

Lesson learned?

Propelled by the brutal murder of Kenneth Zeller, a popular school librarian and teacher, the Toronto Board of Education is now forced to look at its responsibilities in challenging homophobia in its schools.

Present Board policy ignores the issue of sexual orientation in its strongly worded statement condemning prejudice and discrimination on the basis of race, sex or religion. The sparse curriculum that does address homosexual issues is often the exclusive preserve of the physical education departments; speakers from lesbian and gay organizations are barred from the classroom. Teachers and counsellors receive no training in how to deal with the problems concerning gay students or anti-gay behaviour in class.

These policies and practices have allowed a culture of homophobia to grow and flourish in our schools, a culture where gay people are seen to be legitimate targets for ridicule, harassment and now, even violence leading to murder, a murder committed by five "average" secondary school students.

After a thorough investigation of the situation, Trustee Olivia Chow has made a series of recommendations to the Board:

- Policy should be amended to prohibit discrimination and abuse on the basis of sexual orientation;
- The prohibition against the use of resource people from our community should be dropped;
- The Ontario Ministry of Education should be pressed into including sexual orientation in sexual education curriculum and other appropriate subject areas;
- A body within the Board should be given the responsibility for dealing with prejudice and discrimination against lesbians and gay men.

This action is long overdue. Lesbians and gay men from across the city of Toronto should phone their trustees to urge their support for Ms Chow's recommendations (to be discussed at the end of April). Similar action can be taken by gay people in other municipalities across Canada: what are your local boards doing to ensure that non-progressive policies that may lead to violence and prejudice are being dismantled?

The Toronto board is confronting an opportunity to live up to its responsibilities toward lesbian and gay male students, parents and staff and to society as a whole. Each of us should do our utmost to ensure that this opportunity is not missed. Kenneth Zeller's death must be more than the predictable outcome of a school system — indeed, a society — that refused to deal with the hatred and victimization of homosexuals.

Tim McCaskell, for the Collective ●

You can get the number of your Toronto trustee by calling (416) 598-4931.