

School Board News

National School Boards Association

Some school leaders say military recruiters have too much access

By Ellie Ashford

3/15/05 -- While some school leaders believe the military offers just one more option for students to consider, others think recruiters are too aggressive and that students' privacy should be better protected.

The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) gives the armed services unprecedented access to potential recruits long before young men turn 18 and are required to register with the Selective Service.

With the escalating war in Iraq making it harder for the military to reach its personnel goals, high schools are seen as a rich recruiting ground, particularly schools where most students don't plan to go to college.

NCLB requires access

Under NCLB, schools must give students' names and phone numbers to the military unless students and their parents sign an opt-out form stating they don't want the information given out. NCLB also requires schools to give recruiters the same access they provide to colleges and employers. Failure to comply can result in the loss of federal funds.

The opt-out forms often are buried in the voluminous amount of paperwork students and parents receive on the first day of school. The large majority of students don't turn the forms in, so schools must give their directory information to recruiters.

To avoid that problem, the Fairport (N.Y.) Central School District sends a letter to all parents asking them if they want to opt in (and have their child's contact information given to recruiters) or opt out. The district does not give out the information unless it receives a form back from parents stating they want the information given out.

"We have interpreted [the NCLB provision on recruiter access] and feel ours is the correct interpretation," says Fairport school board Chair Christine Heisman. "We think this is absolutely the right way. We don't want to hand over student information to anyone. The military wants special privileges."

This policy has not discouraged students from seeking information about the military, Heisman says. This year, 71 parents signed the opt-in form, compared with 60 last year and 48 the year before. The high school has an enrollment of 1,600.

Nevertheless, "the military registered disappointment about our procedure," Heisman says, noting that the Defense Department has requested a meeting to discuss the matter.

Heisman and Superintendent William Cala say they will resist any efforts to provide recruiters greater access to student directory information. "The Army wants to make it as difficult as possible to opt out," Cala says. "They want to get kids to join with the least input from parents."

"I expect it will be a battle," Cala says. "It will not be a quiet affair. Our board is determined not to cave in."

Legislation proposed

In response to school officials' and students' concerns, Rep. Mike Honda (D-Calif.) introduced the Student Privacy Protection Act in February. It would amend NCLB to prohibit military recruiters from contacting students unless they and their parents specifically opt in.

"I don't believe successful military recruitment efforts require access to students' personal information without their consent," Honda says. "The right to divulge or not divulge personal information about minors should remain with the students and their parents."

In 2003, the San Francisco school board passed a "student/parent privacy policy" establishing an opt-out policy on student directory information, but had to change to an opt-in policy after the U.S. Education Department threatened to cut off federal funding, says board President Eric Mar.

The school board also had to change its longstanding policy to not allow military recruiters in the schools.

"Military recruiters haven't been very aggressive in San Francisco because they know of our efforts to protect privacy rights," Mar says, and because of the strong antiwar sentiment in the city.

Mar says the district intends to "educate parents and students as much as possible about their privacy rights and alternatives to the military." He would like to see the board create a task force to monitor "counter military recruiters," such as the AmerBcan Friends Service Com.mittee and other peace groups on campus.

Aggressive tactics

Recruiters come to high schools armed with plenty of incentives, including an \$8,000 signing bonus and the promise of college tuition and training for high-paying jobs.

They hold push-up contests to break the ice with students, glean information from yearbooks, target popular students, drive students home from school, and chaperone dances.

The Army's \$1.1 million aviation van travels to high schools across the country with cutting-edge flight simulators.

"Recruiters tend to gear their efforts to the working poor -- the students most vulnerable, with fewer options, and no money for college," says Arlene Inouye, a speech teacher at Roosevelt High School in East Los Angeles and the coordinator of the Coalition Against Militarism in Our Schools.

In Los Angeles, "it's pretty much up to administrators to determine whether to be friendly to recruiters or not," Inouye says. At Roosevelt High, an enormous year-round school with 5,200 students, she says, recruiters can only come once every three or four months and are restricted to a lunch table.

But at other Los Angeles high schools, recruiters have more access, and have even been permitted to call students out of class. She also says recruiters target immigrants and offer them a faster track to citizenship. She says they've shown up at schools with fully equipped Humvees with music blasting and promotional materials in Spanish.

While her school has made an effort to publicize students' rights to opt out, other schools have not done so. She tells of an incident in Los Angeles last fall when members of the Fairfax High School football team stormed the principals office because they were angry at not being told of their right to opt out.

Superintendent Cala says Fairport Senior High School used to give recruiters “quite liberal access” to the campus. But that changed after an incident where a Marine recruiter harassed a member of a student peace club and later left a threatening message on the student’s home phone. The recruiters behaved in a way that was “over the edge and way out of line,” he says. Now recruiters have to make an appointment before coming to the school.

Informed decision making

Jan Thaczyk, a counselor at Cape Cod Regional Technical High School in Massachusetts, says she has heard reports of recruiters seeking out lower-income students or using misleading tactics but hasn’t seen it at her school.

Recruiters must call ahead and make an appointment and are given a table in the cafeteria, she says. “Students who are interested can go to the table and get information. It’s optional and available.”

About 3 or 4 percent join the military every year, she says, and it hasn’t changed since the war began.

“My job, along with parents, is to explain to students the degree of obligation if you sign up,” Thaczyk says. “Students should never take that lightly in wartime or not.” If students need help making a decision, she invites parents and recruiters to a meeting to help sort through the information. She tells students, “If you feel you’re not ready, don’t sign.”

Kevin Quinn, the counselor at South Kingstown High School in Wakefield, R.I., who doesn’t oppose giving recruiters more access, says, “Counselors want students to look at all postsecondary options and make informed decisions.” Recruiters are in the school every week, he says, targeting seniors who haven’t applied to college.

Before NCLB, a school board policy prohibited administrators from giving student information to anyone, including recruiters, Quinn says.

“I don’t push the military. I do push for informed decisions,” Quinn says. His advice to students: “Do not sign until you’re positive. Do the homework and be informed. Get it in writing.”

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