

May 13, 2009

We Need the Caring Schools Curriculum!

- Launch curriculum with further revisions.
- Allow opt-out.
- Train teachers with lots of role playing for “sticky questions.”

Dear School Board Members:

As we saw at the May 12th BOE meeting, intelligent people of good will can passionately disagree. That in itself is the most important thing we can teach our students—that it’s OK to hold a different opinion. We can still be nice to each other. We can even really like each other although we disagree on important subjects.

So how do we move forward?

Gay slurs are routinely ignored by teachers and playground supervisors who are afraid to respond lest they become the target of a parental complaint that they were teaching sexuality or morals in an unauthorized fashion. **We absolutely require training that gives teachers tools for effective response to slurs—and genuine questions—about LGBT people.**

The revised curriculum is a good start. I haven’t read the books or seen the films, but I can find nothing objectionable in the posted lessons plans apart from some appalling spelling and usage errors that I would be happy to copyedit for you.

However, opponents are correct to note that these lessons could promote a herd mentality rather than genuine acceptance of all students—including those kids whose parents think LGBT persons are living outside God’s will. It would be easy for “unwelcoming” or “bigot” to become the new putdown for a new group of victims.

Whether the curriculum works depends—as all lessons do—on the wisdom and skill of the teachers. If the teachers promote a specific value judgment apart from tolerance of diversity, the lessons will wind up

Suggested Revisions

- **Kindergarten:** Launch as-is.
- **1st grade:** Be careful in language comparing family structures. “Equally important” is fine; “equally valid” presents a problem.
- **2nd grade:** Haven’t read book, but hunch is we should omit the “couples” portion of Question #3. Let the kids initiate discussion about the penguins’ relationship if they’re interested. Teacher initiation is too didactic on a hot issue.
- **3rd grade:** Go with it.
- **4th grade:** The controversial “standing up” is a nice kinetic break, not to mention a direct way to experience the courage/discomfort of defending your own beliefs or someone being picked on. However, don’t require the class as a whole to do this. Invite only those who wish to. If nobody wants to stand up, that itself is a launching point for discussion about how uncomfortable it is to go against the crowd.
- **5th grade:** Consider omitting mention of bisexual and transgender in elementary school; wait till middle school. Discuss B&T only in response to student questions/comments. Note that transgender is not identified in the vocabulary. If our curriculum writers can’t provide a matter-of-fact definition, how is the class supposed to deal with this?

In all lessons the teacher should act more as a facilitator than an idea-promoter. Discussions should be driven by student questions. The main thing is to have a comfortable, safe-for-all conversation where LGBT families are visible. No one should be instructed in “right” and “wrong” attitudes

teaching the opposite. Teachers will need intensive role-play training in how to answer sticky questions.

The fact that gay slurs are used daily on AUSD elementary campuses demonstrates that our teachers currently lack the necessary wisdom and skill. Parents are correct in wanting transparency regarding the teacher training.

Should opt-out be allowed? If so, the kids who most need exposure to the curriculum will miss out. Further, those kids may find themselves the target of hurtful teasing (“Religious freak! Bigot! Your parents promote hate!”). If I were teacher, such teasing would become yet another opportunity to teach the anti-bullying curriculum...and here we would discuss tolerance for others’ religious beliefs as well as a stereotype that disapproval of LGBT behavior means hatred of LGBT people. **Will AUSD teachers be trained how to respond to (1) questions about why some kids are excused from the classroom and (2) any ensuing taunts?**

So allowing an opt-out creates problems, but failing to allow it may create an even bigger problem for our obviously divided city. This one comes down to legal interpretation. The argument that the curriculum borders on sex ed and therefore we must allow opt-out is totally specious; for me, the question is whether we *can* we legally allow an opt-out.

My gut instinct is to **launch the curriculum, allow the opt-out**. Successful implementation may allay some fears as times goes on. Perhaps we could allow the LGBT lesson to be tape-recorded and distributed to classroom parents upon request? (You can see I’m no lawyer.)

Thank you for your exceptionally patient and inclusive public process on this issue.