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Education

City schools settle complaint filed for Somali refugees

Tuesday, May 23, 2006

By Joe Smydo, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

The Pittsburgh Public Schools agreed to enhance services for students learning English as a second language, settling a discrimination complaint filed on behalf of Somali Bantu children, the refugees' lawyer said yesterday.

Nancy Hubley, associate director of the Education Law Center and managing attorney of the nonprofit center's Pittsburgh office, said the district has agreed to develop policies for integrating English-language learners into classrooms and for guarding against racial and ethnic intimidation.

Ibrahim Muya, a Lawrenceville resident and leader of Pittsburgh's 200-member Somali Bantu community, and Khadra Mohammed, executive director of the Pittsburgh Refugee Center, said the agreement offers hope to children who had been denied education in their war- and poverty-shattered homeland.

"This is just one step. We're still looking for more steps," Mr. Muya said, citing the students' need for more intensive daily language instruction.

In a statement, city school Superintendent Mark Roosevelt said the district "is committed to creating the appropriate learning environments for all students, including English-language learners. We are pleased to have a resolution that meets the needs of the Somali Bantu students and community."

The Education Law Center last May filed a complaint with the U.S. Education Department's Office of Civil Rights, alleging the school district unfairly segregated more than 50 Somali Bantu students and failed to communicate with the students and their families in a language they understood.

Ms. Hubley yesterday said the Somali Bantu were isolated not only from American peers but other students learning English as a second language. While teachers and other employees tried to accommodate students, she said, the district had no uniform procedure for assessing the students' individual needs.

She said the district did not hire a Somali translator and tried to communicate with the refugees in Swahili, an African language many didn't know well. She said the district did not adequately address the students' complaints of physical abuse and

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harassment by American students.

About 100 Somali Bantu now attend city schools, making them the school district's largest group of English-language learners.

About 1 percent of the city school district's 31,000 students are learning English as a second language, a low number for an urban school district. Ms. Hubley said the district may have been overwhelmed when dozens of Somali Bantu enrolled after settlement here two years ago by the United Nations.

In their homeland, the Somali Bantu are a persecuted minority descended from slaves. They are denied schooling, job opportunities and car ownership, and their plight is compounded by Somalia's poverty, Ms. Mohammed said.

She said the refugees fled Somalia because of the 1991 civil war and, after periods in refugee camps, arrived in the United States without knowing how to use a telephone or flip a light switch. The adults have taken entry-level, low-wage jobs, hoping education will give their children more options.

While Ms. Hubley filed the complaint on behalf of Somali Bantu students, she said the settlement potentially benefits all English language-learners.

Ms. Hubley said the district will hire a Somali-speaking ombudsman for the students and communicate with families of all English-language learners in a language they understand. She said the district agreed to train teachers and principals on the needs of English-learning students and to develop a policy handbook on integration and related issues.

(Joe Smydo can be reached at jmydo@post-gazette.com or 412-263-1548.)

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