/Senior High School on Wednesday, April 20, 2022.
Michael Smith/For the Wyoming Tribune Eagle

- Michael S Smith

CHEYENNE – Parents who say their daughters were victims in a blackmail case involving a Burns High School student say the school district has been slow to respond to the incident, keeping the student in classes and in extracurricular activities with some of the alleged victims for months. Two parents of two underage students spoke to the Wyoming Tribune Eagle and asked that their names not be used. These parents and an attorney connected to the case said an investigation by the Wyoming Division of Criminal Investigation revealed the student

had altered photos of female classmates to make them appear nude. He apparently threatened to send the doctored photos to colleges, teachers, student activity leaders and parents if the female students did not send him genuine photos that were sexually explicit.

One of the parents said they became aware of the case in September after the suspect threatened their daughter, and that the DCI investigation began the same week. The other parent said they were notified by DCI their daughter was a victim in the case sometime in February.

"Several" of the victims have switched to online schooling because of the stress associated with having to face the alleged perpetrator, one parent said.

This parent said there had been "absolute inaction" thus far on the part of the school district and school administrators, other than no longer allowing the accused student to participate in large school gatherings. "The key to this is the school district not having a policy," the parent said. "Girls continue to be victimized (at school)."

The parent referenced school activities that require participants to sign a code of conduct. A discipline matrix on the LCSD2 and Burns High websites lists potential consequences for things like harassment and "sexually-based behaviors," including referral to law enforcement and/or expulsion.

Another parent said their daughter had changed her own schedule to avoid being in class with the accused student. The parent said her daughter was told by Burns High's administration that the accused student was leaving classes early so the alleged victims wouldn't have to see him in the hallway.

That's not enough, the parent said.

"There's no possible way, without physically removing him from the building, that you can keep the girls and him out of each other's line of sight (consistently)," the parent said. "My daughter is at a point with the school that she feels like they're protecting him more than her."

Insufficient response

An LCSD2 student also brought up the issue at a March 14 meeting of the district's board of trustees. Speaking during the public comment period, the student asserted that "right now, we have a very big problem in our school system."

"I am moving to suggest a policy that would remove charged felons from the general student body," the student said, according to a recording of the meeting.

There were **more than 30 victims** at Burns "who are having to look a charged felon in the eyes within a general classroom," the student said, adding that the proposed policy would put the accused student "in isolation" in an effort to protect not only the alleged victims, but others who attend the Burns school, as well.

A trustee told her that although the board would not respond that evening, "we will certainly, at some point, address those kinds of things." This student's family said that, as of Thursday, they had not received a response from the school board.

DCI Director Forrest Williams confirmed in an email to the WTE that the agency had investigated the case and that the student had been charged. The WTE could not confirm what charges had been filed against the student or the current status of the case, however.

Laramie County assistant district attorney Jeff O'Holleran, identified by parents and an LCSD2 attorney as the prosecutor in the case, declined to comment on any juvenile matter. That's because juvenile cases are kept confidential, except in some specific circumstances, according to Wyoming [statute](#).

LCSD2 Superintendent Justin Pierantoni and Burns Junior-Senior High School Principal Bobby Dishman did not respond to the WTE's phone and email queries. LCSD2 board Chair Julianne Randall and Vice Chair Mike Olson did not respond to emails.

"The school district is aware of concerns that some students and their families have raised," said Scott Kolpitzke, an attorney for LCSD2, in a phone interview with the WTE. "They have responded and addressed those within the scope of the law."

In response to another email invitation for comment Thursday, Kolpitzke wrote, "Laramie County School District #2 is aware of concerns raised by some students and parents regarding the incidents you described. As with any complaint about student conduct, LCSD#2 takes appropriate steps, within the scope of the law, to investigate complaints, and to protect students. LCSD#2 cannot comment on specific details of actions it may have taken, or any investigations conducted, because state and federal laws protect the confidentiality and privacy of student information. The School District has policies in place to address student conduct, including, but not limited to policies which address alleged sexual harassment under Title IX. The School District has complied with its policies, and with the applicable laws, and will continue to do so in the best interests of its students."

Coincidentally, family members of a Natrona County School District 1 student spoke before that school board about a similar issue, also on March 14.

According to reporting by the Casper Star-Tribune, family members of a girl attending a Casper high school said a student had committed sexual battery against her. They [asked](#) the board why the student was still allowed to play sports for his high school, despite having been convicted and sentenced to probation lasting until August.

The newspaper later reported that, according to a [letter](#) from Chadron State College in Nebraska, the accused high school student was no longer planning to attend following the accusations becoming public. It was unclear whether the college had revoked the student's admission or if he'd decided not to attend. It was also unclear when the decision was made. At an April board meeting, a Natrona County trustee said that, after hearing the family's story, he [believed](#) the student code of conduct needed

to be "'revised to better clarify its intent and to better ensure its consistent application' among students," the Star-Tribune reported.

Lawyer: Burns principal dismissive

In a March 18 letter to Superintendent Pierantoni, an attorney for one of the juvenile victims, Bruce Moats, argued on behalf of the victim's mother that the district should "take remedial action to protect the safety of her daughter and the other female students as required by law."

Moats is a Cheyenne public access attorney who has represented many news outlets, including the WTE.

Such a request to Dishman, the school's principal, was "dismissed with what might be described as disdain," Moats wrote.

"The principal made several excuses, including that he did not know whether the electronic messages occurred on campus," the attorney continued, later adding that Dishman had "indicated he knew that the messages were not sent at school or on a school activity."

Moats wrote that "at the very least, the messages traveled onto campus, which is sufficient under law to grant the district jurisdiction to act."

"It is clear that the district has an obligation to maintain a safe learning environment for all students. That includes an environment free of sexual harassment pursuant to Title IX," Moats wrote. "It is clear that this situation has affected the learning environment of the female students, as it has caused them to miss school because they do not feel safe."

[Title IX](#) is a federal civil rights law prohibiting discrimination based on sex in education programs or activities that receive federal funding.

Citing case law, Moats argued in his letter that there are legal grounds to separate a student charged with a crime from his alleged victims at school and during activities.

"This is not a case where the school is faced with conduct that it cannot remedy," he wrote. "The school district has the ability to keep the parties

separated and not require the female students to have to attend school with the alleged harasser. Your own Title IX policy requires you to take action."

Moats requested in the letter, on behalf of his client, that the matter be referred to the district's Title IX coordinator.

Both parents of alleged victims said they had either **filed or were in the process of filing Title IX complaints** related to the case. One of these complaints is currently being investigated, according to a parent.

Both said they also were in the process of filing complaints with the Office of Civil Rights, a division of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Hannah Black is the Wyoming Tribune Eagle's criminal justice reporter. She can be reached at hblack@wyomingnews.com or 307-633-3128. Follow her on Twitter at @hannahcblack

Air Force officials: Racism in schools, businesses in Cheyenne, Wyo.

By Jasmine Hall, Wyoming Tribune Eagle
Tuesday, Feb 22



FILE - This May 24, 2108, file photo, shows the entrance to F.E. Warren Air Force Base in Cheyenne, Wyo. (Mead Gruver/AP, File)
CHEYENNE, Wyo. — Col. Catherine Barrington has been stationed in Cheyenne three times since 1998. But she said she never knew she experienced a different community than her fellow airmen.

The commander of the 90th Missile Wing at [F.E. Warren Air Force Base](#) discovered not only was her command chief master sergeant encountering racist behavior, but so were families and their students off-base. She came forward in the past two weeks to ask for the support of Cheyenne Mayor Patrick Collins and Laramie County School District 1 Superintendent Margaret Crespo to address the issue.

RELATED



[Some military families of color report racial issues affecting career decisions, new poll finds](#)

Over half of the 303 active duty members of color have considered discrimination and safety concerns when making decisions about installation preferences.

By [Karen Jowers](#)

“We’ve had children in our schools called a racial slur and get punished for it because it led to a fight,” said Barrington, who is white. “Those children are hurt. They don’t understand why they’re being called that. And the parents are left with the unfortunate responsibility of having to teach their children that they have to learn to endure that.”

Barrington said enduring hatred is a lesson she doesn’t approve of.

She requested commanders and senior leaders speak with their airmen and give them the opportunity to share their own experiences, the Wyoming Tribune Eagle reports. Command Chief

Master Sgt. Nicholas Taylor joined her in the inquiry, and said many of his fellow minority airmen reported being treated differently out of uniform.

Taylor described his own hostile interaction at a local store when he purchased a weapon. Taylor originally went in uniform to pick up a gun he had bought, which required an optic to be put on at a future time. He called ahead to ask if they had any availability, and the clerk immediately welcomed him to stop by. When he arrived out of uniform, her attitude shifted, and she told him they didn't have time to serve him. The command chief said she was very aggressive and instead of arguing with her, he gathered his things and left.

“Other airmen have also experienced this,” he said. “And when they went in to buy ammunition, they would not sell the ammunition to airmen of color at all. So, they had to ask their caucasian counterpart to go in and buy ammunition on behalf of them.”

Barrington said after hearing multiple reports similar to his about the store, she has considered approaching the Air Force Disciplinary Control Board to take corrective action. If the business, or business owner, is not treating airmen in accordance with the military's values, they investigate and notify the business to fix their discriminatory practice in 60 days. They must respond or institute the corrections, or the commander can enact consequences.

“There is due process,” she said. “But if I do that, I'm placing that business off limits for all of our military members. And our payroll

is about \$357 million a year for members who work on the base, so that's a huge impact.”

Barrington and other community and military officials spoke in recent interviews with the [Wyoming Tribune Eagle](#).

Call to action

The call for action stems from more than just the treatment of her airmen.

Military member parents are speaking up for their children, who continue to withstand racism in Laramie County School District 1.

Barrington explained that multiple students have been bullied and called racial slurs at McCormick Junior High, which led to a fight where both students were suspended and fined \$489.

Another ninth-grade girl got off the bus for her first day of the school year and was immediately called the N-word more than one time. She decided to attend Cheyenne Virtual School, instead of going in person, two days later due to the incident.

The commander reached out to community leaders such as Collins and Crespo to look for a solution. She wants a change in policies for students who are bullied and to find the root cause of why a fight broke out, not punishing both parties involved.

“Both kids are treated the same, and the advantage goes to the aggressor – in this case, the person who used the racial slur – because he accomplished everything that he wanted,” she said.

“He got the other kid in trouble, and the other kid is penalized for enduring racism. That’s not acceptable.”

After meeting with Collins and Crespo, she said steps are being taken to address community racism. The child who was suspended is no longer penalized, according to the commander, and the mayor has begun to look into how his office can have a positive impact. He’s considering bias training for businesses, as well as networking with LCSD1 officials and Sankofa African Heritage Awareness Inc. to look for support.

“We definitely want to make sure that all of our students and all of our adults, no matter where they’re coming from, or their life experiences or who they are, that they always feel welcomed and connected,” Crespo said. “And that we focus on being kind and empathetic to each other. That’s really the goal for me, and I will continue to work with the mayor.”

James Peebles, the founder of the heritage organization, has spoken with many of the parties involved to act as an educational resource. He was concerned to learn of the discriminatory practices against people of color in the community, but said he was not surprised.

Changes in Cheyenne

Peebles described watching the social dynamic in Cheyenne change, with Black families leaving after experiencing racism. There has also been pandemic-driven, anti-Asian rhetoric in the past five years.

Peebles said last year was the first time he even questioned his safety here after living in Cheyenne for 12 years. He would take five-mile walks every day early in the morning. One day, he heard someone honk at him and yell profanities out of the car as they drove down the street. He decided to stop going.

“Because the fear is hanging in the air,” he said. “You see it on TV every day.”

Although he is not a member of the military, these are the kind of experiences the [F.E. Warren base](#) commander and her command chief want to end. Nicholas said the Air Force is very diverse, and it prides itself on treating everyone with dignity and respect. He is also scared of the influence a racist comment or hostile encounter will have on soldiers preparing to potentially make the ultimate sacrifice for their country.

The sentiment was shared by Barrington, who put an emphasis on military readiness.

“I want every airman to experience the Cheyenne that I have experienced,” she said. “And it’s a great city filled with wonderful people. We just have to exhibit those values all the time, to all of our members. And it matters – how we treat people matters. And when you look at the world situation today, military readiness is incredibly important, and how our family members are treated impacts our ability to be ready.”