

# 4J STUDENTS FACE RACE-BASED DISCRIMINATION

**Incidents increased post Trump's election** BY KELLY KENOYER WITH REPORTING BY JESLYN LEMKE

*EDITOR'S NOTE: The names of the mothers in this story, Brenda and Rosa, are pseudonyms to protect their children from retribution.*

**T**his past September, Brenda went to pick up her 5-year-old son from kindergarten at McCormick grade school. "The principal said he was at the office and to come get him," she says. Brenda followed the principal to an office containing her son, locked in and crying. "She felt like he was going to hurt her and she said she didn't know what to do," Brenda says.

Her son ended up suspended within a week of joining the kindergarten class and was removed to a one-on-one program at Fox Hollow Elementary School. He was the only Hispanic student in the class at McCormick.

Brenda and Rosa are both social workers, both have kids in the 4J school district, and both are Latina. They say that 4J has serious problems with discrimination against Latino students, and not just at a peer-to-peer level. Principals, vice principals and teachers have all harmed their kids in various contexts, they say. And under a Trump administration that has targeted immigrants, the tension has increased for their families and those they work with.

Brenda tells this story about her 14-year-old son: When he was in sixth grade at Kennedy Middle School, they had a meeting with the assistant principal. When her child told the assistant principal that he hoped to someday become a biologist, he said you need "a big bank account" to become a biologist.

"The look on his face ... I knew he was discouraged," Brenda says. "My son is so bright, but he says he feels like a loser. He feels like he's not going to make it because of that comment the assistant principal made."

Rosa adds that her son, now 19, admitted at a recent counseling session that he thinks he's too stupid to be college material. "All he ever heard from second grade on was that he was stupid and he would never be anything," Rosa says.

Brenda says the only Hispanic teacher her kids ever had was a Spanish teacher. "They need to start by hiring more bilingual and bicultural teachers," she adds.

Rosa's kids had a white Spanish language teacher at South Eugene high who brought her class to Chapala Mexican Restaurant for a field trip. "Chapala's is not where you go to get a cultural experience. It's actually offensive," Rosa says.

Both moms say their kids and the kids they work with have become more afraid since Trump came into office. "I know for my kid it really affected his anxiety," Rosa says. Both say they've had community members say threatening things to them in public places since the election. They've seen their own kids called slurs like "beaner" and have heard from other parents that threats of the wall and "being sent back to where you came from" are often floated by students at schools in the 4J district, and the administration does little to prevent it.

the next 90 days. It also states that the district "does not collect information on the immigration status of students or parents" and will not release student records without a court order, search warrant or subpoena.

Fifteen-year-old Gissel Narvaez, who identifies as Latina, spoke to a full crowd at the Feb. 15 meeting about the ongoing venomous and hostile racist comments she and her peers face at Sheldon High School. Racially motivated bullying, Narvaez said in a later interview, became a huge problem at her school in the weeks following Trump's nomination.

"One of my friends, he is undocumented. Ever since the election, he got scared to come to school," Narvaez says. "When Trump was finally put into office, the fear got so high he just dropped out because he was scared."

Narvaez says Sheldon High School's hallways became openly hostile in the weeks after the Trump nomination, so much so that school administrators held a Unity Assembly to remind students about equality and unity among ethnic groups.

"Ever since we had that, things have been dying down," she says. She noted most of her Latina friends at school — about 10 in all — come from undocumented families. She spends time comforting friends worried they might come home to an empty house because ICE has taken their parents.

4J school district is 14.7 percent Latino/Hispanic and 69.3 percent white according to statistics from the 2016-17 school year provided by 4J school district.

"Advocating takes so much work and energy — even for us parents who work in the field, who know our rights, who know the language, as opposed to parents who are trying to stay invisible and earn a living," Rosa says. Undocumented status can be a huge barrier for parents who may want to advocate for their children, she says, so "They just try not to pass a lot of ruckus."

Even without such barriers, "it's overwhelming for us as parents to deal with the 4J district," Brenda says.

When it comes to the recent push to make 4J a sanctuary school district, Rosa says, "It's a start. I'll give them that. But they need to listen to the needs of the community and not just say that they do."

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*Gissel Narvaez, 15 SHELDON HIGH SCHOOL*

Asked to comment, 4J associate communications director Kerry Delf writes in an email, "Bullying, harassment and discrimination are not acceptable behavior in 4J schools, and reported incidents are taken seriously."

At the urging of many angered and worried Latino families and their advocates, the 4J school district passed a resolution on Feb. 15 that affirmed many of the school's existing policies about providing information to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

The district's last two board meetings have seen dozens of citizens urging the school board to pass more robust measures to protect the undocumented Latina families from federal authorities. Though the wording of the resolution doesn't contain the term "sanctuary," it does require some training for staff and administrators within



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