

Understood. Connected. Valued.

Growing up in Westport, I quickly learned what it meant to stand out. In a school of hundreds, I can count on one hand the number of students who looked like me. More often than not, it was just me—in classes, walking the halls, or sitting at lunch as the only girl of color in the room. Those moments made me more aware of the gap between how I saw myself and how I was seen by others.

Westport prides itself on being a welcoming community, but belonging is not just about physically being in a space with others—it's about being understood. It's about being connected to your community. It's about being *valued*. While I've never been directly told, "*You don't belong here,*" I've felt it in a thousand quiet ways—the double takes when I say Westport is my hometown, the disbelief when I step into leadership roles or excel in AP courses, or the doubt people show when I pursue activities outside the norm for 'someone like me'. It's not outright hate; it's something more subtle yet just as isolating—a quiet bias that makes me feel like I must constantly prove my worth.

And nowhere have I felt this more than in my sport. Fairfield County's athletic teams are known for their excellence—but not necessarily for their diversity. As a competitive swimmer, I step onto the pool deck knowing that, more often than not, I am the only brown-skinned girl in the water. Even when I succeed, the reaction isn't admiration but disbelief—comments like, "*How can you possibly balance everything? The academics, the athletics, the extracurriculars?*" No one asks others who succeed in multiple areas these questions. It's as if my accomplishments are unexpected, as though they were not supposed to be possible for someone like me.

Yet, despite these challenges, my identity has also been my greatest source of strength. Being different has given me a deeper sense of determination and resilience. I don't settle for less. I see the signs of bias now, and I don't let them define me. But here's the thing—belonging isn't just an internal issue. It's also shaped by our structures and systems.

Westport wants to be a place where every student feels like they belong, but how can we when there are almost no role models and peers who look like us? Walking the halls, sitting in classes, and joining school activities, I rarely see faces that reflect my own. It's not just a feeling—it's a *reality*. African American students make up only 1.8% of the school district's population, meaning that in a graduating class of 400-500, there are maybe seven of us. Seven. Not in one classroom, not on one team—but in an entire grade. We aren't just underrepresented; we are *scattered*, spread so thin that it's easy to feel invisible. And it's not just among students. In a building with about two hundred educators, I can count on one hand the number of teachers of color. Five—maybe fewer. In all my years of school, I've never had a teacher who shares my background, who understands—without explanation—what it's like to walk into a room and immediately feel like an outsider. To be the only brown-skinned girl in a classroom, in an AP course, or on a team. To always feel like I have to prove that I belong.

Representation is not just a statistic. It's about walking into a space and seeing proof that you can thrive there—that your ambitions are not anomalies, and that you don't have to be the *first* or the *only* one to be excellent. When we don't see ourselves reflected in leadership, in education, in success stories, we are left to wonder—*do we truly belong here?*

This isn't just an oversight; it's a missed opportunity. Representation matters—not just in the classroom, but in the way students see their futures. When teachers of color stand at the front of a classroom, they aren't just educators; they are proof that we belong in those spaces and that we can be scholars, leaders, and intellectuals. Westport needs to hire more diverse staff—not just to tick a box, but to show that they truly value all students and their experiences. While representation is important, the attitudes of educators also help unlock the potential students see in themselves. In my psychology class, I learned about implicit bias: how even well-intentioned people can unknowingly hold prejudices that affect their actions. Studies show that people can often—without realizing it—have lower expectations for students of color, are more likely to discipline them harshly or assume they need extra help (Quereshi & Okonofu; “Racial Bias”). This is not because they are bad people, but because bias is deeply ingrained in all of us.

This is why all teachers need to take implicit bias tests, not as an accusation, but as a tool for self-awareness. They need to recognize their biases, educate themselves, and actively work to do better. It's not enough to say, “I don't see color.” Because the truth is, the world does. Pretending otherwise doesn't erase the experiences of students like me—it erases the chance to change them.

For me, Westport has always been home and I will always love my home. But home should be a place where you don't have to fight to fit in. It should be a place where no student ever questions whether they are out of place because of their identity. Where our differences are not just seen but celebrated. Where the next girl of color walking into a classroom or diving into a pool doesn't have to wonder if she's the only one—because she won't be.

Westport is not a place of hate. But it is a place of gaps—of blind spots, of unintentional marginalization, of well-meaning people who don't truly understand others' realities. By sharing my story, I hope we can start closing those gaps and creating a community where true belonging means being understood, valued, and connected to those around you.

Works Cited

- Quereshi, Ajmel, and Jason Okonofua. "Locked Out of the Classroom: How Implicit Bias Contributes to Disparities in School Discipline." *SSRN*, 16 2 2024, https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=4702736&utm. Accessed 17 3 2025.
- "Teacher Racial Bias Matters More for Students of Color." *NYU*, 18 May 2017, https://www.nyu.edu/about/news-publications/news/2017/may/teacher-racial-bias-matters-more-for-students-of-color-.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com. Accessed 17 3 2025.