

Harassment of Muslim sixth-grader is deplored

An advocacy group says the school responded slowly. School officials defend their actions.

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ST. PETERSBURG - Pinellas school officials were slow to respond after an 11-year-old Muslim girl was harassed, humiliated and last week threatened with death by a boy in her science class, a local advocacy group for Muslims charged Monday.

However, district officials said the staff at Azalea Middle School quickly took appropriate action and that the boy had been disciplined.

The problems started from the beginning of the school year for the St. Petersburg girl, said Ahmed Bedier, executive director of the Tampa chapter of the Council on American-Islamic Relations, known as CAIR. Eighth-graders at Azalea taunted her because of her Muslim head scarf, he said. They called her a terrorist and asked if she was hiding any bombs.

The harassment stopped after her parents complained to the school, Bedier said. Then a sixth-grade boy began to bother her about 10 days ago, punching her in the arms and shoulders and once holding her against wall, his hands around her throat, he said.

On Wednesday, the girl cried after the boy ripped off her Muslim head scarf in second-period science class, revealing her hair and neck. For a Muslim female, Bedier said, the action is akin to someone tearing off your skirt.

According to the girl, the science teacher witnessed the incident and told her to put the head scarf back on in the restroom.

The next day, when she asked to be moved to a different seat, the teacher told her she had to "work for it," the girl said. Later during the period, the boy promised to start rumors the girl was a lesbian and said he would get a gun and kill her, Bedier said.

By Friday, after her parents complained, the teacher allowed the girl to sit away from the boy, Bedier said. Also, a school official told the parents they would handle the situation, he said.

Yet, by end of the day, the girl said she had not been interviewed by school officials or law enforcement officers.

"There's no reason or justification whatsoever that, after repeated incidents of harassment and assault, officials at the school would not take action to prevent further things from happening," Bedier said.

District spokeswoman Andrea Zahn said the school responded to the head scarf incident on Wednesday. She said the boy has received appropriate discipline, that procedures were followed properly and that a school resource officer determined the gun threat to be unfounded.

She said the district's policies on keeping student information confidential prevented her from being more specific. Asked whether the school would separate the boy and the girl, Zahn said Azalea administrators "took appropriate procedures to ensure that the student would feel comfortable in her classroom settings."

Bedier responded to the district's account, saying: "I think they need to re-examine what happened and reinterview people. I think they're speaking out of ignorance."

Before making the gun threat, he said, the boy told the girl it appeared school officials did not take her complaint about the head scarf seriously.

"From what we see, the message he got from school officials is this is not a big deal," Bedier said.

In a news conference, the girl, whose first name is Hannah, said she wants to switch to a more tolerant school. The family said she did not attend classes Monday because no one from the school called them to say how the incident was handled. Bedier would not release the girl's last name.

Speaking in a determined voice and flanked by her parents, Maria and Mourad, Hannah said she felt afraid and "should be treated like everyone else is treated because I'm the same way that others are."

Asked why she wears the head scarf, she said: "Because I love my faith. And I chose to put the scarf on because my mom is my role model and she teaches me to put the scarf on. She teaches me to be a good Muslim too."

Zahn said Azalea has been proactive in trying to prevent bullying and name calling. She said it is one several schools piloting an antibullying program this year.

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