



## Writing on the Wall

### *BRIEF-CASE*

Sara O'Brien and Meira Levinson

<https://justiceinschools.org>

A defining physical feature of the Garnet Public Schools is a ten-foot mural that was painted on the side of the central office in 1994. Underneath the title “Celebrating Black Excellence,” paintings of local Black leaders and pioneers look out over shops and restaurants in a busy commercial area. The mural originally featured a local civil rights leader, the first Black mayor of Garnet, and two Black business leaders. On the tenth, twentieth, and thirtieth anniversaries of the mural’s unveiling, GPS added new figures to the mural, including a Nobel Prize winner, NFL running back, and young environmental activist. These new figures were nominated by students, who wrote essays explaining how they embodied Black excellence.

While the mural is largely popular among Garnet residents, the district does hear occasional grumbles that there are not similar large public displays celebrating excellence among other racial groups. But GPS’ efforts to celebrate diversity in other ways, like celebrating many different heritage months and hosting cultural celebrations, have been well received. The mural has seemed like a permanent fixture in Garnet.

During this year’s primary season, however, Garnet’s State Representative Michael Gomes has made his opposition to the mural a key part of his campaign for State Senate. In a fiery speech, Mr. Gomes calls the mural “racially exclusionary and morally reprehensible,” pledging that as a State Senator he will ensure that districts across the state cease their “divisive” work. The clip is picked up by Breitbart and Tucker Carlson, and the state’s flagship newspaper does a story about it as well, which sets off a flood of letters to the editor, some denouncing Gomes and others denouncing the mural.

Soon the superintendent’s office is overwhelmed with phone calls and emails, some even threatening violence against the superintendent Jason Murta. One email suggests that citizens “take care of that disgusting mural by blowing up the building”—a threat that Gomes quickly denounces. Another bomb threat leads to a two-hour lockdown across the district as the police investigate. Some of the calls are less extreme, with people offering ways to expand or diversify the mural, for example. At the same time, others encourage the superintendent to take a stand for racial justice and defend the mural publicly. Young Black alumni take to social media to post about how the mural increased their sense of belonging and gave them role models, tagging their posts #blackgarnet. Both the NFL running back and young activist post that they feel honored to be included in a mural that celebrates Black excellence in a country that still struggles to eliminate anti-Black racism.

In addition to the threats of violence, Dr. Murta fears that the uproar over the mural may make Garnet the subject of federal lawsuits. He hears a rumor that a local law firm, with financial support from Parents Defending Education, is looking for non-Black families to join a lawsuit petitioning for the mural to be removed as a Title VI violation discriminating on the basis of race. The district is also fielding a record number of Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests seeking access to curricular materials related to race and racism, which Dr. Murta also fears might also be used as fodder for a federal lawsuit. If such a suit were to succeed, the district could lose federal funding, which would be a huge blow; the majority of students in the district qualify for free meals, and every school relies on Title I funding.

Dr. Murta calls a meeting of the district leadership team, including their general counsel. The district seems poised to take a major hit, reputationally if not legally or financially, no matter how they act. How should they respond to the uproar?

**To cite this case study:**

O'Brien, S. & Levinson, M. (2025). Writing on the Wall. *Justice in Schools*.

<https://www.justiceinschools.org/ethical-leadership-polarized-times-brief-cases-suite>

*This work is openly licensed via [CC BY-NC-SA 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/)*