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Island to defy Fernandez

Homosexual lesson won't be mandatory

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The Staten Island Community School Board will defy Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernandez' directive to make lessons on respecting homosexuals mandatory.

At a meeting last night in Tompkinsville headquarters, Board Chairwoman Olivia Brennan agreed to send a letter to the chancellor restating the board's intention to put the lessons in the sixth grade Family Living/Sex Education classes. Parents can opt to excuse their children from those classes.

Transferring the lessons from the first grade to the sixth was part of the school board's overall changes to the 443-page "Children of the Rainbow" first-grade teachers' guide.

The chancellor ruled last week that the lessons can be taught in sixth grade, but cannot be made optional. The chancellor said all districts must abide by the Board of Education's 1989 policy not to discriminate on the basis of "race, color, creed, religion, national origin, age, handicapping, marital status, sexual orientation..."

But Island board members said they will not back off from their November resolution to make the lessons optional.

"It was a very small point in our resolution. But it was the most important point," said board member Jerry Cammarata of the "opt-out" provision.

"If there's not an opt-out provision, it's not acceptable to members of this board," said Betty Martinucci, vice chairwoman.

"It's never going to be an opt-out program unless it's placed in the Family Living/Sex Education," said board member Eleanor Conforti.

"If you go back, I don't know how many years, when everybody was up in arms when the original Family Living and Sex Education curriculum was introduced in the community, there was a furor," Mrs. Conforti said. "It was terrible. And after a while parents were allowed to opt out, and all that furor went away."

She added that 97 percent of students do not opt out of Family Living lessons.

In a seven-page report, Cammarata went on to condemn the chancellor's newly toned-down version of "Children of the Rainbow." The chancellor softened sections of the first-grade teacher's guide by referring to lesbian/gay couples as "same-gender couples" and changing other phrases that had drawn criticism from parents throughout the city.

A chancellor's spokesman said the Island district's revisions still stand unless Island school officials decide to adopt the chancellor's revisions instead.

But Cammarata said board members should review the new "Children of the Rainbow," which is not yet in final form.

"Both versions still overemphasize and dramatize the problems facing gays and lesbians," he said, adding that problems of other cultures and religions are not stressed.

"Homosexuality is promoted in both versions as not being frightening, horrid or nasty. Yet, Dr. Fernandez' appointee to consult on AIDS to the New York City Board of Education has stated, 'For homosexual male adolescents who have had intercourse, the average age of their partners is seven years older.'

"To me that is frightening, horrid and nasty," Cammarata said, reading from his report. Cammarata later said he found the quote attributed to "Fernandez' appointee" in a 1989 article published in the Journal of Pediatrics.

Cammarata also accused the chancellor of "sitting on" a multicultural curriculum called "A World Together." Cammarata praised the curriculum and said it was "value-based." The content of that curriculum could not be learned last night.

Board member Lilian Popp said there was no reason for Cammarata to revive the "Children of the Rainbow."

"Except for the opt-out proviso, the chancellor has accepted our revisions. So why are we going through this? I don't see any reason why we have to rehash that. We have to discuss only the opt-out," she said.