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Teach-in Postponed Until Pro-war Side Added



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By Stacie Williams

Before the larger war teach-in in Oakland, a smaller teach-in at Memorial High School in Madison, Wis., was almost swept under the rug back in December.

The district postponed the student-organized teach-in after a student called a local right-wing radio show to say that he felt the teach-in was "unbalanced."

Enough negative calls and e-mails to the district and the radio station came through in a few hours — some calling the district "subversive" and "anti-American" — that school super-intendent Art Rainwater invoked a district policy that says that "in the study of controversial issues" the district must provide instruction "in an atmosphere as free as possible from bias and prejudice." The district interpreted that policy to mean the teach-in organizers had to include pro-war speakers.

Sophomore Rachel Blumenfeld, a student who helped organize the teach-in, was extremely disappointed at the district's action. "I had several Muslim friends who were very uncomfortable with the pro-war speakers, and we wanted it to be a place where people felt comfortable, and some people felt like they were being attacked," said Blumenfeld.

Blumenfeld said she has also experienced harassment at school because of her anti-war organizing. Some of the posters for the teach-in were torn down, defaced, and placed in urinals throughout the school. Hostile students called her a "stupid, stoner hippie."

The Memorial High teach-in was pushed back from December 3 to December 13 and, even though attendance was optional, 1400 of the schools' 2100 students came. Freshman Micah Herstand attended and thought that the only downside was that the teach-in should have been longer.

"I had an idea of what it was for beforehand, but after hearing every reason why we should or shouldn't go to war, now I know all the reasons," Herstand said. "I liked it because it was kind of like a debate with rebuttals."

Memorial High School teacher Pat Calchina, who served as a moderator for student organizers, says the school board "buckled to right-wing pressure."

"This is really disturbing. The attacks on [me] would not be as vociferous if this were not about war," Calchina said. "It's all this 'are you or are you not patriotic' stuff. I think that dusty old rule was pulled out of the pocket because it was about war." Calchina says there are plans in the near future to have a teach-in on military recruitment in the schools. But, she says, the debate is not over. "From this, it is obvious that peace is controversial in the district."

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