

Gay awareness film heightens classroom debate of sexuality

Critics argue issues should be discussed at home, not school

From combined dispatches

CHICAGO — Third-graders in New York are seen debating the idea of homosexual marriage. Eighth-graders in San Francisco are heard firing questions at a homosexual man and woman who visit their classroom.

Story time for first- and second-graders at a school in Cambridge, Mass., is shown to include the book "Asha's Mums," about a little girl who has two lesbian mothers.

All are excerpts from a controversial documentary, "It's Elementary: Talking About Gay Issues in School," which first caused a stir when several public television stations decided to run it this summer.

"It's Elementary" has aired on more than 100 PBS stations, including those in the metropolitan Washington area. This month, it will be shown on PBS stations in eight states.

It's also being used by many school districts nationwide as a training tool for teachers — unifying what some say is a growing move to incorporate homosexual issues into school curriculums.

Since the film's release in 1996, it has been shown at nearly 500 teacher-training programs, says the San Francisco-based Women's Educational Media, a group that distributes the film.

Critics say talk about such issues belongs at home. But others argue it's a matter of dealing with

issues that students already see every day in newspapers, on television, in movies — and maybe even in their own communities or classrooms.

"Both schools and families have to address the issue somehow because it's there — and it's not going back into the closet," said Tony D'Augelli, a psychologist at Penn State's College of Health and Human Development.

Chicago school officials — who stress that "It's Elementary" will not be shown to students — said last week that the district's 589 principals would view the film beginning in September and receive a copy for their schools. Yesterday, however, officials said they have revised that plan, saying principals will be told about the film during training sessions and can request a copy for their schools.

A city official who helped get the film into the district and who will conduct the training sessions said the decision to provide the film was aimed at fostering tolerance and, in turn, preventing violence against homosexual students.

"It's practical. It makes good sense. It's about safety for children. I don't think anybody, regardless of their religious background, can argue with that," said Mary Morten, Mayor Richard Daley's liaison on homosexual issues.

School officials in San Francisco, who also are using "It's Ele-

mentary," have gone as far as imposing a ban on anti-homosexual slurs.

"Go stand on a playground. I guarantee you that you will hear within minutes kids saying, 'Oh, that's so gay. What are you, a fag?'" said Kevin Gogin, who counsels kids at the San Francisco Unified School District.

Moves to address homosexual issues in the classroom are not, however, without opponents, among them tough-talking radio talk-show host Laura Schlessinger and several religious groups who have made "It's Elementary" a priority target.

Patti Johnson, a member of the Colorado Board of Education who has spoken out against the use of the film in her state, said she agrees with having a no-slur policy, but that some teachers are going too far.

"I don't think you have to go into big, deep explanations, especially when kids are little," she said. "It's kind of like when you want to stop a 2-year-old from running into the street. They don't always understand death or dying. But they understand a quick swat on the butt."

The new U.S. ambassador to Luxembourg, James C. Hormel, an open homosexual and heir to a meat-packing fortune, is a major sponsor of the film.

• Staff writer Cheryl Wetzstein contributed to this report.