



Written by [R. Cort Kirkwood](#) on August 29, 2011

Teacher Suspended for Calling Pupils “Future Criminals”

The pedagogue of Paterson [has been suspended](#) with pay, and might well be fired. The students were disrupting her class, but her critics claim her remarks were “racist.”

Paterson’s population is [largely](#) black and Hispanic.

What She Said

Veteran teacher [Jennifer O’Brien said](#) she posted the comments to Facebook because of her frustration that the students in her first-grade class are out of control, and she can do little about it.



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O’Brien came home from work, [North Jersey.com reported](#), and expressed her genuine feelings after what must have been another tough day in the “blackboard jungle.” [Wrote O’Brien](#), “i’m not a teacher — i’m a warden for future criminals.”

Six hours later, [North Jersey.com reported](#), she posted again, wondering why she couldn’t put her first-graders into a [Scared Straight](#) program, which introduces hardened criminals to youngsters. [Wrote O’Brien](#), “They had a scared straight program in school — why couldn’t i bring 1st graders?”

Unsurprisingly, given that O’Brien had 333 friends on the social networking site, her feelings didn’t remain among those friends for long. Complaints came into the school board, and O’Brien was suspended. O’Brien appeared before a government school inquisition last week.

[According to](#) North Jersey.com, “O’Brien told an administrative law judge that she wrote the post in exasperation because six or seven unruly students kept disrupting her lessons, distracting children who wanted to learn.”

One boy had recently hit her, another had struck another child, and she had given the principal several disciplinary reports on students during her three months in charge of a class of 23. She said they also stole a box of stickers she hid in a closet to use as prizes.

“I was speaking out of frustration to their behavior, just that build up of ‘I don’t know what else to do,’ and I’m actually scared for their futures, for some of them,” O’Brien said. “If you’re hitting your teacher at 6 or 7 years old, that’s not a good path.”

O’Brien, [North Jersey.com reported](#), “told [administrative law] Judge Ellen Bass that she was surprised her posts were so misinterpreted.”

She said she deleted them as soon as she realized they were causing offense and immediately apologized to her principal. She said some parents also had trouble handling the kids in her class.

“I had quite a few parents that came to me saying ‘I don’t know what to do with them at home ... give me some strategies,’” she said.



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NAACP Lashes Out

O'Brien was suspended because the [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People](#) was upset with her comments, as was the president of the Paterson school board. O'Brien is white; most of her students are black and "Latino."

"The reason why she was suspended was because the incident created serious problems at the school that impeded the functioning of the building," board president Theodore Best told North Jersey.com. "You can't simply fire someone for what they have on a Facebook page; but if that spills over and affects the classroom then you can take action."

"This is not first time I've heard something like this from a teacher," Best told the newspaper. "Overall, I think we have really good teachers. But there's also a significant population of teachers here to collect the paycheck and don't have the best interests of the students in mind."

[Paterson's NAACP](#) contacted Best with the obvious demand . O'Brien had to go. Naturally, its chieftain in Paterson, the Rev. Kenneth Clayton, claimed O'Brien is a racist. Citing the transcript, Clayton "said at first he thought the post was a 'sick joke.'" Jersey.com reported.

"I couldn't believe anybody would be that stupid to post something like that on Facebook," he said. Then he started getting calls from a "vast" number of people in the city. "I think people were just overwhelmed with a sense of anger which we were just trying to make sure that we were able to calm ... because we didn't want it to turn into some type of angry demonstration."

Clayton said the comment "helps us realize again that racism has not been erased from our country.... I know that children can be testy and tedious and all those things, but to say in first grade there that you're a warden for them, that's reprehensible ... if a teacher or any adult leader could look at children like that in the first grade and think that, then the children are doomed."

Apparently, Clayton thinks the comments are racist because O'Brien is white and most of her students are black and Hispanic. O'Brien's lawyer told North Jersey.com, "If you make a comment that is not a racist comment but you're a white person and it's made about students who happen to be black and Hispanic, there's a presumption that it's racist."

Other Teachers Agree With O'Brien

School board president Best isn't the only educator who knows teachers agree with O'Brien.

[The New York Times](#) quoted Irene Sterling, president of something called the [Paterson Education Fund](#), "a non-profit group that supports the local school community" despite the millions of taxpayer funds that community receives. [Sterling told](#) the paper, "It's horrible. And unfortunately, I don't think she's the only teacher in Paterson who thinks that way." That, of course, was after condemning the teacher: Parents "were angry about the teacher's comments because anyone, including her own students, could have read the negative characterizations."

She said it highlighted a lack of commitment by some teachers.

Neither Sterling nor Best explained why teachers might think their young charges are "future criminals," although some of those [who commented](#) at New Jersey.com's story agree with O'Brien.

"I stand with the teacher here," [one commenter wrote](#).



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Instead of pointing the finger and accusing someone of racism ... call out the child and the parents for doing such a poor job! No teacher can fix children that act like that in the time span of a 7-hour school day.... Kids with these behavior problems — no matter what race they come from — need love, structure and responsibility ... something they obviously don't get at home. Its time to hold parents accountable for their failures in raising children!

“Until you have taught in the inner city yourself, don't be too quick to judge this woman,” [wrote another](#). “I have taught on the south side of Chicago for many years and have heard similar sentiments often expressed by many teachers (of all races).”

[Asked a third commenter](#), “How is this racist? She didn't say the kids should be lynched. She didn't say they should send them back to the jungle. She said they act like criminals, which is highly likely a statement of future fact. I'd like to see the statistics.”

“It ain't racist if it's true,” another said.

Just another example of to much PC in our society. Makes one miss the days when teachers would spank their students — they did us, and we did not turn out to be criminals. Coincidence, I think NOT.

In deciding if the comment was racist, one should ask, "In a mixed-race (including whites), inner-city school district such as the Paterson school district, where a sizeable percentage of the students will undoubtedly be in serious trouble with the law in the future (because that's true year-in and year-out), would a minority teacher be accused of racism for making the same comments?" If not, critiques of the teacher's commentary should be limited to judging the validity of the comments and judging whether the comments reflect badly on the teacher's ability to teach, and then deciding what actions should be taken.



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