

Jewish parents lodge religious complaints

SUGAR LAND (AP) — Two Jewish parents, spurred to action by a suburban Houston school district's support of a football-prayer resolution last winter, have returned with an array of allegations about religious problems in several local schools.

Among the charges leveled by parents Frank Levy and Hillary Goldstein was that two Fort Bend Independent School District middle schools promoted after-school prayer meetings this fall, with one allowing posters featuring crosses.

Also, they said Fort Bend Austin High School required Jewish students to bring notes from rabbis so they could miss school Oct. 9 to observe Yom Kippur, one of Judaism's most important holidays.

"There were four or five points to deal with," Levy said of the Oct. 23 board meeting where he and Goldstein laid out their complaints. "We expect them to respond in some detail."

On Monday, Fort Bend's superintendent Don Hooper responded to each of them during the district's regular board meeting.

Hooper said the principal allegation — the requirement of an excuse note from a rabbi — stemmed from an error due to an inexperienced school official.

"The investigation of that concern has de-

termined that a brand-new administrator innocently gave incorrect information on that subject during freshman orientation at Austin High School," Hooper said.

"We realize there is an evolutionary process to get these things changed. I think the school district really wants to address these issues."

— Dena Marks
Spokeswoman for the Houston chapter of the Anti-Defamation League

"We do apologize for that mistake and the administration has taken appropriate action to insure that sort of mistake does not occur again."

Hooper also said that a school principal

may be permitted to announce the activities of student religious groups over the public address system and via posters "so long as the same opportunity is given to every other student group on campus."

Other allegations included a teacher's computer screen saver that displayed the words "Jesus Christ," and an elementary school nurse who called Jewish parents on Yom Kippur to inquire about absent children.

Hooper said he was only able to confirm two such calls and said it is standard practice for the nurse to check on absent students who have not given prior notice they will be missing school. The screen saver allegation could not be confirmed, Hooper said.

Levy briefly addressed the board members Monday, thanking them for investigating the allegations and providing explanations where they could.

Levy noted the school board has a clear policy barring religion from school affairs and that district legal counsel Bernadette Gonzalez appears to have been responsive in addressing the issues.

Hooper said he asked Gonzalez to draft comprehensive guidelines to ensure school policy is in compliance with state and federal law. He also promised diversity training for teachers and administrators.

"I think what they did is a start," Goldstein said. "But I also think they have a long way to go. I believe the tolerance and diversity training is key."

Dena Marks, spokeswoman for the Houston chapter of the Anti-Defamation League, said the organization was monitoring the issue but had not taken a stance either way.

"We realize there is an evolutionary process to get these things changed," Marks said. "I think the school district really wants to address these issues."

Marks added that, based on her organization's dealings with Gonzalez, any alleged problems do not appear to be systemic.

However, Levy said he and other Jewish parents have scrutinized the district since it passed a nonbinding resolution in February supporting the State Board of Education's defense of the football-game prayer policy at Santa Fe High School.

The prayer policy, rejected this summer in a highly publicized U.S. Supreme Court decision, allowed students to initiate prayer over the loudspeaker at Santa Fe home games.

"(The state resolution) was designed to be inflammatory and a rallying point for people of like beliefs," Levy said.

News in Brief

15-year-old testifies against rape suspects

HOUSTON (AP) — A 15-year-old girl took the stand Monday to describe what prosecutors said was "every girl's nightmare times nine" — her December gang rape by nine men and teen-agers in a field after she was offered a ride home from a birthday party.

"I kept telling myself it was a dream that I was going to wake up," the girl told the court in tears.

The girl testified during the first day of the trial of three of the nine males accused of gang-raping her a total of 12 times in a field on Dec. 19 last year.

Jose Vasquez, 21, Ismael Roman, 23, and Juan Hernandez, 17, are being tried together on charges of aggravated sexual assault of a child.

The girl testified the crime happened after the suspects offered to drive her and her 14-year-old friend home from a quinceñera, which is a 15th birthday celebration in Mexican culture that marks womanhood. She and her friend accepted because they could not find a relative to pick them up, the victim said.

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