



C. J. Gunther for The New York Times

Cary Einhaus, right, a college adviser at Phillips Exeter Academy who is gay and lives in a boy's dormitory, talked with Noah Alireza, a senior.

Gay Couples Are Accepted As Role Models at Exeter

By KATE ZERNIKE

EXETER, N.H., June 8 — Phillips Exeter Academy, the nation's oldest preparatory school, is the very picture of tradition, from its stately Georgian architecture to the white dresses and blue blazers seniors don for commencement.

Part of that tradition is the family-like ethos, with faculty members required to live alongside students in dormitories, offering homework help, consoling teenage heartbreak, serving as role models.

Now, the stewards of this 219-year-old campus are challenging tradition, altering the very definition of family and of role model.

Late last month, the trustees voted to allow gay and lesbian couples to serve as dormitory parents.

In the simplest terms, the decision reflects the increasing acceptance of gays and lesbians in mainstream culture. But it also reflects how much schools like this, once almost exclusively for affluent white boys, have sought to embrace diversity, often with growing pains. School officials have taught tolerance, they say, and now they must live it.

"We were trying to teach our students to be respectful and supportive of others, including those who are gay," said Tyler C. Tingley, the principal. Barring gay couples from the

A school steeped in tradition teaches tolerance and has decided to live it.

dormitories "was an enormous disconnect," Mr. Tingley said. "In the minds of our students, it undercut what we were trying to say."

Exeter joins its rival, Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass., which last October voted to allow gay couples in its dormitories. Concord Academy, in Concord, Mass., approved a similar policy in 1997.

At Exeter, faculty members must live in the dormitories for a minimum of 10 years. So, officials said, the decision was a matter of equity. But it is also a matter of education.

When a Harvard graduate named John Phillips chartered the school in 1781, he declared that it should be open to "students from every quarter." But for about two centuries, those quarters extended from Boston's Back Bay to Philadelphia's Main Line, with a thick swath down Fifth Avenue.

Like many elite East Coast institutions, boarding schools embraced progressive causes, but in a noblesse oblige, arms-length way. The earliest histories of Exeter report that the school banned expensive silk clothing, but in the late 1800's five students left because there was a "coloured" boy in their class.

Today, the campus is a mix of skin colors and ethnic backgrounds, even if the quadrangles look like a fashion shoot for J. Crew. Girls have been part of the student body since the 1970's. But faculty members say relations between blacks and whites are still "tentative," and boarding schools have their share of teenage intolerance.

"In teen argot, the word 'gay' has a negative context," Mr. Tingley said. "That's saying to a young man or a young woman who is confronting his or her sexuality that society does not support them, and in fact condemns them. It's as powerful as racism, but we have not confronted this issue as much as we have confronted racism."

Several surveys show that gay teenagers are several times more likely than their straight peers to be harassed at school or attempt suicide.

"For gay students, it's going to help to have institutionally accepted models of stable gay relationships," said David R. Weber, an English teacher. "For heterosexual students, that model is going to give the lie to the demeaning stereotypes they're likely to come here with."

Exeter trustees began considering

the policy change last October just as Andover trustees approved it. Andover's decision, Exeter officials say, made theirs easier; the two compete for applicants as well as on the football field.

As at Concord and Andover, the Exeter trustees consulted doctors and examined research that said gay parents were no more or less likely to rear gay children. They wanted to be ready to answer questions from any parents worried that gay couples in dormitories might lead students to become homosexual.

In a voice vote, the faculty supported the initiative almost unanimously. The trustee vote was unanimous.

"I'm not as worried about me having some special benefits or special right," said Cary Einhaus, a college adviser who is gay and lives alone in a boys' dorm. "It's more remembering that as a teenager, how much it would have helped if I had someone I could identify with, or have as a role model, to say, 'Wow, this could be my life — it's normal.'"

Even five years ago, the schools vaguely talked about such a policy, but decided, as Thomas E. Wilcox, headmaster of Concord, said, "The world was not ready for it."

The policy has produced almost no reaction from students, who, faculty members point out, have been raised in a world where television shows and movies are regularly peopled with gay characters. One student anonymously told *The Exonian*, the Exeter student newspaper, that homosexuality is "unnatural," but others said gays should have equal rights. The faculty vote to allow same-sex couples in the dorms merited only an inside story in *The Exonian*; the front page featured a story about the unprecedented racial and socioeconomic diversity among the fall's incoming class.

"Like so many situations in which gay folks are the topic, the reality is always so much different than the fear," said Brian Racine, a science teacher at Concord, who is gay and lives on campus with his partner. "The reality has been that it's a nonissue."

The policy will take effect at Andover in the fall and at Exeter a year later. Trustees said they wanted to give parents whose children had accepted admission before the policy was announced a chance to consider other schools if they had objections.

Only one parent has called Exeter with concerns. Andover officials say they had 34 letters or e-mail messages about the policy, four negative, three concerned and the remainder positive.

"I would hope that it's a committed relationship, but I think it's fine," said Barbara Plimpton, a New York parent whose daughter is a graduating senior. "I'm much more concerned that they be good, psychologically sensitive people."