

My Fight against Racist Bullying in Philadelphia, PA Schools

Shota Iwasaki
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Pastor Shota and his family

Shota Iwasaki is the local pastor of the Philadelphia Family Church in Germantown. Below, he recounts a difficult situation in which he, as a father, fought to protect one of his sons, who was a victim of bullying.

THE PAINFUL TRUTH

When one of our sons entered middle school, my wife and I were concerned that because there were only a handful of Asian students in the school, he may be bullied. As expected, one of his classmates did antagonize him. Our son eventually reported this to his teacher. The harassment continued, however, so he finally told my wife about it. "I don't want to go back to school anymore!" he told my wife. It was so painful for us to hear that our child was in so much agony.

Full of concern, my wife asked that I go to our son's school to try to resolve the problem. Although I work long hours and return home late every day, I knew that I needed to address this issue. My son needed to know that I, his father, would stand up for him whenever he desperately needed my help. Thus, I went to speak with the person responsible. The school official I spoke with took immediate action and the problem was resolved.

AT A STANDSTILL

Although this first bullying situation dissipated quickly, our son was subsequently harassed by two more students. A student sitting next to him in class started kicking his seat and even pulled his hair. He informed his teacher yet again about the constant bullying. It was not until he finally told my wife he wanted to move to another school, and I then went again and spoke to the official in charge, that the problem was dealt with.

When our son asked if he could transfer to a different school after yet another student began to bully him, we were willing to find a better, more loving educational environment. In accordance with Philadelphia School District regulations, we filed a report with the district and appealed for a transfer. Three weeks passed, but we received no response from the district. My wife and I again returned to our son's school. We were devastated when the vice principal notified us of their decision: the district will not be approving our son's appeal to transfer, feeling that his school is adequately handling our son's bullying situation.

This decision was made without a single conversation with me and my wife. We were so frustrated -- our son faced repeated, constant difficulties with other students in his school. He would have no choice but to continue being in an unbearable environment.



Pastor Shota speaks at anti-bullying conference

AN OPPORTUNITY FOR CHANGE

A few months after the disappointing news, my wife and I had the opportunity to speak about my son's situation with Pennsylvania state representative, Stephen Kinsey at an American Leadership Conference (ACL) event. He invited us to speak at a local anti-bullying press conference that was to be held a few days later. There were several speakers lined up in addition to myself, including: Rep. Kinsey, Pennsylvania state representatives Isabella Fitzgerald and Chris Rabb, Philadelphia councilwoman Cindy Bass, representatives of local police departments and victims' advocate organizations, Jeff Templeton, executive director of Staying Positive Equals Amazing Kids (SPEAK), and Mark Smith, a victim of bullying who gained national attention when a video of a vicious attack against him by teenagers was posted on social media.

My wife and I were very grateful to have the opportunity to share briefly about the battle we'd been through. We explained the story of our son's repeated experiences of being bullied, and we expressed our frustration that it took as long as it did to resolve. We also expressed concern that other minority parents who work long hours might find it difficult to invest the time and effort needed to resolve any similar situation. This opportunity would not have been possible had our Heavenly Parent not created the situation for us to meet Rep. Kinsey at the ALC conference last month.

A NEW YEAR

The school year has begun and our son is in a new class. Thankfully he has found good friends and so far we have not heard any complaints from him. In considering how to prevent a repeat of the previous year's troubles, I thought if he is able to raise up his self-esteem, he will be less likely to become the object of bullying. To support him in that effort we set up a basketball hoop in our backyard. He is currently practicing every day and wants to join the school team in the spring.

If he encounters another difficult situation, I now have contact information for an advocate who will help us to engage effectively with the school system, by putting us in touch with people in the district who can support us to deal with the problem within our local school. We are so thankful to Heavenly Parent for allowing us to attend the ALC conference and meet Rep. Kinsey. I know that it gives our Heavenly Parent so much joy to see our son, His beloved child, free from bullying.