

Gay Student Advocates Speak School Board Hears Of Name-Calling, Violence, Teacher Reactions

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High school students who say they have been harassed and beaten up for being gay or befriending gay or lesbian students asked the school board Tuesday to take strong action to defend them in the schools.

Speaking during the public comment portion of the school board meeting, students and adult advocates complained of name-calling and violence by other students. They accused teachers of sometimes suggesting that students who are victimized should consider dropping out and getting an alternative degree.

"They say, `You should just leave - this is too much for you. Get your GED,'" said Regina Dyton, executive director for the Project 100 Community Center in Hartford, which includes a group that advocates on issues concerning gay, lesbian, transgender and transsexual people. "This is intolerable. This is a policy issue and it's a legal issue. You need to say loud and clear what the penalty is for encouraging a young person to quit school."

She said she knows one young person who was encouraged to drop out two years ago. He did, she said, and now he is having trouble finding a job. And she said she knows another student who was beaten up and "called a faggot and a sissy" while two teachers stood nearby laughing.

Bulkeley sophomore Moises Laurent said he is straight but has been tormented for being friends with gay students. "I have one teacher who pulled me aside and said, `Why do you hang around with these people?'" he told the board.

Laurent said that he is so often afraid to go to school that he has skipped nearly 30 times this year.

Outside the auditorium where the board was meeting, Richard Robinson, a junior at the Hartford Transitional Learning Academy, said that last year when he attended Bulkeley students there waited for him to leave the school and then beat him up for being gay.

"I was in two fights because I'm gay," Robinson said.

Cindy Dubuque, a hate crimes specialist for the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund, told the board that when students are assaulted because they are gay or because others think they are gay, it constitutes a hate crime.

The group took their concerns to Superintendent Robert Henry for the first time in January. Henry assigned a staff member to work with them and to oversee training for teachers.

"We are here to ensure a safe environment for all students to learn. ... We'll make sure we pay attention," Henry said Tuesday.

Board Chairman Wayne A. Carter said the administration's immediate response to concerns expressed over the winter illustrates the district's commitment to helping students feel safe.

"I happen to be a cleric who believes God's word supports a heterosexual lifestyle. I also believe the Christian message is a message of love. It condemns acts of bigotry, hatred and persecution," Carter said.

In other business, the board appointed Tory Niles as acting principal of Kennelly School. Niles was vice principal under Zoe Athanson, who recently died after a long illness.

The board also appointed Barbara D. Macauleyas principal of Hartford Transitional Learning Academy. Macauley had been acting principal for the school.

And the board approved moving forward with plans to move the Classical Academy to a renovated building on the corner of Woodland Street and Asylum Avenue for the 2004 school year. The school, which will be a magnet school, focuses on classic literature, Latin and astronomy.

The board tabled a proposal to revise the promotion and retention policy because some board members asked for more information.

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