

December 3, 2009

Dear Veronica, district leaders, GVJH staff, and principals,

In response to the recent article published by CNS News, I'd like to clarify the misinformation presented regarding the presentation series that Just Communities provided to the GVJH Leadership Class November 18th-20th, 2009. As the presenter, I'd like to take this opportunity to clear up what I can and to provide you with more information about the presentation series. I've attached a statement outlining the purpose and topics covered in each of the three sessions, how this content is aligned with California educational standards and state legislation, and the need for education regarding safety and inclusion for all students. I've also attached the full presentation packet from the three-session series. More information responding to specific claims in the article is below and attached.

The aim of the presentation series was to help student leaders foster a safe, respectful, and equitable school environment for all students, regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation. The presentation topics were as follows:

1. Session 1 Topic: Overview and Sexism (50 minutes)
 - a. Welcome and Overview
 - b. "Roots of Violence" activity: Exploring the connection between bullying and violence and discrimination and inequality.
 - c. Sexism: "Act Like a Man / Act Like a Lady" Activity: Exploring societal messages about gender roles and the bullying, harassment, and violence young men and women experience based on gender role expectations
 - d. Discussion: Creating a safe, respectful campus environment free from gender-based harassment
2. Session 2 Topic: Heterosexism and Homophobia (50 minutes)
 - a. Welcome and review
 - b. Definitions related to sexual orientation, heterosexism, and homophobia
 - c. Media Examples: Recent hate crimes against gay youth
 - d. Discussion: How students can work to create a safe, respectful campus environment free from harassment based on sexual orientation
3. Session 3 Topic: Racism and Being an Ally (50 minutes)
 - a. Welcome and review
 - b. Definitions: Stereotype, Prejudice, Discrimination, Oppression, Racism

- c. Media Examples: Racial stereotypes in advertisements, cartoons, etc.
- d. Discussion: Racial stereotypes at school and how to change them to ensure that all students – regardless of racial or ethnic background – are treated with respect and dignity.
- e. Closure: Being an ally and promoting a safe, equitable school community.

The presentation content was developed by Just Communities and combines original work and adaptations of a nationally recognized violence prevention program called *Making Allies, Making Friends: A Curriculum for Making the Peace in Middle School* (<http://www.amazon.com/Making-Allies-Friends-Curriculum-Middle/dp/0897933079>).

The article references the definitions and diagram related to sexual orientation and gender identity. During Session 2, the diagram on page 8 of the packet was used to clarify the definitions presented on page 9. We use this teaching tool to help clarify common confusion about the difference between biological sex, gender identity, and sexual orientation. At no point were students asked to circle or even consider how they personally identify. The student whose materials have been circulated chose to draw on and circle words on the diagram on her own; this was not part of a class activity or assignment. In fact, Just Communities believes it is not safe to ask students to identify their sexual orientation or gender identity in a classroom setting and it is therefore against our practice to do so. The purpose of the definitions presentation is to provide students with accurate language about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people to replace common derogatory terms and to clarify myths about this population. Having accurate vocabulary about a group of people is essential to creating an environment where they can be treated with dignity and respect.

The article claims that most of Just Communities' materials focused on sexual orientation and gender identity. It's certainly true that we believe that it is critical to address harassment based on sexual orientation and gender and our materials reflect this. As described above, the first session of the series focused on gender and sexism, the second on homophobia and heterosexism, and the third on race and racism. Materials pertaining to sexual orientation represent three pages of the fifteen page packet.

The "Act Like a Man/Lady" Activity referenced by the article is a widely used activity used to explore societal messages that students receive from a variety of sources including their families, peers, and the media about how an "ideal man" or "ideal woman" should act and the consequences people face if they don't fit this ideal (for example, a young man who does not like sports or a young woman who does not wear make-up may both face insults and harassment). The activity is followed by a

discussion about how to promote a school environment that is safe for all students, including those who don't fit into these narrow ideals.

The article also states that the presentation included a discussion of Proposition 8. A discussion about public policy was not a part of any of the presentations. During the second session, a student asked a question about what the proposition was and I clarified it and moved on; this concluded the discussion. Students were at no time asked to share information about how their parents voted on the proposition or how they felt about it.

The article claims that I made statements about students "becoming" LGBT as a result of their friendships. I did not make this statement and there was no discussion of why or how people's sexual orientation develops. To further clarify, Just Communities does not believe that there is any connection between a person's friendships and their sexual orientation and we would not make such an inaccurate statement.

Finally, I'd like to clarify that during the "Agreements" portion of the initial session we established that all students had the right to participate in the class activities or not to the level they felt comfortable. All students were given the option to "pass" at any time during the discussion and measures were taken to ensure that students felt comfortable doing so. All homework assignments were completely optional.

Just Communities promotes open dialogue with the communities we serve. We have offered to meet with the concerned parents in person to explore our presentation materials and to answer any questions they might have, but they have declined. We would be happy to meet with any members of the GVJHS staff, the district office, or other schools to discuss these matters. If you have any questions or would like any additional information please don't hesitate to contact us at (805) 966-2063 or alena.marie@justcommunitiescc.org.

Thank you,

Alena Marie
Program Manager, Just Communities Central Coast
www.justcommunitiescc.org

Just Communities Central Coast advances justice by building leadership, fostering change, and dismantling all forms of prejudice, discrimination and oppression. Just Communities envisions an equitable and inclusive Central Coast where all people are connected, respected and valued. Just Communities was established in 2001 as the National Conference for Community and Justice (NCCJ) of California's Central Coast.