

DAVID S. FISHBACK

BACKGROUND PRESENTATION

"JUST SAY NOW TO COMPREHENSIVE AND INCLUSIVE HEALTH EDUCATION" A COMMUNITY FORUM BY TEACHTHEFACTS.ORG

BETHESDA CHEVY-CHASE HIGH SCHOOL

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For many years, Montgomery County Public School health teachers were, by regulation, essentially prohibited from mentioning homosexuality. Many health teachers urged MCPS to change this policy and to allow the inclusion of information on sexual orientation. Three years ago, the Board agreed, and wisely voted to revise the 8th and 10th grade health curricula. At the same time, also at the urging of health teachers, the Board voted to develop a condom demonstration video to supplement the 10th grade health unit on contraception.

The video was piloted in several schools in the Spring of 2004, and last November the Board unanimously approved it for system-wide use.

MCPS Staff, including school psychologists, counselors, nurses, and health teachers, developed revisions pursuant to the Board's instructions. These revisions were then rigorously reviewed by the Board-appointed Citizens Advisory Committee, which was made up of a broad cross-section of the community, including parents, physicians, and students, as well as representatives of organizations like the Mental Health Association, and the Catholic Archdiocese. MCPS Staff and the Committee closely examined the literature and consulted with professionals in the field before finalizing their recommendations. The recommended additions simply provided basic information: definitions of sexual orientation and statements that the professional mental health organizations affirm that homosexuality is not a mental disorder, that there are families in our community headed by same-sex couples, and that having homosexual parents or guardians does not predispose a child to being homosexual. There was to be no separate "gay" unit.

When these recommendations were presented at the Board's November 9, 2004, meeting, Superintendent Weast stated that MCPS should have made these changes years ago. The Board agreed, and voted unanimously to pilot the revisions in the next semester.

Before continuing this story, allow me to relate to you some of what we told the Board at the November 9 meeting:

More than 30 years ago every mainstream American medical and mental health organization concluded that homosexuality is not a disease and that people who happen to be homosexual can live healthy and happy lives. While some people still assert that homosexuality is an illness and can be "cured," this notion has been rejected by, for example, the American Medical Association, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Psychiatric Association, and the American Psychological Association, as incorrect and dangerous to the well-being of those who are gay. In the mainstream scientific and medical community, this is not a point of dispute.

Yet, children who happen to be gay (or think they might be gay) have been left in limbo, in a system in which they feel they must hide to be accepted, in which they may fear that they are somehow diseased. And other children, receiving signals that everyone must be heterosexual to be accepted, too often act cruelly to those who are or appear to be different.

We then described the significant provisions of the proposed changes:

That sexual orientation is the "persistent pattern" of attraction. In other words, just because someone has an occasional attraction to a person of the same sex does not mean that he or she is gay.

That homosexuality is not a mental disorder, that "[m]ost experts . . . have concluded that sexual orientation is not a choice; it's a natural response." This is important because in the past, and indeed today, children in late adolescence and the teen years who happen to be homosexual go through horrible trauma fearing that they are diseased and can never be happy. Years ago, the mental health profession came to understand that a large amount of substance abuse, reckless self-destructive behavior, and suicide resulted from the agony afflicting gay youth, believing they were defective and would never be accepted in society. It is wise to learn from this experience, and to act to help ALL of our children become happy, productive citizens.

This information is important because there are children growing up in families headed by same sex couples, people who are fine, upstanding members of their communities. Homosexuality is a part of life. Thus, it is an appropriate and necessary part of the health curriculum dealing with human sexuality.

Parents have the choice of not permitting their children to take the human sexuality portion of the health class. We strongly believe, however, that parents who may have concerns will find those concerns satisfied when they examine the curriculum. The curriculum speaks of respect and caring -- and recognizes that different religious traditions have differing views on sexual behaviors. Of course,

the curriculum does not make theological judgments on such matters. But what it does do, and has always done, is to stress the need for people to treat each other with respect. That is the Golden Rule, which is followed by all religious and secular traditions in this country.

So far, so good.

But almost immediately after the Board's unanimous vote, local right-wing talk radio began screaming that Montgomery County was about to do terrible things, misstating much of what was in the curriculum and falsely charging that MCPS was ignoring the risks of sexually transmitted diseases. A group formed to recall the Board. Members of the Advisory Committee who had disagreed with the recommendations – and who had declined the opportunity to submit a dissenting report to the Board – pretended that all of this had simply been sprung with no opportunity for community input. They ignored the fact that they were involved in the discussions and that development of the curriculum had been widely reported in the local press for the previous two years.

Then something quite extraordinary happened. Typically, people write or telephone the school system only when they are angry about what the school system has done. But this time, community responses ran IN FAVOR of the Board's decision by a margin of five to one. The public understood that what the Board had done was the right thing to do.

In March, those attacking the Board – who by then had changed their name from “Recall Montgomery School Board” to “Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum” or CRC – held a “town hall meeting.” This meeting featured professional anti-homosexuals, including some from James Dobson-funded groups. The speakers’ hateful statements were so extreme that even the CRC organizers half-heartedly tried to distance themselves from them. But that effort was to no avail, because the speakers’ public positions were already very well-known when CRC invited them.

In the meantime, MCPS’s preparations for piloting the revised curriculum proceeded. Not surprisingly, an overwhelming majority of parents with students in the pilot classes granted permission for their children to take the unit.

But then, in early May, just days before the piloting was to begin, CRC and Parents and Friends of Ex-Gays (PFOX), represented by Jerry Falwell’s Liberty Counsel, filed a lawsuit in federal court to block the implementation. The court gave the Board only three days to respond to 80 pages of legal and factual arguments, and then immediately issued a Temporary Restraining Order stopping not only the revised curriculum but the condom demonstration video, as well. The

most chilling part of the court's opinion was its statement that if MCPS was to say anything about sexual orientation, it had to present "all sides" of the subject. Sort of like saying that if a school system is to teach evolution, it must also teach creationism. That ruling could never have withstood an appeal, even in the most conservative federal courts.

Still, the Board was faced with a problem: If it fought the lawsuit, the matter likely would have been tied up in litigation for years, preventing the Board from implementing the needed revisions.

So MCPS decided to scrap everything, including the Advisory Committee, and start over. By making the matter moot, it forced Liberty Counsel to agree to dismiss the lawsuit. Significantly, the settlement made it clear that the Board retained the right to decide what would be in any future curriculum changes.

Now the process is beginning anew. CRC and PFOX continue to make unsupported assertions about the approach the Board so wisely took last year. Most recently, they have been saying that curriculum should include the notion that people can (and should) choose not to be gay – even though the American Medical Association has denounced such "reparative therapy" approaches. Today, Teachthefacts.org is presenting experts in the field to discuss the FACTS surrounding these issues.

MCPS has to choose: It may choose to continue the silence on sexual orientation that has caused so much harm in the past or add to the curriculum dangerous unsubstantiated assertions. OR it may choose to follow the lead and wisdom of mainstream health care professional associations like the American Medical Association.

While CRC and PFOX, and their supporters James Dobson and Jerry Falwell, may see Montgomery County as the next Kansas, where fact and dogma vie for a place in our classrooms, we cannot let that happen here. Not in OUR community, because we truly value ALL of our children.