

**CATHY WURZER:** Glad you're with us here on *Minnesota Now* from NPR News. I'm Cathy Wurzer. Back in 2020, Qorsho Hassan was the first Somali-American to win the Minnesota Teacher of the Year Award. She did numerous media interviews at the time. Back at her school, she was celebrated.

Her students and fellow teachers all describe her as an exceptional educator and changemaker. But Qorsho is no longer teaching. In June, she announced she's leaving the classroom. So what happened? Qorsho Hassan is with us right now along with the reporter Becky Dernbach.

Becky reported on this story for the *Sahan Journal*. Kwersha and Becky, welcome to the program. How are you both?

**QORSHO HASSAN:** I'm doing well.

**BECKY DERNBACH:** Good, thank you.

**CATHY WURZER:** Good. Thank you. I'm so glad you're both here. Wow, Qorsho, there's a lot to talk about here. A lot went into your decision. Generally speaking, what was the last straw for you-- the thing that led you to leave teaching?

**QORSHO HASSAN:** I think it was the school year, realizing that things were not getting better, they were actually getting exponentially worse. And students, in particular, students of color, were getting less and less services and support. And I was noticing more and more trauma, and just realizing that the institution of public education was not serving all students equitably and just feeling really defeated.

**CATHY WURZER:** Do you think this may have been different had we not had a pandemic?

**QORSHO HASSAN:** No. I was noticing the systemic issues prior to. Especially here in Minnesota, I was quite surprised at how the state was first described to me. Being only here for five years, I was told that it was a very affluent, thriving state. But that only really applies to white folks.

**CATHY WURZER:** And your students of color, as you say, are suffering.

**QORSHO HASSAN:** They are. I would say this school year really posed challenges for all my students, particularly those that already are marginalized by the system. And just what really just broke my heart was watching them suffer and continue to not get their needs met in the guise of a system that was supposedly doing all that it could.

**CATHY WURZER:** Becky, when did you start to talk to Qorsho about some of the issues in the classroom?

**BECKY DERNBACH:** I think pretty early on. I met Qorsho when she won the Minnesota Teacher of the Year award in August 2020. And she was already talking about wanting to prioritize retention of teachers of color and some of these issues. I visited her classroom the following month, and she was already talking about some of these things and a lot of these things.

And it was the middle of a pandemic. Then from there, there were a bunch of other challenges that piled on top of that. There was the hybrid learning system that Qorsho's school was using. There was an incident where a police officer, who is now actually a candidate for Hennepin County Sheriff, Jay Hansen, complained about a picture book she was using in the classroom. And that spiraled into a social media firestorm that attracted a lot of attention, a lot of negative attention, on Qorsho-- and then the challenges with this last school year on top of all that.

**CATHY** Qorsho, do you feel like you've been pushed out of the classroom?

**WURZER:**

**QORSHO** I do. I actually really challenge the idea of teachers, in particular teachers of color, leaving the classroom willfully.

**HASSAN:** I think that we're constantly attracted and told that we would be retained. But the idea of this workplace being toxic doesn't really lend itself to us staying.

So no, I do not feel like I voluntarily walked away from the job. I love teaching. It's very much a part of who I am. And I'm struggling with the fact that I won't continue to do what I love. But I also really need to value myself.

And I know that I deserve better. And I know that in order to fight for more justice and liberation, I can do that from the outside as well.

**CATHY** Did you get any support from your school supervisors, other teachers of color?

**WURZER:**

**QORSHO** I got a lot of support from my second grade team, as well as the teachers of color at my school. My principal was pretty understanding of my decision. And I also think that this year, while it was incredibly hard and it felt very much like it was never-ending, I also really enjoyed being in community with my students.

**HASSAN:**

And they really understood. And I think that mattered the most is that my little humans had my back and they understood the toll that the school year and other school years have had on me. And that also felt like it was a really important lesson for them to understand the importance of taking care of you and prioritizing your mental health and your needs first.

**CATHY** Say, Becky, you've done a lot of reporting on teacher burnout. This feels like more than just burnout in Qorsho's case. Can you kind of flesh this out for us a little bit?

**WURZER:**

**BECKY** Yeah. I've reported on a lot of different reasons that educators of color are leaving the classroom. And there are some common themes. But also, people's stories are also very different and individualized. And I think that something I've been hearing a lot from educators is they don't feel like they're getting the support they need at school.

**DERNBACH:**

They're seeing systemic issues of inequality that we see in education, they've been seeing those exacerbated through the pandemic, which is really challenging. It's emotionally challenging, but then it's also a challenge to figure out how to serve those students who have more needs, even as school staffing levels have been declining.

**CATHY** Qorsho, I'm kind of curious about the union's role in all this. Did you get support from the union? Or is the union a barrier to change?

**WURZER:**

**QORSHO** I think both. My local union does a lot of-- and this is throughout the state-- but a lot of attracting teachers of color without realizing the space or the school site that they would be putting those teachers of color in and really kind of putting them in the line of fire. And I also feel like Education Minnesota does a wonderful job of stating the values and the mission of the work that needs to be done in order to be a teacher in the current times.

So I think what local unions can really do is be more aware of the needs of teachers of color, and not just using them as tokens and/or as people to learn from and not really do anything with that learning. And I also feel like, on the other hand, we as a system are realizing that while other sectors of the US, like police, are constantly being funded, public education is continuously being defunded as our needs become greater and greater. And so it's almost as if we have no choice but to function in disarray and chaos.

**CATHY** Say, Becky, I'm curious-- are education leaders listening to teachers like Qorsho?

**WURZER:**

**BECKY** It sort of depends what you mean by listening, right? I think that a lot of people are hearing stories like Qorsho's, and reading them, and taking them very seriously. At the same time, I think that what I'm hearing from a lot of teachers is that they want to see change based on their feedback.

**DERNBACH:**

And they feel like they're not seeing that. And so I think that sort of remains to be seen.

**CATHY** I might put you on the spot here, Becky, with this question-- but what do you think is lost when someone like Qorsho leaves the field of teaching?

**WURZER:**

**BECKY** Over the past two years, I have seen Qorsho in the classroom. I have reported on protests outside school board meetings. On Qorsho's behalf, I have seen her at awards ceremonies that I have just heard over, and over, and over again how much of a difference that she has made for students and how much of a role model she has been for students. And I've also heard-- this isn't the first school Qorsho left.

**DERNBACH:**

She was laid off from her previous job at Gideon Pond Elementary School in budget cuts. And I've heard from students at that school and parents at that school how much they had hoped they would have Qorsho as a teacher and how disappointed they were to not have that opportunity. And I think it's really hard to measure, but I think that it is really a large loss.

**CATHY** Qorsho, do you think you'll ever go back to a classroom? You mentioned that there are other ways that you can do the work you want to do. But where's it going to end for you, do you think?

**WURZER:**

**QORSHO** I don't know if I'll ever go back to the classroom. I don't think I will unless it's radically different from what it is now and that it serves all students. I think the level and quality of education that students of color are receiving in this state is abysmal. And unless that is rectified, I can't see myself really going back to what I call the crime scene.

**HASSAN:**

However, I do find myself always teaching, right? I don't think that teaching is exclusive to the four walls of a classroom. And so there's beauty in being able to advocate for quality education for all students, being able to be a part of something that is larger in terms of really calling for more accountability from our school leaders-- requiring that state funding be equitably distributed to all schools.

And so just thinking about ways of how I can be a change agent outside of the classroom has been something that I've been really stewing on. But I also have been really just prioritizing rest. I think it's really important, especially as a Black woman, that I take care of my well-being I've been through a lot and it's just not the past two years.

It's been more than that. And I think it's really important for me to step back, and to heal, and to process, and then figure out what's next.

**CATHY WURZER:** All right. I'd like to know what you plan to do in the future. Thank you so much for joining us. Becky also, many thanks to you as well.

**QORSHO HASSAN:** Thank you.

**BECKY DERNBACH:** Thank you.

**CATHY WURZER:** That's Qorsho Hassan and Becky Dernbach. Qorsho is a former Minnesota Teacher of the Year, Becky Dernbach is a reporter for *Sahan Journal*. That's an independent, nonprofit, digital news site dedicated to reporting for immigrants and communities of color in Minnesota.