



# Letters to the editor

## The Valley community responds to the equity study

I am in no way denying the racism that exists at Valley. Students make racist remarks, students treat other students differently because of their race. This is obvious. Nonetheless, I highly reject the assertion that has come out of this audit. People read this article and squeal “systematic racism.” Call me naïve, but the cynicism of this declaration concerns me. The lack of questioning of this report augments the widely held claim that people don’t think for themselves and attach themselves to popular opinions.

Ryan Williams, senior

It’s heartbreaking that less than one percent of the student body was represented at the community meeting. Student involvement in quelling racism needs to be the top priority; administrators need to open their minds to student ideas, because it’s the students who see racism on a daily basis.

Grant Hurt, junior

One of the most important principles in life is to consistently try to widen your circle of love and understanding. While we do have a race problem at Valley, the flip side is that all of us now have unique opportunities to grow.

Rob Schebel, language arts teacher

I don’t believe there’s a “race problem” at Valley, because just because you’re of different race doesn’t mean there’s a problem. I do however, believe there’s a discrimination problem. Because if any student discriminated against, that’s a problem. So I would like to see some action and have things get done instead of taking a year to write about the supposed “race issue.”

Sam Galligan, senior

I think race doesn’t tell you anything about a person. Deep down inside, a person is much more than the color of their skin and they represent so much more. Rather than talk about race, I think we should talk about what country they’re from, what cultures do they associate with, what religious beliefs do they have. Race tells us nothing but how they look. It’s useless information. If you want actual information that can help you learn something about someone. Rather than learn about their race, learn about their culture, rather than what’s the color of their skin.

J.J. Kapur, junior

Valley is simply a reflection of what is going on in American culture as a whole. And that’s sad. It was especially sad for me to read that many of my colleagues—like a large portion of America—saw no problem at all with the status quo. None. By simply reflecting the status quo, we as a school and district are not doing right by our students of color.

Stefanie Kaylor, language arts teacher

Often, racist interactions are depicted as an exchange between a perpetrator and a victim (or multiple perpetrators and victims). However, implicit biases we all carry affect our daily interactions with the people around us, often in such subtle ways we don’t immediately notice them. In order to address this “death by a thousand cuts”, our definition of racist behavior must change.

Cayden Codel, senior

Overall, I’m frustrated that now we’re talking about race more as a whole, despite the fact that I talk about it everyday. I appreciate my white peers who are honest about their opinions of race and who are trying to be empathetic towards others, but the whole school needs to be aware. My one example is when the “White Privilege” article came out in *Spotlight* last year, I was cornered by three white girls who demanded that I check off something in the boxes to validate that white privilege isn’t a reality.

Rachel Greene, senior

So if you decide to look the other way, to ignore the problem, to scoff at the statistics in front of you, you are choosing to be ignorant. And you are making yourself a part of the problem at Valley. So I implore you to open your eyes and become more aware. Just because you do not see racism or hear about racism does not mean that it doesn’t exist.

Lizbeth Salina-Reyes, Senior

Is it normal to question my skin color before I question my integrity? Racism is real and terrifying. I hate how the subject is taboo for people of non-color. Whenever the subject of race comes up, they claim that they’re uncomfortable. I’m sorry you feel that way, however, that’s how I have felt since the day I started kindergarten.

Komel Shahid, senior

Letters have been edited for length. To view full length letters, please visit our Twitter, @VHSSpotlight

I struggle to find faults in equity among Valley’s students because I keep a pretty mixed friend group. We’ve been friends for so many years that I don’t see them as anything other than equals. It’s easy for me to say that everyone receives the same opportunities because prejudice isn’t something I watch for. In my eyes we all have the same teachers, apply to the same colleges, etc.

Elizabeth Forney, senior

# Continuing the conversation

## Spotlight staff editorial

Why does Valley—and society—avoid talking about race outside the formal settings of community forums and civil rights discussions? Why is discussing inequity so uncomfortable?

Fear. Fear of others' labels: whiner, racist, sensitive, uneducated, hateful, ignorant. As Valley grapples with its own racial climate and results of the equity study, a stifled conversation threatens to halt progress entirely.

Why does the conversation falter? Microaggressions. Microaggressions are "everyday insults, indignities and demeaning messages sent to people of color by well-intentioned white people who are unaware of the hidden messages being sent to them," according to Columbia University psychologist Derald Sue.

Microaggressions mischaracterize through stereotypes like "Asians are smart" or "black people are the best basketball players." Even when stereotypes are "positive" (that is, they point out strengths), broad generalizations hurt. As author Casey Gane-McCalla wrote in the *Huffington Post*, "Black athletes are usually given credit for their 'natural athleticism,' while whites are credited for their 'hard work,' 'discipline' and 'knowledge of the game'...the problem with stereotypes in sports is that they often lead to general stereotypes. If you say 'white men can't jump,' why not 'black men can't read defenses'? And if black men can't read defenses, maybe

they can't read books either?"

While no one advocates gross stereotyping or hate speech, people disagree about microaggressions' effects. Some feel tiptoeing around microaggressions is censorship, while others believe it's necessary in a progressive, inclusive society.

For example, author Lionel Shriver believes over-sensitivity to political correctness has gone overboard. The public recently

criticized Shriver's speech at the Brisbane Writers' Festival in which she defended authors' right to write about other cultures, races, and genders. She explained that fiction works are tools of empathy; they help readers and writers understand other people. Plus, if society restricted writers to their own background, all fiction would be memoir, she said.

During the speech, author Yassmin Abdel-Magied walked out, saying Shriver's message was "a celebration of the unfettered exploitation of the experiences of others, under the guise of fiction," according to the *New York Times*. The festival's leaders quickly organized a response forum for listeners to air their grievances.

**"I have been noticing everyone just trying to be careful with their words. Why are they acting like that? Why are they thinking that they cannot be free to say what they think? Don't be afraid to talk about it. . . . If the school is scared or if they don't want to talk about it, we're not going to know what is right and what is wrong."**

**-a student of color in the equity study**

However, proponents of microaggression sensitivity feel that repeated insults—however small—add up. "The intrusive consistency with which they appear in my life proves to be a constant reminder that I am identified before I can introduce myself, that I am seen as someone who does not belong, and that I am in a place I do not deserve to be," author Karen Chee wrote in the *Huffington Post*.

Confronting racism with free speech and microaggressions in mind is challenging. Often, improving equity means singling out a group by providing them with supplementary services.

For example, if students underperform on a reading comprehension test, teachers might offer extra tutoring or a remedial study session. But what if the majority of a group is underperforming and her assistance looks like stereotyping? Then singling out one race or culture veers into microaggression territory. (Hopefully, teachers only respond to underperformers and not lump all members of a group together.)

It's a paradox—in the attempt to improve race relations or close achievement gaps, people risk

accidental racism—and it's why conversations about race stagnate.

To have a constructive conversation, people need to be mindful of microaggressions but not intimidated by them. Many whites avoid discussing race because they don't want to say something accidentally racist. The conversation is complicated—one has to sort through microaggressions, stereotypes, censorship, and cultural appropriation.

"The increased focus on microaggressions coupled with the endorsement of emotional reasoning is a formula for a constant state of outrage, even toward well-meaning speakers trying to engage in genuine discussion," Greg Lukianoff and Jonathan Haidt wrote in an article about microaggressions in the *Atlantic*.

Rather than demonize or suppress those who don't understand microaggressions, let's educate them—and continue the conversation.

"I have been noticing everyone just trying to be careful with their words. Why are they acting like that? Why are they thinking that they cannot be free to say what they think?" a student of color said in the equity study report. "That's something that I think is the reason the issues are just growing and growing. I think that is something the school should work on. Don't be afraid to talk about it. . . . If the school is scared or if they don't want to talk about it, we're not going to know what is right and what is wrong."

### Spotlight

Published by the students of Valley High School  
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If you have an article you would like to have published, please contact editor-in-chief's Elizabeth Ash and Julie Sisler or Mrs. Mikels in Room 1662.

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*Spotlight* has received The International First Place Award from Quill and Scroll International Journalism Honor Society, First Place Award from the American Scholastic Press Association, and the All American Award from the National Scholastic Press Association.