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Rift Over Recruiting at Public High Schools

A Seattle High School Bars Military Solicitation, Touching Off Debate Over Iraq War and Free Speech

by Dean Paton

SEATTLE - While most Parent Teacher Student Association meetings might center on finding funding for better math books or the best way to chaperon a school dance, a recent meeting here at Garfield High School grappled with something much larger - the war in Iraq.

The school is perhaps one of the first in the nation to debate and vote against military recruiting on high school campuses - a topic already simmering at the college level. In fact, the Supreme Court recently agreed to decide whether the federal government can withhold funds from colleges that bar military recruiters.

High schools are struggling with a similar issue as the No Child Left Behind Act requires that schools receiving federal funding must release the names of its students to recruiters. Some feel that's an invasion of privacy prompted by a war effort that has largely divided the American public. Others say barring recruiters is an infringement of free speech - and a snub to the military, particularly in a time of war.

Garfield High School took a decisive step last week with a vote of 25 to 5 to adopt a resolution that says "public schools are not a place for military recruiters."



ANY TAKERS?

Army Staff Sgt. Christian Marsh watched a wave of students pass by at the Edmonds-Woodway High School in Edmonds, Wash. Recruiters are struggling to meet enlistment numbers. (Photo/Dan Delong/Seattle P-I)

All this comes as recruiters struggle to meet enlistment goals.

Although PTA chapters are supposed to be "nonsectarian and nonpartisan, which means nonpolitical," according to Jenny Sopko, a spokeswoman for the national PTA in Chicago, Garfield's PTSA cochair maintains that its action is "wholly consistent with our mission."

"The mission of the PTA is to protect and defend kids," says Amy Hagopian, a mother of three whose son is a Garfield senior. "It's not just limited to education issues - which explains why the PTA takes positions on kids' health, violence, and other serious issues."

Garfield, with 1,600 students, is one of Seattle's top high schools, routinely producing bumper crops of National Merit Scholars, plus internationally acclaimed student orchestras and jazz bands. It's also racially diverse, with African-American students making up 31 percent of its student population.

Like so many schools today, Garfield grapples with painful budget cuts, loss of teachers, and dwindling resources. The school's opposition to military recruitment seems, in part, a result of parents' growing realization that tax money spent for the Iraq war is money not spent on children's educations or other domestic needs.

"They're spending \$4 billion a month in Iraq, but we have to cut our race relations class, which costs \$12,500," Ms. Hagopian pointed out. "That's an important class for our kids."

During discussion at the PTSA's meeting last week, Ted Inkley argued against the resolution because he thought it dangerous to deny free speech to organizations simply because their philosophies or intentions disagreed with the PTSA.

Mr. Inkley, an attorney whose daughter is a senior, told the crowded library he could "easily" see a resolution by some other PTA that banned Planned Parenthood representatives from campus because of their views on contraception and abortion.

Steve Ludwig, whose son is a senior and whose daughter will enter as a freshman next fall, made a point shared by many in attendance: Garfield does not allow organizations that promote illegal activities to recruit students to perform those activities, nor does it allow organizations that discriminate on the basis of race, gender, national origin, or sexual orientation to recruit on campus.

"Planned Parenthood, as far as I know, does not advocate or perform illegal acts. The US military does," Mr. Ludwig continued. The soft-spoken carpenter said he would not object if Army representatives came to Garfield to debate their ideas on torture or aggressive war. "What I object to is their coming here to recruit students to perform those acts," he said. "It's not about free speech."

Nationally, there's a growing sense that recruiters desperate to bolster falling enlistment numbers are misrepresenting sign-up agreements to entice recruits. In response to 480 allegations of improprieties by recruiters since Oct. 1, the Army announced it will suspend its recruiting for one day on May 20, so commanders can remind its 7,500 recruiters of proper conduct.

Douglas Smith, a US Army spokesman, said the job of recruiters is not to make promises but to show applicants possibilities and career options.

"As for a recruiter making promises and not following through, the recruiter's not in any

position to promise anything. We hope that all our recruiters are communicating honestly with our applicants," Mr. Smith said. But he added, "In the contract [between the new soldier and the Army] it says, 'Anything the recruiter may have promised me is moot.' "

Smith also pointed out the legality of military recruitment activity on campuses. "The No Child Left Behind Act requires schools to let us have access to these students," he says.


Indeed, the resolution by Garfield's PTSA is more symbol than policy, for Seattle, like virtually all school districts, requires high schools to give recruiters access to students - or risk losing federal funding under Section 9528 of the act. School districts also are required to notify parents and students that they may "opt out" by signing a letter preventing recruiters from getting their names.

In response to Garfield's resolution, Seattle's district issued a statement reinforcing its policy of allowing recruiters to work on high school campuses, but also said it would increase efforts next fall to make it easier for parents and students to opt out.

"Nothing in this resolution prevents students desirous of joining the military from doing so," said Sasha Riser-Kositsky, a Garfield sophomore from a written statement during last week's meeting. "Indeed, there is a recruiting center within a five-minute walking distance of Garfield."

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