

Parents, teachers protest gay-teacher caucus

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Staff Writer

Carrying miniature American flags and signs reading "Leave Sexual Orientation Out of Education," about 200 parents and teachers called yesterday for banning a caucus of gay teachers.

"We believe the agenda of this caucus reflects a national trend of militant homosexuality," said Patti Southgate, a public-school teacher addressing the crowd with a megaphone. "We feel parents should be the ones to teach values to children, not the state."

Jefferson County Teachers Association President Diane Price and several other JCTA officials who have generally supported the caucus took coffee and cookies to the crowd assembled in front of their offices at 1941 Bishop Lane.

"We're trying to make the point that the caucus is recognized because they have a right to exist, and that these people have a right to protest," Price said.

But protesters scorned the hospitality.

"Coffee and cookies won't appease me!" shouted Teri Foree, a

teacher. "What will appease me is to get rid of the gay and lesbian caucus."

The teachers union approved creation of the Gay & Lesbian Teachers Caucus in June as one of 13 subunits within the JCTA that represent membership interests.

The chairman of the caucus, Tony Prince, said its goals include defending gay teachers against discrimination by making sexual orientation a protected category in the contract.

But Southgate said, "We believe that it could leave the door wide open to homosexual topics' being

taught in the school system."

Among several handouts was a letter to school board members last year from parent Mary J. Hardin complaining that an essay assignment on sex issues was an attempt to push an alternative lifestyle on her son Emmett, then a Waggener High School freshman.

One question the assignment asked was, "Is it all right for a man to decide to wear make-up?"

Another question about public hand-holding included "adult same-sex couples" among several groups to be discussed.

"I fail to see how this assignment

could possibly teach my son anything about English," she said, "and I also feel that social issues and values are to be taught at home."

Hardin read a June 22 response from former Superintendent Donald Ingwerson that the teacher, Prince, was being questioned and would be disciplined if necessary.

Prince said "raising issues of gender and sexism is clearly something we are instructed to do, and that clearly includes homosexuality. But raising the question isn't soliciting a particular viewpoint, nor did students have to answer that question."

Thousands of petitions, opposing approval of the caucus and saying the caucus had "called for homosexual textbooks," were given to protesters to distribute. Some speakers brandished two textbooks, "Daddy's Roommate" and "Heather Has Two Mommies," that have prompted controversy in schools across the country.

However, Price, Prince and school officials said the caucus has not suggested any textbooks or other additions to the curriculum.

Teaching on gays stirs up Queens

FROM COMBINED DISPATCHES

NEW YORK — The chief of the nation's largest school system is locked in a bitter dispute with some parents over whether first-graders should be taught about the homosexual lifestyle.

New York Schools Chancellor Joseph Fernandez suspended a neighborhood school board last week for refusing to accept the "Children of the Rainbow" curriculum, which contains a section on how to teach respect for homosexual parents.

The city's Board of Education dealt him a setback Wednesday night by voting to reinstate the nine-member elected board in District 24, a largely Roman Catholic section in Queens. However, it affirmed Mr. Fernandez's authority to supersede the board if the two sides cannot come to terms on an alternative curriculum.

Mr. Fernandez set tonight as the deadline for the school board to meet with him and his staff. If the board doesn't respond, he will appoint three trustees to assume all responsibilities for the development of a multicultural curriculum.

The Queens board's president, Mary Cummins, had no comment yesterday.

What has particularly angered some parents in the district are two books on a suggested reading list for teachers — "Daddy's Roommate" and "Heather Has Two Mommies."

The 443-page "Children of the Rainbow" curriculum guide for teachers also notes that:

- Teachers of first-graders have an opportunity to give children a healthy sense of identity at an early age. Classes should include references to lesbians and homosexuals in all curricular areas and should avoid exclusionary practices by presuming a person's sexual orientation, reinforcing stereotypes, or speaking of lesbians and homosexuals as "they" or the "other."

- The issues surrounding family may be very sensitive for children. Teachers should be aware of varied family structures, including two-parent or single-parent households, homosexual or lesbian parents, divorced parents, adoptive parents and guardians.

- Children must be taught to acknowledge the positive aspects of each type of household and the importance of love and care in family living.

Thousands of letters have been mailed to parents warning that the curriculum meant first-graders would be taught about the "homosexual lifestyle, including oral and anal sex."

"I'll be the first one to pull my kids out of the school" if the curriculum is enforced, said Anna Saez, who heads a parents association at Public School 89.

"I wish it wasn't in the school at all," said another parent, Betty LoCicero. "If it's going to have to be, let it be in the junior high school."

It's the latest controversy involving Mr. Fernandez, whose name has surfaced as a potential education secretary in President-elect Bill Clinton's administration.

In excerpts from his upcoming autobiography, Mr. Fernandez disclosed last week that he nearly died of a heroin overdose as a teen-age dropout in Harlem. As education chief in New York, Mr. Fernandez was a leader in paving the way for AIDS education nationally and for condom distribution in schools.

The curriculum fight is his worst crisis so far — parents have come close to blows and security was tightened around him after two death threats were delivered.