Lawrence Public Schools may <u>not</u> be the Discrimination-Free Learning Environment they claim to be.

Poster in the lobby of the Lawrence school district's main office may not apply for diversity and tolerance of differing political beliefs?
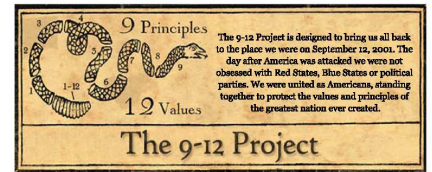
By: Greg Ward

On Friday, May 15, 2009, Kansas 912 Project members met with David Cunningham, the Division Director of Human Resources for USD 497 in Lawrence, Kansas. The Kansas 912'ers met with Cunningham to learn more about the district's decision not to renew the contract of a Lawrence High School U.S. History & Government teacher. The teacher, who is also a Kansas 912 Project member, posted a comment on the kansas912.com website claiming the district was not renewing his contract next year because his political views differed from those of the high school staff and administration.

Prior to meeting with Mr. Cunningham, the Kansas 912'ers met with the teacher and then later met with the teacher's union representative from the Kansas National Education Association (KNEA). The KNEA representative stated the district admitted they violated the current employment contract by failing to do required in-class evaluations in accordance with the teacher-agreement. He also indicated LHS administrators appear to have harassed the teacher over an assignment where students were asked to contrast the pro's and con's of each presidential candidate during the fall election and again because his class did not watch the Presidential inauguration live in his classroom. Harassment also included a Vice Principal confronting the teacher about - who he should vote for - and by making disparaging remarks like "how can you support that woman", in reference to Sarah Palin.

In addition, the teacher was also knocked by other staff members who criticized him for displaying a McCain/Palin bumper sticker on his car and one administrator even demanded he remove links from his teacher webpage to government and historical websites including the armed forces and Arlington National Cemetery, suggesting the teacher's page was "too patriotic".

Another Kansas 912 Project member that lives in Lawrence and has two daughters that were students of the LHS teacher, said his daughters were told by other staff members that budget-cuts were the reason why the teacher's contract was not being renewed. Contrary to these reports however, the district is currently advertising an open position next year on the district's website in the very same department at LHS. When we asked the district's HR director about this, David Cunningham would only say the matter was confidential. While the teacher has taught for 19 years, this was his first year in the Lawrence school district and Cunningham made it clear that the district has the legal right to terminate his employment for any reason. Our response to Mr. Cunningham was that although this may not be a legal question, it certainly seems to be an ethical one and while the district may have the legal right, condoning an intolerant environment and terminating an outstanding teacher because of his political beliefs is simply WRONG!

The representative from KNEA we spoke to also raised the question of whether the teacher's first amendment rights may have been violated. If so, students, school administrators, board members and the entire Lawrence community may be in store for a first-hand education in government and what the U.S. Constitution and freedom of speech is all about.

The next school board meeting will be Tuesday, May 26 at 7:00 p.m. There is an effort by students to attend the meeting and voice their opposition to losing a well-liked and engaging teacher that challenged their thinking. We also call on all Kansas 912'ers and Lawrence residents alike to flood this school board meeting in support of these students and take a stand against this apparent effort to rid our schools of diversity of political belief. It's time the people we entrust to run our schools learn that we are not going to allow them to teach our kids that it's OK to coerce or dispense with anyone that may not share the same beliefs they have.

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