

Castle Park High ruled in violation of gender-equity law

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April 1, 2009

SOUTH BAY – A federal judge has ruled that Castle Park High School has allowed “significant gender-based disparity” in sports at the expense of female athletes.

In a summary judgment ruling this week, Judge M. James Lorenz stated that Castle Park is not in compliance with Title IX, the 37-year-old federal law that forbids sex discrimination in any education program or activity receiving federal funds.

Measures to remedy the situation will be determined later.

The ruling stems from a suit filed against the Sweetwater Union High School District in April 2007 by Castle Park softball players. They said girls had worse sports facilities than boys and fewer chances to participate in athletics.

The court granted their suit class-action status in August on behalf of all present and future Castle Park female students who seek to play sports.

“I hope this order serves as a wake-up call to other high schools that they must bring their athletic programs into compliance,” Vicky Barker, legal director of the California Women's Law Center, said in a statement.

Jerry Schniepp, coordinator of athletics for the Sweetwater district, said the district already has spent “a significant amount” to improve facilities.

“We're working very hard to get into compliance and bring the girls' facilities up to where they should be,” Schniepp said.

The summary judgment ruling was made on one of the plaintiffs' four claims against the district: unequal participation opportunities in violation of Title IX. The remaining claims will go forward in court, including one that the district retaliated against the plaintiffs by firing their coach after they complained of discrimination.

The plaintiffs showed that while female enrollment at Castle Park was around 45 to 50 percent since 1998, female participation in athletics was 33 to 41 percent during those years. Lorenz ruled the district also failed the other two main elements of Title IX compliance: showing a continuing practice of expanding opportunities for girls and demonstrating that female interest and abilities have been accommodated.

Over the past 11 years in the county, the Ramona school district, Mesa College and the Grossmont Union High School District have faced similar legal complaints involving Title IX and subpar softball facilities.

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