

BOB SMITH

Homosexuality lessons in the classroom?

Earlier this summer, several parents stopped by to see me at the Capitol. They brought with them examples of printed materials being used in some of the nation's elementary and secondary public schools to advocate homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative. Federal funds, they reported, support the use of those publications as instructional materials in the schools.

As we talked, I looked at the materials. Two books, "Daddy's Roommate" and "Heather Has Two Mommies," are designed to promote homosexuality and same-sex parenting to 3- to 8-year-olds. An illustration in "A Kid's First Playbook About Sex," aimed at the same age group, depicts a child daydreaming and asks him to "write down some daydreams about a person or some people you may want to have sex with when you grow up." This is a book for 3-year-olds!

Other pamphlets, such as "Young, Gay and Proud" and "1 in 10," are aimed at teen-age schoolchildren. The most explicit pictures and language were contained in the "Safer Sex Handbook for Lesbians" and "Listen Up" by the Gay Men's Health Crisis; these are more like homosexual sex manuals for teen-agers than educational materials. The language in these pamphlets describes acts of sex not found in most medical textbooks; and much of it is too

graphic and obscene to describe in a family newspaper.

On March 18, 1994, The Washington Times ran a story headlined, "New York City AIDS Forum Leaves Parents Horrified." The article states:

"The New York City Youth AIDS conference that impressed AIDS Czar Kristine Gebbie outraged parents with distribution of fliers on anal sex and other homosexual practices to children as young as 12. The Feb. 12 conference at New York University Medical Center was sponsored by the New York Department of Education." Mary Cummins, a local school board member from that district, said she examined the materials and "was horrified."

As a former public school teacher and school board chairman, and as a parent of three children, I was shocked that such publications would be distributed to our children. This egregious use of tax dollars prompted me to offer an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education bill, prohibiting federal funds to any local educational agency that implements a "program or activity" that promotes or advocates homosexuality as a positive lifestyle.

When I offered my amendment, I invited my Senate colleagues to

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stop by my desk to review the materials because I could not show the publications' obscene illustrations, or quote their lewd language, during nationally televised Senate proceedings. When a young woman lobbying for this amendment tried to show senators in the Capitol copies of these pamphlets, she was threatened with arrest for distributing pornographic materials.

If these materials are so ob-

scene that they cannot be shown on the Senate floor or possessed in the Capitol, why are they fit for publicly funded distribution to schoolchildren? After full debate, the Senate answered that question — passing my amendment by the overwhelming margin of 91 to 9.

The legislation has since been attacked as "undercutting local control over education," "prohibiting the counseling of homosexuals in the schools," or "fostering intolerance of homosexuals." These distortions are perpetuated by those whose ideological disagreements with my amendment preclude them from accurately interpreting it.

My amendment is completely consistent with the principle of local control that I have always supported. This is not a mandate. Local school districts will remain free to use state and local funds, as well as private money, for instruction and educational materials that advocate homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative. If they choose to do so, however, they will forfeit their federal funds. The overwhelming majority of American taxpayers would never want their money used for these programs. They should not be forced to subsidize the advocacy of homo-

sexuality to our children in the public schools.

Contrary to the criticisms, the amendment does not prohibit counseling of homosexuals in the schools. It is wholly permissible for guidance counselors to privately consult with gay students.

My amendment does not foster intolerance of homosexuals. It simply prohibits the use of federal funds for the promotion of advocacy of homosexuality as a lifestyle. There is a substantial difference between tolerating something and promoting it.

The promotion of homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative is a highly controversial concept. No matter what side of the issue an individual takes, few want their tax dollars spent to promote homosexuality to their children in our public schools. Ninety-one senators proved that point by supporting my initiative.

Sen. Bob Smith, New Hampshire Republican, began his Senate service in 1990. He serves on the Armed Services, Environment and Public Works and Select Ethics committees. This article was written for Scripps Howard News Service.

COMMENTARY

AL KIELWASSER

Jeff Colburn, a high school teacher in the San Francisco Bay area, recalls a lecture he gave about the Nazis. He told his class that not only were Jews persecuted, but also communists, Gypsies and homosexuals.

"So what's wrong with killing the fags?" one student asked.

Most students know very little about lesbian and gay history. Many will never even become aware of their own deep ignorance of the subject. And some, like the student in Jeff Colburn's class, will turn passive ignorance into an active hatred.

Recently, the U.S. Senate voted to promote such hatred by impoverishing schools that teach the truth about homosexuality. By a 63-to-36 vote, the Senate adopted an amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act that would cut off funds to any school district offering programs "that have either the purpose or effect of encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative."

This amendment — sponsored by GOP Sens. Jesse Helms of North Carolina and Bob Smith of New Hampshire — also would ban counseling or referrals to support organizations that affirm homosexuality.

Trying to help, Sen. Ted Kennedy, Massachusetts Democrat, offered his own amendment that would simply cut funds to schools that "promote or encourage sexual activity" of any kind. But the Kennedy amendment would be selectively enforced by those who cannot brook any mention of lesbian or gay subjects in a fourth-grade textbook.

These legislative efforts are founded on the dubious notion that children can be "taught to be gay."

There is no credible evidence to support that crackpot theory. On the other hand, there is overwhelming evidence that demonstrates the positive benefits of teaching tolerance and a healthy respect for diversity. Children are not born to be homophobes. They are taught to hate one another, and themselves.

According to the U.S. Justice Department, lesbians and gays are probably the most frequent victims of hate crimes. Often, the perpetrators of this violence are young men, many in their teens.

In remaining silent about sexual orientation, our schools perpetuate ignorance that allows children to hate — and even kill — lesbians and gay men.

suggest that homophobia takes a terrible toll on the self-esteem of lesbian and gay youth. Living in a society that openly rejects their very identity, these children routinely face verbal abuse, isolation and physical hostility, from their own families and their peers. Such hateful pressures can — and too often do — lead to suicide.

These recent congressional efforts should alert us all to the necessity of fighting more vigorously for educational equity and curriculum reform. Our society cannot afford to combat only the symptoms of homophobia; we must engage the causes.

Chief among these causes is an inadequate, homophobic system of public education.

There are, of course, lesbian and gay students in every school across the nation, and in every classroom these students (and the truth) are under attack. The federal government should proactively assert the civil and educational rights of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth.

Activists in Los Angeles and San Francisco already have developed a "Bill of Educational Rights" for lesbian and gay students:

- The right to fair and factual information about sexual orientation in textbooks and other classroom materials.

- The right to unbiased information about the historical and continuing contributions of lesbian, gay and bisexual people in all subject areas.

- The right to positive role models, both in person and in the curriculum.

- The right to attend schools free from verbal and physical harassment, where education, not survival, is the priority.

- The right to attend schools where respect and dignity for all students is the standard.

- The right to a heritage free of crippling self-hate and unchallenged discrimination.

- The right to political leaders who guarantee and fight for their constitutional freedoms, rather than legislators who reinforce hatred and prejudice.

The time is long overdue to have this Bill of Rights nailed to the doors of our schools, congressional offices, and the White House. The choice ultimately falls to each of us. Either we will continue to hate, or we can begin to truly educate.

Al Kielwasser is co-chairman, San Francisco Bay Area Chapter of the Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation and Project 21: A National Lesbian/Gay/Bisexual Coalition for Curriculum Advocacy. This article was written for Scripps Howard News Service.