

REPORT TO SCHOOL PROGRAMS COMMITTEE

RE POLICIES AND PROGRAMS REGARDING SEXUAL ORIENTATION

As a result of the tragic murder of Ken Zeller, a teacher at Williamson Road Public School, by students from our schools, I put forward a motion requesting a report on the policies and programs existing in our system to combat the ignorance and intolerance of homosexuality

I was asked by the School Programs Committee to consult with the appropriate officials and to report on what currently exists in this area.

So far I have met with the following people:

Hari Lalla and Tim McCaskill from the Race Relations Department;
Gloria Torrance of the Physical Education Department;
Charlie Taylor, Superintendent of Curriculum;
Some concerned parents in Ward 6 schools;

and received a number of confidential delegations from students of the Toronto Board of Education.

To date, my basic conclusion is that there is at present considerable abuse allowed within Toronto schools directed at those suspected of being gay. This abuse goes substantially unchecked -- teachers do not see as their responsibility either disciplining or instruction which would lead toward tolerance in this area. There is no Board policy which would suggest such a role, and there is very little teacher training in this area. Nor is there any Board policy to provide protection for students or staff from abuse or harassment on the basis of sexual orientation.

Existing Board Policy

With the sole exception of employment, there is no protection against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation in Board policy. Sexual orientation is not included as a prohibited ground for discrimination or abuse in the Student Handbook of Rights and Responsibilities.

Further, it is not within the mandate of the Race Relations Department to do any educational work on this issue.

The only Board policy is a recommendation from the Sex Education Advisory Committee Report passed on June, 1985:

"That the Ministry of Education include sexual

orientation as an 'Area of Study' in the Physical and Health Education Guidelines for Grades 9-12 with clear direction as to how to deal with it."

This is obviously inadequate.

Curriculum

There is almost no curriculum material available on this topic, and what little exists is restricted to the Physical Education Department. A few audio-visual materials, such as the CITY-TV documentary "Growing Up Gay" are available to phys-ed teachers. The Ministry guidelines on sex education dismiss the entire area of homosexuality with one paragraph. Since homosexuality can only be dealt with by phys-ed teachers under the rubric of sex education, human rights and tolerance aspects of this issue are simply not addressed by the system.

Experts and community members are often invited into a school when there is discussion of a social issue, with the sole exception of one issue -- homosexuality. Board policy states that discussion on tolerance of people of a different sexual orientation can only be made by 'qualified Board staff'.

Professional Development

The Physical and Health Education Department offers in-service training so that teachers can obtain factual information on sexual orientation. However, these in-service workshops are offered to high school Physical Education teachers on a voluntary basis. Consequently, not all teachers make full use of this resource. Approximately one professional development day every two years deals with the issue of sexual orientation for Phys-ed teachers. Of a total of 180-200 high school Phys-ed teachers, some 40 teachers attended the last such session. No other group of teachers, not even guidance counsellors, have received any professional training from the Board to deal with this issue. There thus exists a situation of inadequate resources, as well as inadequate awareness of what does exist among our teaching staff.

O.S.S.T.F. District 15, in their December 17, 1985, letter to the Director of Education has offered assistance in devising, planning, and implementing a program to "sensitize students to the basic human rights of homosexuals in our society and counteract the homophobia which is found in their overall social environment."

Reality in Our Schools

According to the CITY TV documentary "Growing Up Gay",

roughly one in ten students in our school system is gay or lesbian. In other words, we as Trustees are responsible for the safety, education, and socialization of roughly 7,000 lesbian and gay students. What do they currently face in our school system? As a result of the tragic death of Kenneth Zeller, a number of parents and gay students have come forward to describe what they face in our schools:

STUDENT OBSERVATIONS

I was in Western Technical for 4 years. I have now left that school because of the intense harassment.

I was called "faggot" all the time, in the classroom, along the hallway. Even when there was a teacher there, it was the same as none of the teachers ever raised any objection to this name calling. These "faggot" jokes are worst in the physical education class as guys try to out "macho" each other in front of their phys-ed teacher.

During the discussion of sex-education in the phys-ed class, my teacher said to the class, "love has got nothing to do with homosexuality, its just lust". That was the extent of the discussion in class on this topic.

In my last year at Western, I felt very down on myself, I talked to two teachers whom I thought I could trust. The first one ignored me. The second teacher told me that I must accept the discrimination in school if I am the way I am.

Being confused and frustrated I went to the guidance counsellor. He said he was not allowed to talk about the issue of homosexuality. If he did, he would get in trouble with the school board and my family. He gave me a list of 'youth lines' for me to call to get counseling. Obviously it was not an appropriate list since none of the agencies on the list are prepared and willing to talk to me about my sexuality.

I finally gave up and left the school.

On Wednesdays we have outreach. Most in-school projects are finished by noon and so by that time students are wandering about. We seem to get a lot of visitors around noon Wednesdays.

On Wednesday, January 8, one student, Mary, had two boys visit her.

I was getting ready to leave when one of them said "I hope you get A.I.D.S. and die" to me.

I stopped, and turned, and with mock glibness responded, "Why thank you. And I hope the same for you." Then I turned and continued toward my locker. After a couple of steps I realized how angry I was, how hurt I felt. I realized that this was the sort of thing I'd left school and then Windsor and home to avoid. I remembered, or thought I'd remembered, that it was prohibited for students to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation. So I turned around and told him that his action was unwarranted and prohibited. Then I went into the office to complain to Jane, our co-ordinator. She wasn't there so I told our secretary.

She came out with me to speak to him. By that time he had been joined by Mary and her other guest. The secretary and I tried to explain to him that his actions and attitudes were unwelcome in our school, while he told us that I could not be allowed to survive and spread my homosexuality. All the while he made actions and sounds like machine gunning. Finally we told him to leave and not return. All the while this happened Mary stood and watched and giggled.

After they left our co-ordinator came back. She went out to speak to them. Then she came back and confirmed that they were not to be allowed into the school and that their sentiments would not be condoned in the school. Then she let me cry on her shoulder for a minute.

Almost as upsetting as the attack was the feeling of futility I got when I found that no more could be done, there was no one on their level to whom I could complain simply because that type of bigotry is not expressly prohibited and so is therefore by implication condoned.

The staff seemed to share my futility in a manner. They had no idea what to say, how to react, what action to take, or how to show me their support. Prejudice is usually expressed quietly, open violent displays are alien to most of our staff and so it is difficult to find the proper reaction. Homophobia has for so long been permitted, its not easily perceived as being malicious, it's difficult to see or understand the victims position.

That is the reason that I speak about this, a personal incident, because gays are not often enough perceived as victims, or being victimized, it is important how to expose our wounds.

One of the 'qualified Board staff' was at a school discussing the issue of tolerance. At the end of the class a student put up his hand and said, "I understand what you've shown us about racial name calling and why it can be harmful, but what about the queers? We can still call them names, can't we?"

Another student echoed, "You shouldn't put down people because of their colour because there's nothing wrong with being a different colour, but homos aren't natural."

Yet another student replied, "Queers can't be natural. Otherwise God wouldn't have sent AIDS to punish them."

During a discussion a student described to a Board staff member how one night he and some friends were short of money and somebody suggested they go roll a queer. Everybody knew that queers all had lots of money and wouldn't be able to do anything.

The group went up Yonge Street to the Saint Charles which was where they knew the queers hung out. "First we were afraid to go in because we figured everybody would realize we weren't queer right away and they would figure out what we were up to. Finally we went in. Were we surprised! Nobody even looked at us twice. They all looked so normal. Some of them were really big. Some were wearing leather jackets and looked really tough. So we looked around a bit and decided that maybe these people wouldn't be so easy to roll after all so we left."

A student had put up a Boy George poster in her locker and a male student came up and said, "That guy is queer. What are you putting up his picture for? Are you queer?" She said she was really mad and told him where to get off. There were a number of people like that around the school and if it ever got out that anybody in the school was gay it would be all over the place in no time. Their lives would be made completely miserable and they'd probably have to leave.

A parent accompanied 20 Grade 5 students to a field trip recently. During the trip, there were many occasions where smallish, quiet, intellectual looking boys would be called "homo" repeatedly. "You wouldn't want to kiss him, he is a homo", was also used to insult these youngsters. According to this parent, this term "homo" is used habitually when a student wishes to insult another.

WHAT MIGHT BE DONE

Board Policy

Board policy could be amended to prohibit discrimination and abuse on the basis of sexual orientation, and this amendment could be added to the Student Handbook of Rights and Responsibilities. This would give equal protection to all.

The prohibition against the use of community resource people in the classroom discussion of homosexuality could be removed. At present, it serves as an example that discrimination is both practised and condoned by the Toronto Board in this area. How can we expect our students to exhibit tolerance when the Board does not? It also ensures that lesbians and gay men remain 'faceless, nameless' objects of fear, ridicule, and ignorance, to our students, rather than real people with families, friends, interests, and lives of their own.

Curriculum

The Board's request to the Ministry to provide guidelines for the inclusion of sexual orientation in the sex education curriculum should be actively pursued.

Since attitudes toward gay men and lesbians go far beyond the domain of sex education to encompass issues of tolerance and human rights, the Board should ensure that these issues can be raised in other appropriate curriculum areas such as family studies and social studies.

Further to this, appropriate curriculum materials should be made available to all teaching staff, rather than remaining the exclusive preserve of the Physical Education Department.

Professional Development

The invitation of O.S.S.T.F. District 15 to co-operate in

this area should be acted upon immediately, and existing in-service training on this issue should be made available to all teachers, rather than just Phys-ed teachers, and should be expanded, so that all teachers are encouraged to have at least a basic knowledge on this issue, in order to be able to deal with the questions and concerns of their students in a knowledgeable and sympathetic manner. All teachers should be made aware of the existing curriculum and support materials, and encouraged to become familiar with them.

Board Structure

At present, responsibility for discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation is not within the purview of any Board organization. Some body within the Board should be given this responsibility.