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Schools ignore ethnic abuse: Liu

By Philip Newman

City Councilman John Liu (D-Flushing) has accused the mayor and school officials of failing to crack down on ethnic abuse, such as a recent incident at Newtown High School where a fellow student was accused of forcibly shoring the hair of a Sikh teen. "This kind of behavior, in which students subject minorities to abuse and harassment, has been going on for years, but it has become much worse since 9/11," Liu said. "And by failure to acknowledge and act against it, the mayor and school officials tend to encourage it."

Liu, Councilmen David Weprin (D-Hollis), Hiram Monserrate (D-East Elmhurst) and Robert Jackson (D-Manhattan) and the officials of the Sikh Coalition attended a rally outside the Tweed Courthouse in Manhattan Monday.

The occasion was in response to last week's attack against Harpal Singh Vacher, a Sikh freshman who keeps hair long and wears a turban in accordance with the mandates of his Sikh faith.

Police said the student's hair, which he normally keeps at below-waist length, was cut off at his shoulders by an older student in a bathroom at the Elmhurst high school.

Liu said school officials "have to understand harassment does exist in the schools and when administrators turn a blind eye to that harassment, they in turn tacitly approval of even more harassment."

The Sikh Coalition in Manhattan sent a letter to Schools Chancellor Joel Klein urging him to combat ignorance about Sikhs with education and meet with community groups to promote diversity and preach tolerance.

The Sikh Coalition handed out copies of its report that said three out of four Sikh boys who attend Queens schools have been harassed or teased because of their religious identity and that more than 40 percent of Sikh students who wear turbans or patkas (head coverings for young boys) have been subjected to some form of physical harassment, such as hitting, punching or disrespectful touching on the head.

"In Queens, 59 percent of students who reported incidents spoke to someone about what happened to them," the report said. "Nevertheless, across the board nearly a third of those requests for help went go unheeded."

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