

NOTE: IDENTIFYING INFORMATION REDACTED



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May 2, 2012

Peter Nero
Superintendent
Cranston School Department
845 Park Avenue
Cranston, RI 02910

Dear Superintendent Nero:

The Rhode Island ACLU was contacted last week by the single mother of a student at a Cranston school. She called us to express concerns about an upcoming event that has been scheduled by the school PTO group. Although we do not expect anything to be done before that event takes place, both the ACLU and RI NOW share her concerns. We are therefore writing to request that you intervene to address this matter for future activities.

The event that has been organized is a dinner dance. For at least the past two years, these dances have been open to all students to attend with an adult of their choice. This year's event, however, is labeled a "Me and My Guy Dinner Dance," where "ladies" were invited to bring "the adult male" of their choice for "a night of dinner, dancing and lots of fun."

The complainant is a single mother who has raised her daughter. As she noted to us, this dance event excludes not only all boys at the school, but also those female students who, like her child, do not have a close adult male in their life to take them. The gender-exclusive nature of the event chosen this year for the children is made even more problematic because of its promotion of gender stereotypes: while the girls are invited to a dance, it is our understanding that the planned event for the boys is a Pawsox outing.

The variety and diversity of family structures in this day and age counsel against gender-limited events like this. We assume that the PTO has recognized this fact by holding dances in the past few years that were open to all students. Its reversion to a more stereotypical format results in the unintentional isolation of some children, preventing some single parents, and those in other non-traditional families, from being able to attend events with their children.

In addition, assigning girls to a “me and my guy” dance, while sending the boys to a baseball game, serves only to perpetuate outmoded notions of appropriate “girl” and “boy” activities. In the 21st Century, these stereotypes simply do not hold any force, nor should a school be attempting to promote them. We are sure that, contrary to notions that may have ruled the day decades ago, some girls would be much happier attending a baseball game than a dance.

Our complainant made concerted efforts to try to informally resolve this matter before contacting the ACLU. She talked with the PTO president, with the principal and with your assistant superintendent about making this year’s dance similar to the inclusive dances of past years. Although she has since been told that she is welcome to attend the dance with her daughter, this hardly addresses the more fundamental concern she is raising. In fact, it would only lead to what she is trying to avoid: the isolation of her daughter if she is the only student to attend the dance with a female adult.*

In addition to the important policy issues raised by her, her concerns are also supported by long-standing laws designed to end gender bias in education, particularly to the extent that proposes very different types of events for boys and girls. While the federal law prohibiting sex discrimination in education, known as Title IX, contains an exemption for “father-son” and “mother-daughter” activities, it emphasizes that “if such activities are provided for students of one sex, opportunities for reasonably comparable activities shall be provided for students of the other sex.” 20 USC 1681(a)(6) (emphasis added). A dance for girls and a baseball game for boys, particularly in light of the stereotypes they embody, are not, we submit, “reasonably comparable” activities. To the contrary; the stereotypes at their core undermine the goal of school anti-discrimination laws.**

While neither the dance nor the anticipated Pawsox event is being organized by the school itself, it is clear that these events have the school’s imprimatur, for the school is responsible for facilitating their events. Not only does the school provide the PTO its own bulletin board and table in the school to promote activities like these, the organization is also prominently highlighted on the school’s web site. More directly, the event notices are given to the students in school, through teachers, only with school approval.

* In an attempt to respond to her objections, the PTO has sent out a revised event notice, which now states that that girls can bring an “adult,” rather than just a “male adult,” of their choice, and advises parents to call if they have “any questions or concerns as to whom your daughter may attend the dance with.” But since the event is still labeled a “Me and My Guy Dinner Dance,” it is unlikely that parents will realize the significance of these revisions.

** A companion state law also rejects gender bias in the school setting, expansively applying (with only a few unrelated exceptions) a ban on discrimination in “employment practices, admissions, curricular programs, extracurricular activities including athletics, counseling, and any and all other school functions and activities.” (emphasis added) R.I.G.L. §16-38-1.1.

Page Three
Superintendent Peter Nero
May 2, 2012

In sum, we hope that the school district will work to discourage, not promote, the sort of typecasting activities inherent in the baseball and dance events for school students. Since the dance is being held shortly, however, we recognize that there is little that can be done to address this particular situation, nor are we seeking any immediate action on your part that would interfere with this imminent event. However, we believe it is incumbent upon school officials to advise the PTO, and any other organizations with which the school district has an active partnership, about the problems associated with events like these using school resources. We respectfully request that you so advise the organization.

We realize that some people may view these types of gender-based events as benign. But sex discrimination and stereotyping are no small matter. The public schools, of all places, should be especially wary of promoting gender stereotypes or inadvertently isolating some children from full participation in school activities. We trust you will agree with these concerns.

Thank you in advance for your attention to this matter, and we look forward to hearing back from you about it.

Sincerely,

Steven Brown
Executive Director
Rhode Island ACLU

Carolyn Mark
President
RI NOW