

School board to scrutinize revised 'Rainbow' guide

Chancellor hopes toned-down version causes less controversy

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The Staten Island Community School Board will discuss Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernandez' revised "Children of the Rainbow" curriculum guide at a meeting Monday in its Tompkinsville headquarters.

But School Board Chairwoman Olivia Brennan said the board will continue pressing to transfer lessons on diverse families, including those headed by gay and lesbians, to the Family Living/Sex Education classes. Parents can opt to excuse their children from Family Living classes.

Fernandez last week sent a toned-down version of the first-grade teachers' guide to Board of Education members, a move seen

by many as a way to deflect widespread criticism of the guide and get on with multicultural education.

The revisions were meant to disarm critics, Fernandez said in a statement released yesterday.

... Opponents have latched onto some of the language in the guide, taken it out of context and used it to fuel their campaign of misinformation and distortion. With these minor changes we will curb much of the inflammatory rhetoric of opponents, while allaying the legitimate concerns of others who truly support our efforts in multicultural education."

The chancellor said his proposed revisions include recommendations from parents, com-

munity groups, senior staff and the chancellor's multicultural education advisory board. A final version will be completed in several months.

Michael Petrides, Staten Island member to the Board of Education, called the revisions "late damage control."

"I think it's late in the day," he said. "The whole Children of the Rainbow episode has really been a setback for public education in this city."

Petrides said the teacher's guide has become so controversial that "I don't think anybody's going to follow it."

The chancellor's proposed revisions come nearly seven months

after the Island school board made its own changes to the Children of the Rainbow. Last Friday, Fernandez approved the Island board's plan to introduce lessons on gays and lesbians in the sixth grade, but he said the lessons cannot be optional.

According to chancellor spokesman Frank Sobrino, the new Children of the Rainbow curriculum will not "conflict in any way" with the Island's proposal for sixth-grade classes on family.

"For now, the original teacher's guide still remains in effect. Any changes the districts have presented in their proposals remain in effect," he said.

Ms. Brennan said yesterday board members have not yet seen the chancellor's proposed revisions, but will discuss the new Children of the Rainbow curriculum at their meeting at 7 p.m. Monday, she said.

"We can look at it again," she

said. "But I hope we will come to the table with intelligent, non-threatening attitudes. If we have any discussion, I hope it will be productive. We have learned from what has happened in the past."

If the board adopts the chancellor's revised teacher's guide, there will be no need to move the lessons into the sixth grade.

In the chancellor's new version of the Children of the Rainbow, "Heather Has Two Mommies" has been dropped from the optional bibliography, but not two others that raised some hackles — "Daddy's Roommate" and "Gloria Goes To Gay Pride."

The Island school board removed references to the three titles in June. The chancellor's staff has not taken issue with the deletion, saying the books are optional.

Most references to gay and lesbian parents have been changed to read "same gender parents," in

the chancellor's revision. The only reference to gay parents in the new version is a line stating that "lesbian/gay parents might worry that revealing their sexual orientation could lead to prejudice against themselves and or their child."

The old version said "a child being raised by lesbian co-parents might not have a male figure to relate to during Father's Day celebrations." The new version says a child raised "by adults of the same gender may not have a figure of the other gender to relate to in day-to-day experiences."

Jerry Cammarata, the board's Curriculum Committee chairman, said the proposed revision "sounds less inflammatory" but not satisfactory because it tells teachers to accept various families including gay and lesbian ones.

"Children need not accept. They need to respect," he said.