

Support bill to protect students from military

As the number of GIs killed in Iraq passes 2,000, and more than 10 times that many young American men and women have been sent back wounded and maimed, parents are taking a harder look at military recruiting in our schools.

School principals are under heavy pressure from the federal government to turn over the names, home addresses and home phone numbers of students as young as 16 to military recruiters. Military recruiters call students at home offering all kinds of inducements to join up. Parents who have been trying to get their children to focus getting a good education then have to battle the recruiters for their kid's future.

The recruitment pressure is especially heavy in low-income communities. A recruiter told the Los Angeles Times, "We certainly don't discount any school. But if 95 percent of kids in that area go on to college, a recruiter is going to decide where the best market is. Recruiters need to prioritize."

A recent Government Accounting Office study found that more than 80 percent of the Iraq casualties among GIs were from lower-income urban and rural communities.

The military has principals in a hammerlock, thanks to the fine print in the Bush administration's 700-page "No Child Left Behind" education bill. Section 9528 says if schools don't provide students' information to recruiters, schools will lose all federal funding.

The federal law says parents or students can "opt out" of the recruiters' Rolodex by filling out a special form that schools are supposed to send home. In some Alameda County school districts, parents must fill out the form or write a letter requesting that their child's information be kept private.

In a growing number of schools, students — often together with parents, teachers, and administrators — are campaigning to make people more aware of their right to opt out. Concerned parents have started the "Leave My Child Alone" movement (<http://leavemychildalone.org>), and other organizations, including ACORN and Working Assets, have added their voices of concern. Several local school districts have interpreted the federal law to permit an "opt-in" system: Schools won't release student information to recruiters unless parents sign a paper requesting the disclosure. The Alameda County Board of Education earlier this year passed a resolution urging districts to ensure that all parents and students understand their rights.

Rep. Mike Honda, D-Campbell, has introduced a bill that would empower parents to protect their high school age children from unwanted contact by military recruiters. This bill (HR 551) deserves support. Dubbed the Student Privacy Protection Act of 2005, the bill would amend No Child Left Behind to replace "opt out" with "opt in." Parents who want their children exposed to home phone calls from military recruiters could opt in. Otherwise, the student's information remains private.

Honda's proposed bill puts the burden where it belongs: on the recruiters, not on the parents. It's not an anti-military or anti-war bill; it's a pro-education bill. Focusing high school students on education is hard enough already.

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