

Teen death

BC teachers support gay youth

SCHOOL DAYS

Kirsten Murphy

IT'S TOO LATE FOR 14-year-old Hamed Nastoh. But on Tuesday, the British Columbia Teachers Federation sanctioned gay-straight clubs in middle and high schools — drawing a standing ovation from the majority of its 700 voting delegates.

"It's really hard to vote against something that is a student safety issue," says James Chamberlain, a Surrey delegate and outspoken gay teacher. "Without the union's blessing, some teachers (and students) feel they're not being supported."

Nastoh killed himself two weeks earlier. "Those kinds of actions [like homophobic teasing] contribute to those kinds of reactions," Chamberlain says.

Gay-straight clubs promote dialogue on sexuality and offer peer support to gay teens — and sometimes protection, too. The union's blessing does not make them mandatory, and school

boards and teachers are free to ignore the suggestion.

One gay youth interviewed said having teachers start clubs can make a difference in many schools. If a student is already washing graffiti off a locker, forming a club if there is no apparent adult support is an intimidating act.

Wade MacDonald fought to establish a gay-straight club at his Mission high school two years ago. His teachers supported him; administrators fought him.

Eventually he won, but his victory was short-lived when the bullying became unbearable. MacDonald says long-term support of the clubs is desperately needed by queer youth, many of whom are coming out earlier than ever before.

"A lot of kids just want to say it out loud. They just want to feel it coming off their chest," he said.

Opposition enrages him. "It's such bullshit.... If you're not going to educate people, how can you expect them to change?"

An open mic session preceded Tuesday's union vote. Several dozen delegates, many of whom queued up as early as 6am, opposed the resolution, claiming it would polarize the



FAMILY VALUES. Theresa Cowan (foreground) and Emira Mears (centre-left) demonstrated in favour of gay-straight clubs in middle and high schools.

bullying issue.

Three years ago, several members of Gay And Lesbian Educators Of BC brought homophobia and heterosexism to the union table and a policy passed over the

objection of religious and so-called "parents' rights" groups.

Prior to 1997, the teachers' union had no policy regarding discrimination based on sexual orientation.

HAMED NASTOH

SUICIDE

Hamed Nastoh's suicide proves it's not okay to be gay in British Columbia secondary schools.

The 14-year-old grade nine Surrey student jumped from a bridge two weeks ago. His schoolmates' homophobic taunts, he wrote, were too much to bear.

British educators now have the support of their union to form gay-straight clubs for students in grades seven to 12.

The policy follows two weeks of protests by parents' rights groups and counter-protests by queer youth.

Hundreds of gay supporters turned up for a peaceful and, at times, boisterous gathering on Sunday.

"They didn't have anything like this when I was in high school," said a man in his early 30s at the protest. "I tried to kill myself too, but through drugs and alcohol."

Pinetree Secondary School in Coquitlam hosts the province's only gay-straight club. "We don't know if [Nastoh] was gay or straight," says organizer Brent Power. "But his death says that homophobia affects everyone. You get harassed not just if you're gay, but if you're perceived to be gay or lesbian."

And Power wants more. "I want to see curriculum reflective of gay and lesbian students."

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