



Judge's Ruling Against Sex-Ed Program Grabs National Eye

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By Kelley Beaucar Vlahos

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WASHINGTON — A judge's order on Thursday evening to halt a new public school sex-education curriculum in the affluent suburbs of Washington, D.C., could have significant ramifications throughout the rest of the country.

A group of parents took their opposition to the sex-ed courses to court last week, arguing that they depicted homosexuality as a natural and morally correct lifestyle and did not offer any contrary opinion.

"This has national significance because Montgomery County is a wealthy, influential school district and the lid has been ripped off an agenda that has crept into schools nationwide," said Robert Knight, director of the **Culture & Family Institute** ([search](#)), an affiliate of the conservative organization [Concerned Women for America](#).

"This shows that parents, even in a very liberal area, can fight back and win," Knight added, noting that he knew of no other case in the country where a sex-ed program has been restrained by a federal judge.

But others say U.S. District Judge Alexander Williams Jr.'s decision to grant a temporary restraining order against the Montgomery County Public Schools' pilot sex-ed program for 8th- and 10th-graders is a blow to efforts to give students access to a broad, fact-based health curriculum.

Opponents blame a minority of conservative voices for imposing their views on the majority of parents across the county — and the nation.

"The thing that concerns us is there is a situation where there is widespread support across the country for accurate, age-appropriate health education," said **Eliza Byard** ([search](#)), deputy director for the [Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network](#) (GLSEN).

"It seems that a small number of dissenters in Montgomery County had access to the levers of power to disrupt the process that was initiated by a citizens' advisory committee," Byard said, arguing that the "small number" succeeded in overturning the majority's desires. "It does seem ... some very basic underpinnings of our American pluralism is at stake."

This local case highlights an ongoing national debate over modern sex-ed programs that has become more pronounced in recent years as the lines between competing liberal and conservative forces have seemingly become more polarized and have demanded equal time in the nation's schools. The issues typically revolve around funding and teaching about homosexuality, condom use, abstinence and pre-marital sex.

The Montgomery County lawsuit was brought by two groups: [Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum](#), a parent-based organization that was formed in direct response to the new curriculum, and [Parents and Friends of Gays and Ex-Gays](#) (PFOX), a national group that believes that homosexuality is a "decision," not an innate characteristic of some individuals.

Judge Williams said in his 23-page memorandum that based on the evidence presented to him, the curriculum, developed by a citizens' advisory committee last year, posed a potential "chipping away at plaintiff's **First Amendment** ([search](#)) freedoms."

His arguments centered on resource material for teachers that discusses the moral debate over homosexuality, defining gay-friendly and anti-gay churches and discerning between myth and fact about the homosexual lifestyle based on differing belief systems.

"The revised curriculum presents only one view on the subject — that homosexuality is a natural and morally correct lifestyle — to the exclusion of other perspectives," said Williams, a Clinton administration appointee.

He added that he did not know why the school system felt it necessary to "bound into the crossroads of controversy where religion, morality, and homosexuality converge." He was also disturbed about one of the resource materials that implied that the Baptist Church's views against homosexuality are theologically flawed, and that the church once expressed the same intolerance toward African-Americans during the era of slavery.

Jerry D. Weast, superintendent of Montgomery County Schools, called a halt to the pilot program, which was to commence on Monday, until further review.

He also said that a new videotape slated for the sex-ed classes, "Protect Yourself," which parents' groups said included a misleading and gratuitous condom-use instruction on a cucumber, will also be suspended.

David Fishback, chair of the citizens advisory committee, responded Thursday on the blog sponsored by TeachtheFacts.org, a Montgomery County group that grew in opposition to groups like Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum and PFOX. He suggested that the board's defense was rushed, the judge's decision was based on resource materials — not classroom lesson plans — and anticipated that an appeal is in order.

"Fortunately, our legal system will enable the board to fully respond and demonstrate that the curriculum, which essentially does nothing more than state basic facts about sexual orientation as understood by every mainstream American medical and mental health professional association, does not violate the Constitution's wise mandate to separate church and state," he said.

"I think it was a rushed decision and hopefully in time will be corrected," said Christine Grewell, the mother of a teenager in the Montgomery County school system and a member of TeachtheFacts.org.

She called the opposition marginal in the scope of parents in the county — and across the country — who want their children to have access to a balanced, informative sex-ed curriculum. She added that students should feel comfortable asking questions and getting answers beyond what their churches or conservative family life may allow.

"To be honest, high school kids have a 'bogus radar' and if you lie to them, if you are less than honest with them, they are going to read right through you, most of them, and they won't trust you," said Grewell, who counts herself as one of hundreds of soccer moms and dads who have joined the cause.

She said the new curriculum addressed a lack of sex education in the county schools about different sexual lifestyles or "sexual variations," like male homosexuality and lesbianism, as well as condom use.

"That's what this new curriculum does. There are some definitions, some myths and stereotypes explored. For someone to say that's indoctrination, it's ridiculous," Grewell said.

On the other hand, Ellen Castellano, a mother of seven in the Montgomery School system, also considers herself a soccer mom, and says she is tired of the other side casting critics like herself as right-wing nuts. She said her group, Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum, has purposefully remained "moderate," and seeks what most parents in the country want — neutrality.

"My mantra has been we can define sexual variations, not defend them, that's all they can really do. It's a way too hot issue to do anything beyond that," she said. "And the judge, he said really clearly that [the county] had gone beyond just a definition, they were promoting it and tilting clearly towards one side."

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