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In Efforts to End Bullying, Some See Agenda

By ERIK ECKHOLM

HELENA, Mont. — Alarmed by evidence that gay and lesbian students are common victims of schoolyard bullies, many school districts are bolstering their antiharassment rules with early lessons in tolerance, explaining that some children have “two moms” or will grow up to love members of the same sex.

But such efforts to teach acceptance of homosexuality, which have gained urgency after several well-publicized suicides by gay teenagers, are provoking new culture wars in some communities.

Many educators and rights advocates say that official prohibitions of slurs and taunts are most effective when combined with frank discussions, from kindergarten on, about diverse families and sexuality.

Angry parents and religious critics, while agreeing that schoolyard harassment should be stopped, charge that liberals and gay rights groups are using the antibullying banner to pursue a hidden “homosexual agenda,” implicitly endorsing, for example, same-sex marriage.

Last summer, school officials here in Montana’s capital unveiled new guidelines for teaching about sexuality and tolerance. They proposed teaching first graders that “human beings can love people of the same gender,” and fifth graders that sexual intercourse can involve “vaginal, oral or anal penetration.”

A local pastor, Rick DeMato, carried his shock straight to the pulpit.

“We do not want the minds of our children to be polluted with the things of a carnal-minded society,” Mr. DeMato, 69, told his flock at Liberty Baptist Church.

In tense community hearings, some parents made familiar arguments that innocent youngsters were not ready for explicit language. Other parents and pastors, along with leaders of the Big Sky Tea Party, saw a darker purpose.

“Anyone who reads this document can see that it promotes acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle,” one mother said at a six-hour school board meeting in late September.

Barely heard was the plea of Harlan Reidmohr, 18, who graduated last spring and said he was relentlessly tormented and slammed against lockers after coming out during his freshman year. Through his years in the Helena schools, he said at another school board meeting, sexual orientation was never once discussed in the classroom, and “I believe this led to a lot of the sexual harassment I faced.”

Last month, the federal Department of Education told schools they were obligated, under civil rights laws, to try to prevent harassment, including that based on sexual orientation and gender identity. But the agency did not address the controversy over more explicit classroom materials in grade schools.

Some districts, especially in larger cities, have adopted tolerance lessons with minimal dissent. But in suburban districts in California, Illinois and Minnesota, as well as here in Helena, the programs have unleashed fierce opposition.

“Of course we’re all against bullying,” Mr. DeMato, one of numerous pastors who opposed the plan, said in an interview. “But the Bible says very clearly that homosexuality is wrong, and

Christians don't want the schools to teach subjects that are repulsive to their values."

The divided Helena school board, after four months of turmoil, recently adopted a revised plan for teaching about health, sex and diversity. Much of the explicit language about sexuality and gay families was removed or replaced with vague phrases, like a call for young children to "understand that family structures differ." The superintendent who has ardently pushed the new curriculum, Bruce K. Messinger, agreed to let parents remove their children from lessons they find objectionable.

In Alameda, Calif., officials started to introduce new tolerance lessons after teachers noticed grade-schoolers using gay slurs and teasing children with gay or lesbian parents. A group of parents went to court seeking the right to remove their children from lessons that included reading "And Tango Makes Three," a book in which two male penguins bond and raise a child.

The parents lost the suit, and the school superintendent, Kirsten Vital, said the district was not giving ground. "Everyone in our community needs to feel safe and visible and included," Ms. Vital said.

Some of the Alameda parents have taken their children out of public schools, while others now hope to unseat members of the school board.

After at least two suicides by gay students last year, a Minnesota school district recently clarified its antibullying rules to explicitly protect gay and lesbian students along with other target groups. But to placate religious conservatives, the district, Anoka-Hennepin County, also stated that teachers must be absolutely neutral on questions of sexual orientation and refrain from endorsing gay parenting.

Rights advocates worry that teachers will avoid any discussion of gay-related topics, missing a chance to fight prejudice.

While nearly all states require schools to have rules against harassment, only 10 require them to explicitly outlaw bullying related to sexual orientation. Rights groups including the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, based in New York, are promoting a federal "safe schools" act to make this a universal requirement, although passage is not likely any time soon.

Candi Cushman, an educational analyst with Focus on the Family, a Christian group, said that early lessons about sexuality and gay parents reflected a political agenda, including legitimizing same-sex marriage. "We need to protect all children from bullying," Ms. Cushman said. "But the advocacy groups are promoting homosexual lessons in the name of antibullying."

Ellen Kahn of the Human Rights Campaign in Washington, which offers a "welcoming schools" curriculum for grade schools, denied such motives.

"When you talk about two moms or two dads, the idea is to validate the families, not to push a debate about gay marriage," Ms. Kahn said. The program involves what she described as age-appropriate materials on family and sexual diversity and is used in dozens of districts, though it has sometime stirred dissent.

The Illinois Safe Schools Alliance, which runs teacher-training programs and recommends videos and books depicting gay parents in a positive light, has met opposition in several districts, including the Chicago suburb of Oak Park.

Julie Justicz, a 47-year-old lawyer, and her partner live in Oak Park with two sons ages 6 and 11. Ms. Justicz saw the need for early tolerance training, she said, when their older son was upset by pejorative terms about gays in the schoolyard.

Frank classroom discussions about diverse families and hurtful phrases had greatly reduced the problem, she said.

But one of the objecting parents, Tammi Shulz, who describes herself as a traditional Christian, said, “I just don’t think it’s great to talk about homosexuality with 5-year-olds.”

Tess Dufrechou, president of Helena High School’s Gay-Straight Alliance, a club that promotes tolerance, counters that, “By the time kids get to high school, it’s too late.”

Only a handful of students in Helena high schools are openly gay, with others keeping the secret because they fear the reactions of parents and peers, students said.

Michael Gengler, one of the few to have come out, said, “You learn from an early age that it’s not acceptable to be gay,” adding that he was disappointed that the teaching guidelines had been watered down.

But Mr. Messinger, the superintendent, said he still hoped to achieve the original goals without using the explicit language that offended many parents.

“This is not about advocating a lifestyle, but making sure our children understand it and, I hope, accept it,” he said.

Notes

¹<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/07/us/07bully.html>