

Boys, girls to see different sex-ed films in 5th grade

By Paul Rosynsky
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Fairfax County Superintendent Robert Spillane has ordered grade-school principals to stop showing boys' sex-education videos to fifth-grade girls, and vice versa, until further notice.

He said yesterday an original vote by School Board members to show the videos may have been confusing, and he wanted his staff to have an opportunity to review the directive and the board's options. Some board members contacted yesterday differed on what they were actually voting on.

Mr. Spillane's "priority message," released Friday, comes after parents' complaints were reported in *The Washington Times*. It asks principals to recommend changes in the fifth-grade sex-ed program for next year.

The School Board voted in March 1996 to allow fifth- and sixth-graders to view films about the opposite sex, but that decision could now be revisited.

Mychele B. Brickner, an at-large School Board member, said the order is "too little too late."

"It's kind of a moot point," Mrs. Brickner said. "I believe most of the fifth-grade classes are finished" with the course and have seen the films.

Board member Carter S. Thomas, who voted against having the films shown to both sexes, said Mr. Spillane's action was wise but the superintendent was not taking responsibility.

"I do think he is trying to pass the blame for something that has blown up in his face," said Mr. Thomas of Springfield. "We made a dumb decision back then and are trying to pass the buck on a committee that advises us."

Other conservatives agreed. "I laughed all the way," said Gary Reese, who represents the Sully District on the school board, when he heard of the superintendent's

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Parents feel pushed aside by public schools

By Carol Innerst
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Rhetoric doesn't always match reality when public schools talk about parental involvement.

"Parents are their enemies," said Jean Benham of Charlotte, N.C. "They don't want you to be involved, and they do everything they can to undermine you."

From racial quotas (Mrs. Benham's concern) to sex education (a hot topic now in Fairfax County), many parents complain that school administrators often deceive or stone-wall them.

The North Carolina General Assembly has mandated abstinence-based sex education, but school officials go to great lengths to keep parents in the dark about the kind of sex education they offer, said Pamela Ahlin of Raleigh.

When her daughter was in seventh grade, she brought home a permission slip for a field trip to a health center to learn "general health principles." School officials denied that it was a sex-education lesson, Mrs. Ahlin said. Her daughter became ill and could not go.

"The next day all her friends called her and said, 'Guess what we learned about sex!'" she said.

"The permission forms have not changed," she said. "They read like it's a field trip to the zoo."

Mrs. Ahlin said the school held a health fair for students, with 30 agencies participating, but did not advertise it in

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the newsletter to parents. Not even active school volunteers knew about it.

Planned Parenthood was there distributing condoms but was not on the list of health fair participants that Mrs. Ahlin demanded to see when she heard about the fair.

"Everything is so secret, so undercover," she said. "They don't want parents to find out what's going on."

Larry and Blanca Wiggins of Centreville said a Centreville Elementary School vice principal misled them about sex education by saying their fifth-grade daughter would only see films dealing with the sexual development of girls.

Instead, Amanda Wiggins, 11, and the other girls in her class saw a 10-minute video called "Kids to Kids: Boys," which discusses changes that occur in boys during puberty, including erections and wet dreams.

"This is not an isolated case," said Fairfax School Board member Carter S. Thomas. "This happens all the time. There will be 'an administrative screwup' or whatever. This happens too often."

Three years ago, an Oakton High School teacher showed an unapproved film called "The Coming Out of Heidi Leiter" about teen-age lesbians who want to attend the high school prom together. It shows the teens kissing. After a parent objected, the teacher was reprimanded but kept her job.

When confronted by parents who are unhappy over some aspect of the curriculum or other school practice, school officials often try to paint the complainers as members of the "religious right." They sometimes express puzzlement over objections to their policies and typically suggest that they, as professional educators, know better than parents what ought to happen in the schools.

After a parental uprising last spring in upstate New York over an HIV-AIDS education program and parental exclusion from the selection process for instructional materials, Union-Endicott Superintendent Dennis M. Sweeney said he would not be opposed to parental participation, but professional staff should constitute the majority.

A number of incidents in San Francisco involving homosexual activists giving children graphic descriptions of their sexual activities prompted state Sen. Tim Leslie to introduce legislation requiring parental notification for family life, AIDS and sex-education instruction. In the case of kindergartners to sixth-graders, the legislation mandates written parental

permission.

The bill is the culmination of a five-year fight led by Bruce Budnick, a San Francisco parent, to protect other children from the kind of sex education his sixth-grader experienced at Everett Middle School.

He had reviewed the AIDS-HIV Prevention Program and agreed to let his child participate.

"But they didn't tell us there was another facet to the program," he said. "Two days after we signed up for the AIDS program, an outside organization [the Committee United Against Violence] came into the classroom... one gay male and one gay female."

"Here's the deception: They said they were there to talk about violence and hate crimes. Then they led the kids into an hourlong sexual dialogue where they described in first-person detail how they use all their orifices for sexual practices. There was no mention of condoms. One child had a note from her family to skip the AIDS program, but teachers made her stay."

School officials wanted students "completely demystified" about all aspects of homosexuality before they took the AIDS program, he was told later.

When Mr. Budnick complained, the principal said, "Not everybody thinks like you do."

"One [school] board member," Mr. Budnick said, "ridiculed us as old-fashioned and said we were homophobic."

Mrs. Benham and her husband, Jim, say they can't get school officials in Charlotte to talk to them about district plans to move 200 students, including their son, from Providence High School to other high schools in the fall.

The Benhams are relative newcomers to Charlotte, lured there from Kensington, Md., a couple of years ago by the area's community spirit and mild weather.

What didn't change was the attitude school officials have toward parents, they said. It was no different from Montgomery County Public Schools, where their children rode buses to magnet schools as part of the district's voluntary school desegregation plan.

"I went along with the busing in Montgomery County for seven years," Mrs. Benham said. "You never felt like a part of the school. You always felt like a visitor, and they like it that way. They don't want you dropping in and being a part of the school."

Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools spokeswoman Janyce Rucker Wardlaw disputed the notion that school officials are unresponsive to parents.

"We're noted for our public hearings," she said. "We had half a dozen public hearings before the board decided on this, and they were heated and emotional."

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explanation. "There was an 8-to-4 vote, and we lost. It was very clear."

In mid-March, Larry and Blanca Wiggins of Centreville learned that their 11-year-old daughter Amanda had seen a boys' sex-education video at Centreville Elementary School. The fifth-grader and other girls in her class saw a 10-minute video showing a discussion between two boys who had erections during a science class. The video, "Kids to Kids: Boys," discusses changes that occur in boys during puberty. Parents had been told that girls would see only girls' films and boys would see only boys' films.

Jane K. Strauss of the Dranesville District said she voted to show the films because it was her assumption that the films would not be shown to the opposite sexes.

"For better or for worse in any occasion in life there are mishaps," Mrs. Strauss said, "and you try to go back and fix it."

"It's what you call taking executive action," Mr. Spillane said. "That's what a superintendent is supposed to do, take action where there is no policy."

"I have felt the best course was to show the girl's film to girls and the boy's film to boys," he said, hoping the curriculum will continue in the new direction.

"That's great," said Mrs. Wiggins when informed of Mr. Spillane's memo. "I was not only concerned for my daughter but for all the girls."

Mrs. Wiggins suggested showing the films to high-school students.

But she still has concerns about the sincerity of the elementary school's administrators. Mrs. Wiggins said she was assured by Centreville Elementary School Vice Principal William Rice that the girls would view only girls' films.

"I want to know why he gave me the wrong information," she said. "You trust them and you always believed they are informed."

School board members attributed the communication lapse to



Robert Spillane

misinformation.

"You are talking about one of the finest principals [Susan Kane]," said School Board Chairman Kristen Amundson. "It is my understanding that parents were told."

Mrs. Amundson said Centreville Elementary administrators hosted

a second meeting for parents regarding the videos and all parents were invited.

Mrs. Wiggins disagrees.

"I know [Mr. Rice] didn't misunderstand me," she said. "My question was straightforward."

Mr. Thomas admits the School Board should have gone "the extra mile" to inform the principals of the board's original vote to show the films.

"When the policy was passed, there probably should have been a memo sent at that time," Mr. Thomas said. "If we were not clear in our written policy we should have followed it up."

The superintendent's staff will continue to look into the program and could recommend changes to board members before the next school year, Mr. Spillane wrote in the memo.

Mrs. Brickner said the time is right for the board to change the original decision.

"It certainly is a good thing for the superintendent to jump on this," she said. "The School Board should follow through and change the policy."

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