

Educators, be (and inspire) the change you seek

Written by Adora Obi Nweze Florida State Conference President NAACP
Tuesday, 05 June 2012 15:36

The St. Lucie County (FL) School District has a bullying problem that appears to start with the teaching staff and filter down to the students.

The parents of fifth-grader Jonathan Jean have filed suit against the school district, alleging the district allowed their son, a special needs student, to be verbally and physically abused by his reading teacher. The suit says the teacher repeatedly insulted Jonathan in front of the class and, in October, allegedly pushed a desk into the child, daring him to move. The Jean family's lawyer says that Jonathan's condition has worsened and he has had nightmares for months following the incident. Jean was forced to remain in the teacher's class and the instructor received no disciplinary action. Though the lawsuit focuses on Jean's status as a special needs student with an individualized educational plan, there are additional factors to consider: Jonathan is of Haitian descent, his reading teacher is white.

While national education conversations have turned to bullying, and Florida conversations are examining discriminatory treatment of African American students linked to their classroom behavior, it is distressing that St. Lucie schools are not taking the Jean family's allegations more seriously. The school district should use this incident to overhaul its policies and stamp out trends that raise broader concerns about discrimination.

According to data reported to the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights, in 2009 there were 29 incidents of bullying and harassment on the basis of race, color or national origin. Of the students who reported being bullied, 20 were Black boys, just like Jonathan Jean. There were no reports of bullying or harassment on the basis of special needs status or gender (the only other choices provided).

What's more, although 31 percent of the students in St. Lucie's schools for 2009 were African American, they accounted for 53 percent of the out-of-school suspensions for that year, a large and disturbing disparity. Each of the 10 students expelled from the St. Lucie district in 2009 was African American.

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Beyond this case of one bad teacher, the failure here lies with St. Lucie School District officials. By allowing this teacher to remain in the classroom and failing to mount any serious investigation or corrective measures, they failed to send a message that such behavior was intolerable. The school district and faculty should set a tone that bullying is unacceptable – among peers and especially from a teacher – toward a vulnerable child. Schools will never succeed in teaching students to be more responsible and compassionate toward one another when the adults around them are allowed to model the opposite behavior, and do so with no repercussions.

Moreover, officials forced the student in this case to remain in this teacher's classroom where he confronted his tormentor daily. Having deprived one student of the opportunity to learn, the school district needs to learn from its mistakes. The district should do whatever it takes to place Jean in a setting where his educational needs can be met – even if that means going outside the district's boundaries. More teachers need training and support for teaching (academically, socially, and ethnically) diverse students. Additionally, the District should also overhaul the personnel policies that allowed complaints to mount with no intervention.

A 2009 law required each district to reform its policies for student discipline. That law addresses how districts handle suspensions, expulsions, referrals to law enforcement, arrests and incidents of bullying and harassment. Now that communities have a baseline of federal data from that same year, they should make it a priority to eliminate the disparities along racial lines that show up in trends like those observed in St. Lucie schools.

The academic cultural shift has to extend from the top administrators to school-level employee and on to students. The message must be clear that bias in treatment will not be tolerated, whether the perpetrator is an administrator, a teacher or a student. The case in St. Lucie should serve as a cautionary tale for school districts across the state to investigate similar occurrences with vigor.