

ANOKA-HENNEPIN SCHOOL DISTRICT

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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Support, not litigation, is the best path to aiding GLBT students in Anoka-Hennepin

The Anoka-Hennepin School District has asked the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR) to provide assistance in developing additional employee training to support GLBT students. The district is currently in collaborative discussions with the federal Department of Justice and the US Department of Education Office of Civil Rights over the need for additional employee and student training on GLBT issues. SPLC and NCLR have access to resources that could support the district's joint effort with the Department of Justice and the Office of Civil Rights.

"We believe the interests of our students would be better served if we could put our energies and resources into working together to develop materials that directly support students," said Carlson. "Rather than focusing on litigation we would prefer to invest in materials that would provide a positive outcome for students for years to come." Specifically, a new training program and a best-practices video on LGBT issues would equip staff to support LGBT students. These materials also could be shared with districts across the country.

This invitation is in response to a threat from the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) and the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR) to bring a lawsuit against the district unless the school board eliminates its Sexual Orientation Curriculum Policy.

The Sexual Orientation Curriculum Policy allows discussion of sexual orientation in a respectful manner that is age appropriate, factual and related to the curriculum and it asks that while teaching in the classroom staff "remain neutral on matters regarding sexual orientation."

The school board feels the policy is appropriate for the community and is not changing the policy at this time. With respect to GLBT issues, "our community is split and opinions vary widely," said Carlson. "We are



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committed to following the law and appreciate the guidance of the Department of Justice Office of Civil Rights. SPLC and NCLR could support these efforts without harmful litigation.”

The district’s Sexual Orientation Curriculum Policy is constitutional. The Supreme Court has recognized that public school officials have a valid interest in taking neutral positions on matters of public controversy. In a letter to the district threatening the lawsuit, SPLC and NCLR alleged the district had failed to take action regarding five current and former students who were harassed and bullied due to their actual or perceived sexual orientation.

The district took those allegations very seriously and retained an outside law firm` to conduct an extensive investigation of each situation. The investigation found the district’s response was prompt, reasonable and appropriate in each case. When the initial complaints were registered, staff investigated and gave appropriate consequences, including suspension. Due to data privacy laws, victims and their families are not always made aware of the discipline given to offenders.

“Our highest priority is ensuring that all of our students feel safe in school, free from bullying and harassment of any kind,” said Carlson.

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