

Would resolution endanger free speech?

School board votes tomorrow on controversial gay/lesbian issue

Norman Siegel doesn't like what he's hearing about the Staten Island Community School Board.

The executive director of the New York Civil Liberties Union (NYCLU) said the school board would be trouncing on free speech if it adopts a resolution tomorrow night banning discussion of gay and lesbian families in first-grade classes.

And if parents or teachers wish to challenge the resolution, the NYCLU has offered its legal assistance.

The board will vote on the resolution at its meeting 7 p.m. in Prall Intermediate, West Brighton. If the measure is adopted, teachers who flout the policy could face disciplinary action.

Patricia Talaszek, district representative to the United Federation of Teachers, said the precedent would be "very dangerous" and vowed to defend any teacher brought up on charges.

"How (is the school board) going to police this? Are they going to listen to everyone's door, check with kids? It sounds like something out of the McCarthy era," she said.

Driven by his "own philosophical drive as well as the wishes of the community to guarantee that our curriculum meets the value system of Staten Island," Jerry Cammarata, the board's curriculum committee chairman, spearheaded efforts to delete sections of a Board of Education guide called, "Children of the Rainbow."

The section asks teachers to be aware of various family structures, including gay and lesbian ones. It also encourages teachers to acknowledge the "positive aspects of each type of household" and to include references to lesbian and gay families in "all curricular areas."

Cammarata said the section is not "age appropriate."

"We are tolerant of all people, but we don't go out and teach people that's what they should do," he said.

Censorship?

Siegel said the resolution constitutes an "act of censorship."

"If they are going to allow teachers to teach about families, and exclude certain kinds of families in the curriculum, the precedent is troubling. If they can ban discussion on gay families, that then they could say you can't



Laura D'Angelo

SCHOOL OF THOUGHT

have a discussion of interracial families or interreligious families and onward," he said.

Siegel said the NYCLU would consider taking the board to court if "a teacher or a parent objected to the resolution and wanted to challenge it."

"We hope that the board won't pass the resolution. It raises some serious constitutional questions if a teacher decided to discuss a gay family and (the board) took any punitive action," he said.

Alan Bell, president of Lambda Associates of Staten Island and the father of a 14-year-old boy, called the resolution "horrendous."

Although his son lives in New Jersey, Bell couldn't help wondering how the boy would react to news of a school policy that forbids mention of gay parents as part of class lessons.

"My son was nine years old when I told him I was gay. He's had his problems in trying to understand. Now my son is 14 and he understands and is very close to my longtime partner. If my son read that article, what kind of message would he be getting?"

'We're good people'

"Many gay people live very happily on Staten Island and the numbers are much more than people would want to believe. We're good people, we pay taxes and we own homes here," Bell said.

"If children learn about all relationships when they are really small, they accept the differences," said Dolly Crist, a lesbian parent of two adopted children.

Chris Baur, a gay Islander, and a member of Mayor David N. Dinkins' Police Council of Lesbian and Gay Issues, said the board's policy "perpetuates the idea that homosexuals aren't real people, so they don't count."

The school board, however, has received numerous letters, all in support of ridding the guide of the controversial section.

The Rev. Paul Schooling of Salem Evangelical Free Church, West Brighton, opposed a part of the guide that states:

"If teachers do not discuss lesbian/gay issues, they are not likely to come up. Children need actual experiences via creative play, books, visitors, etc. in order for them to view lesbians/gays as real people to be respected and appreciated."

Schooling said the suggestion is "in direct conflict with Judaic-Christian view of family."

Redefines 'culture'

Mary Petrone, a member of Parents for the Restoration of Values in Education, and a member of the board's curriculum committee, wrote that the curriculum redefines "culture."

"Aside from ancestry, background, tradition, ethics, nationality and religious orientation, a new category seems to be added. This category is "sexual orientation," she said.

Mariann Kosovych, former president of the Staten Island Federation of Parent-Teacher Associations, said delegates from Island PTAs voted to support the deletion of parts of the curriculum manual.

Parents were ready to battle the guide in March, but District Schools Superintendent Christy Cugini met with elementary school principals and told them to disregard the section of the guide. He said teachers should refer questions about homosexuality to guidance counselors, social workers and parents.

In response, Wayne Steinman, an Island gay parent and founder of Center Kids, an organization for gay and lesbian parents, protested the policy saying the omission hurts children from those families and "promotes homophobia."

Cammarata, who previously said a resolution would be redundant in light of Cugini's mandate, said last week that a school board vote would make the mandate legally binding.

The school board's resolution follows in the steps of school districts 18 and 20 in Brooklyn and District 24 in Queens, which have also banned sections of the curriculum.