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OP-ED CONTRIBUTORS

A Free Ride for Bullies

By NEHA SINGH and KHIN MAI AUNG

A SHY high school freshman, Harpal Singh Vacher, ended the school year last spring as the latest collateral damage in a citywide political tussle. What began as a childish argument with fellow students on May 24 ended with Harpal crouched on a bathroom floor at Newtown High School in Elmhurst, Queens, his previously unshorn hair littered on the ground around him.

In keeping with his Sikh faith, Harpal had kept his unshorn hair tucked inside a dastar, a religious turban. The police say that his attacker, a high school senior named Umair Ahmed, had removed Harpal's turban and cut his hair to punish him for making derogatory comments about Mr. Ahmed's mother — comments for which Harpal had apologized.

The Queens district attorney has charged Mr. Ahmed with a hate crime. The case is one of the few in which anyone has acted to stem bias-based harassment in city schools, though only after the damage has been done. The City Council recognized and addressed the systemic gaps in countering prejudice and intimidation in public schools years ago, when it passed the Dignity for All Students Act in 2004.

The bill requires the New York City Department of Education to establish procedures to protect children. These include creating anti-harassment policies and communicating them to students, parents and administrators in several languages; reporting annually on incidents of harassment; and explicitly making harassment a basis for disciplinary action.

Unfortunately, the City Council and Mayor Michael Bloomberg are locked in a stalemate on whether to put the law into effect. As a result, children like Harpal are suffering.

And Harpal is not alone. A survey released by the Sikh Coalition this summer shows evidence of a larger pattern of harassment in New York City public schools. More than 75 percent of Sikh boys surveyed who attend schools in Queens complain of being regularly harassed and intimidated by classmates. Students hit them on the head or on their turbans, calling them "terrorists" or "diaperheads."

Many of them never report these incidents, because they doubt administrators will respond. Their fears are not unreasonable: the survey found that of those Sikh students who complained about being harassed, nearly one-third were ignored.

The problem is not limited to Sikh children or religious prejudice. At Lafayette High School in Brooklyn, which has a large population of immigrant Asian students, complaints grew so numerous a few years ago that the United States Department of Justice was forced to intervene.

While Mayor Bloomberg, who supports the state's version of the city's anti-bullying legislation, waits for

Albany to take action, the Department of Education needs to do what it can to keep our schools safe in the interim. The department has no excuse for dragging its heels. If our politicians cannot agree on a law, we need effective chancellor's regulations prohibiting bias-based harassment and making school administrators truly accountable for student safety.

Chancellor Joel Klein believes that adequate rules are already in place. But the prohibition against peer harassment in school is a scant few lines buried deep within the department's disciplinary code. It took us two hours of digging to unearth a simple list of punishments for bias-based harassment, but no definition of what constitutes discrimination or harassment; the idea that immigrant parents would be able to find it is absurd.

And although a policy may be on the books, enforcement is another matter. Whether through anti-bullying legislation or its own regulations, the Department of Education needs to hold administrators accountable for ignoring student complaints. This means better tracking of harassment incidents, educational outreach and mandating meaningful annual reports on bias in schools.

The department must do more to maintain an atmosphere of mutual respect in our schools. Education officials need to recognize that New York's strength lies in its diversity — something that should be a cause for celebration, not division, among our youth.

In the meantime, Harpal did not return to Newtown High School this month. Instead of waiting for the Department of Education to foster diversity, he's moved to a school with more Sikh students like himself, hoping that it will provide a more tolerant learning environment.

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