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RPV school apologizes for graduation-cap flap GUNS: Principal has agreed to measures to ensure dispute over toy figures won't be repeated.

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A Rancho Palos Verdes elementary school has acknowledged it was wrong when it forced fifth-graders to remove the rifles of toy army men from graduation caps in June.

Cornerstone Elementary School Principal Denis Leonard has also agreed to measures that district leaders said would prevent a repeat episode in 2008.

This fall, Leonard will set up a committee of parents, teachers and students to review district policy and bring military representatives on campus to "present educationally beneficial perspectives of the military," according to a statement posted to the Palos Verdes Peninsula Unified School District Web site.

Students returned to the school Sept. 4.

The committee will review the district's zero-tolerance weapons policy cited by administrators in June as justification for Leonard requiring 11 students to clip off the plastic weapons of 2-inch soldiers glued to mortarboards used in a promotion ceremony.

Leonard again declined to respond to Daily Breeze calls to discuss the matter, but Superintendent Walker Williams said the district hoped to avoid further problems.

"We don't want to repeat mistakes or offend people," Williams said Tuesday. "We didn't intend to offend."

The district's public apology, which was posted on the Web site in late August, acknowledged that "students maintain certain free speech rights in the school setting."

In July, Williams and other district officials met with Glen Nakata and his 12-year-old son, Austin, one of the students asked to remove the plastic rifle tips.

"I'm glad they're taking these steps," Nakata said. "It is beneficial that these kids learn about the military."

Nakata's son now attends sixth-grade classes at Palos Verdes Intermediate School.

Also this summer, an attorney representing the National Rifle Association reviewed the district's policy banning firearms from campuses.

Long Beach attorney Chuck Michel said he told the district it couldn't ban plastic army men.

"The NRA was looking into what the school district had done," Michel said. "This school district recognizes that they don't have any reason for doing this."

Michel said the issue should be included in the district's dress code, rather than its zero-tolerance weapons policy.

Christine McNamara, whose son Cole was also asked to remove plastic rifle tips, again scolded the district.

"What will happen next year?" McNamara asked rhetorically. "We'll see how they apply zero tolerance and how they exercise good judgment."

In June, the district supported Leonard's decision to direct the students to remove the plastic rifles.

In enforcing the decision, the district cited its Safe Schools policy and the federal Gun Free Schools Act of 1994, a federal law designed to remove firearms from schools.

A teacher at Cornerstone started the mortarboard tradition about a decade ago. About 60 fifth-graders participate by decorating the hats to reflect their future career goals.

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