

A zero-tolerance policy for fighting ignores self-defense

By John Longenecker

In a Jan. 30 letter to parents, the Bellflower Unified School District announced that, effective Feb. 2, administrators may direct the School Community Policing deputy to issue a citation to a student who commits, among other offenses, fighting.

This citation would require an appearance in Norwalk Juvenile Infraction Court of both child and parent, and may involve penalties of community service, a fine ranging in excess of \$800 and possibly a delay in the child's obtaining a driver's license.

I'm in agreement with naming vandalism, truancy and violations relating to drugs and alcohol as ticketable offenses, but I have a real problem with the penalty for fighting.

My objection to this policy is that the victim of the bullying can too easily be swept up in the policy enforcement of safe campuses when the facts of the incident may be unknowable to administrators and, more troublesome, if the value system of the child and parents clashes with that of the administration, as it seems to in their announcement.

I am informed by officials at BUSD that matters would be investigated, but I know also that sometimes the facts are not discoverable, and that if the report of the school to the Norwalk court is given weight following a citation, it may be most unjust to consider a report that contains administration values that all violence is bad, including self-defense. Irrespective of how previous students may have fared in the system, this announcement indicates a significant change in the business of non-violence in Bellflower schools.

More and more, schools and other institutions are endeavoring to discourage violence, and in the process are refusing to differentiate self-defense from aggression. To them, it doesn't matter who started it.

This has a chilling effect not on discouraging fighting but in discouraging resistance to violence. Where the objective is to discourage violence, policy makers must recognize resistance as the first line of defense against violent crime, including intimidation by force, battery and all the other acts of aggression, adolescent or otherwise.

Failing to discern who started it — not caring to know and certainly not including such a finding in a final report handed in to the court, otherwise it wouldn't have made it that far — is to abdicate the responsibility of the doctrine of *in loco parentis*, or why we may trust our schools



with our children. The doctrine necessarily presumes that the school will act in the interest of the child as a parent would, and this necessarily would mean to endeavor to protect the innocent, from both bullies and the unjustness of agenda and an unsympathetic judicial system.

Citing both children without regard for who started what is to betray this important trust.

If the administrators do not adhere to the value system of parents who don't want their innocent children at the mercy of the bully, but insist on adhering to their own value system as superior in spite of parental protest, then we have a frightening issue with trust and national direction.

I wouldn't mind this policy as much if it mandated that the school investigating the incident determined who started it prior to completing the direction to the Community Policing deputy to issue a citation to anyone, if at all. Self-defense should not be penalized when a bully starts the fight.