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News

Bias-Related Harassment Plagues Public Schools

By Dennis McMillan

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Civil rights organizations representing broad sectors of communities joined together on Oct. 23 to call attention to incidents of bias-related harassment plaguing California's public schools. This is despite state laws that went into effect seven years ago to protect students. In 2000, the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act, AB 537 (Kuehl-D), was implemented to prohibit discriminatory harassment and violence in schools. Civil rights organizations described recent incidents of harassment and violence in schools and advocated for prompt, effective implementation of new local and state initiatives to address this problem.



Lance Chih, a recent graduate of Folsom High School, recounted his experiences as the victim of hate crimes at his school. He stated, "Three years ago, I experienced a series of hate crimes for being gay - starting with a death threat, moving on to a physical attack, and ending with sexual harassment in front of a teacher by two male students."

Unfortunately, Chih's experiences are not rare or isolated. "Far too many students continue to face harassment, ridicule and the threat of violence every day in many California public schools – not just because they may identify as lesbian or gay, but also because of their ethnicity, religion, disability or gender," said Kendra Harris, legislative advocate at Equality California. According to the 2004-2006 "California Healthy Kids Survey," which is supported by the California Department of Education (CDE), 37% of middle and high school students reported being the victim of harassment, and three-quarters of these experiences were bias-related.

Tamara Lange, a senior staff attorney at the ACLU of Northern California reported, "In the last six weeks alone, we initiated several investigations of school harassment or discrimination based on sexual orientation, race or gender identity; and we reached a settlement with an elementary school system in Bishop where Native American children were being harassed and assaulted by a school resource officer."

Angela Chan, a staff attorney at the Asian Law Caucus (ALC), also said that she has received a number of complaints from Asian Pacific American students in different school districts regarding harassment and violence. Some of these students reported the problems to their schoolteachers or administrators, often to no avail. "School districts must meet their responsibility under existing state law to respond promptly to incidents of harassment and violence, including investigating the incident and issuing a report stating any actions they will take to address the incident and prevent retaliation," Chan said. "Left unaddressed, victimization of youth based on race, sexuality, or another protected characteristic can have a severe impact on the victim - including substance abuse, delinquency, depression, and truancy."

Despite the troubling incidents of harassment in schools and the serious impact of harassment on victims, a recent study issued by the ALC showed that many school districts in California have not adopted anti-harassment policies. The survey, which was conducted in Spring 2007, found that 31% of the 75 school districts surveyed did not have any anti-harassment and violence policies in place. Another study conducted by the California Safe Schools Coalition found that many students and parents are unaware of nondiscrimination policies, with 23% of students and 29% of parents not being informed of the policies.

New state and local initiatives were announced to prevent bias-related harassment and violence in

schools, including passage of the Safe Place to Learn Act (AB 394). Authored by Assembly Member Lloyd Levine and co-sponsored by Equality California and Asian Americans for Civil Rights, this bill requires the CDE to play an active role in ensuring full and proper implementation of existing anti-discrimination laws that apply to schools. "This problem of school harassment will not go away without leadership by the Department of Education. We look forward to the implementation of AB 394 and urge the Department to do more than the bare minimum required by this new law to ensure that all of our children know that they are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect," said Lange of the ACLU.

At the local level, Jen Gasang, coordinator for the Asian Pacific Islander Youth Advocacy Network (AYAN), described the launch of a new system for reporting incidents anonymously in the San Francisco Unified District (SFUSD), which was made possible by the advocacy of AYAN, the ALC, and Chinese for Affirmative Action (CAA). Gasang said, "Managed by SFUSD, the Safe School Line aims to make our school community safer by providing three ways for students and parents to anonymously report incidents of harassment, violence, and intimidation to the District – via e-mail at safeschool@sfusd.edu, telephone at (415) 241-2141, and online at www.sfusd.edu."

Christina Wong, director of community initiatives at CAA, also announced a project called the Culturally Responsive Initiative to obtain funding and develop training for teachers in SFUSD to prevent bias-related harassment. "The goal of the Culturally Responsive Initiative is to decrease violence and harassment by supporting professional development activities that will ensure all students throughout the school district are given the opportunity to be engaged in a learning environment that values diversity," Wong said. "An initial step towards this goal is to provide teachers with training on culturally-responsive strategies and pedagogy."

The civil rights organizations have issued a call to action to reduce the incidents of harassment and violence in our public schools by urging the CDE and school districts throughout California to swiftly and properly implement these new state and local initiatives.