

School district denies religious discrimination

SANTA FE, Texas (AP) — Officials with the Santa Fe Independent School District say they have no knowledge of threats and hateful speech a student claims to have experienced at the hands of other students because he is Jewish.

In documents filed in a Houston federal court, attorneys for the school district answered claims by Eric and Donna Nevelow on behalf of their 14-year-old son, Phillip. The family filed suit against the district in August demanding \$5 million in damages for emotional and financial suffering, claiming

Phillip suffered hateful speech and actions for two years and officials did nothing to stop it.

School officials denied the allegations, saying they did not have sufficient knowledge to respond to the claims.

Galveston civil rights attorney Anthony Griffin, who also sued the district over its pre-game prayer ceremonies, is representing the family. In June, the Supreme Court outlawed amplified, student-led prayer that had the assent of school officials. The district, which was the defendant in the case, got rid of the traditional pre-game prayer in July.

Throughout their 10-page defense in the Nevelow case, district officials deny any wrongdoing, calling the allegations vague and mischaracterized.

The district says the family's allegations that another student drew a swastika on Phillip's book cover was misleading. The family claimed Phillip was showing another student how to write a Hebrew letter when the other student said, "I'll show you another language," and drew the Nazi symbol on Phillip's book.

School officials said there "allegedly was an incident in which Phillip Nevelow and an-

other student drew swastikas on a sheet of paper," but that Phillip was also to blame.

"The first student allegedly drew the swastika incorrectly, and Phillip showed the first student how to draw one correctly," their answer says.

The family said the district's failure to act on their complaints supported "intentional acts of discriminatory conduct" and "encouraged students, parents and supporters of the district's prayer in school crusade to disrespect and dishonor any religion or beliefs not their own."

Texas lags in juvenile justice

HOUSTON (AP) — A juvenile justice system that emphasizes extracting guilty pleas from youth more than providing them a quality defense is giving Texas a standard rating in such legal matters, a new report shows.

Many poor teen-agers accused of a crime do not see a lawyer until just before a court appearance, Texas, which ranks last among states in funding for legal aid, according to the study to be released Tuesday by an Austin-based non-partisan group studying criminal justice systems.

"The report found that justice in many Texas juvenile courts runs like an assembly line," the group, Texas Appleeed, stated. "Children often meet their appointed counsel minutes before their hearing, counsel recommends the child plead guilty, the judge accepts the plea and the defendant is sentenced at his first court hearing, and it's on to the next case."

Texas ranks second to California in incarcerating youths because too much emphasis is placed on getting guilty pleas, according to the report.

Alternative sentences such as treatment for drug or mental health problems that could keep youths out of state schools are routinely overlooked by judges, said Bill Beardall, legal director of Texas Appleeed.

"The juvenile courts are the most important gateway in the entire criminal-justice system," Beardall said in the Houston Chronicle Tuesday. "They are positioned at that very early stage, when juveniles can either be diverted into being productive, stable members of society or carelessly passed into juvenile in-

"[Juvenile courts] are positioned at that very early stage, when juveniles can either be diverted into being productive, stable members of society or carelessly passed into juvenile incarceration ..."

— Bill Beardall
Texas Appleeed legal director

carceration, which frequently leads down to a path of crime. In Texas the latter is happening."

The report, "Selling Justice Short: Juvenile Indigent Defense in Texas," is the first in a series of reports the group is preparing on how poor people are treated in the criminal-justice system.

The American Bar Association, the University of Houston Law Center, the National Juvenile Defender Center, Northwestern University Legal Clinic and the Southern Poverty Law Center all participated in the study.

Vincent Schiraldi, director of the Justice Policy Institute in Washington, D.C., and the Center on Juvenile and Criminal Justice said Texas ranks last in funding.

"But the state is at the bottom in funding because there is no state funding," Schiraldi said. "That is left to the counties, which are already tax-strapped."

Officials with the Texas Youth Commission, the Texas Association of Counties and the Texas District and County Attorneys Association withheld comment before the report's release.

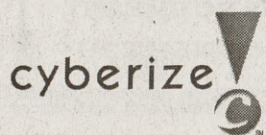
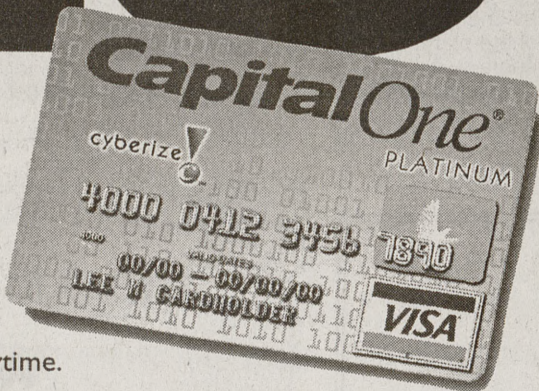
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