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## News

July 5, 2009

### Debate erupts over Kanawha schools diversity policy

By **Davin White**  
Staff writer

CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- In two meetings, Kanawha County school board members spent very few minutes talking about whether to include sexual orientation as part of the county's cultural diversity policy.

Fast forward a few weeks, and proposed changes generated about 200 comments on the school board's Web site and led to a flood of e-mails for the legal department.

School board members plan to vote on the policy at a meeting July 16.

Jeremiah Dys, president of the Family Policy Council of West Virginia, said the proposed policy is "going to be penalizing teachers for doing nothing other than standing by their beliefs."

Newly hired school employees would receive an orientation on cultural diversity before assuming their duties, while current employees will continue annual diversity training where they watch videos and answer questions.

School board attorney Jim Withrow said the proposed changes have been misunderstood, while board member Pete Thaw added that people on more than one side of the debate have distorted the facts.

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"It's a policy that we're trying to put in for fair treatment of everybody and to stop the bullying. It's not about



homosexuality," Thaw said. "It's about equal treatment of all students in the schools."

In April, Clayton Stover, a 12th-grader at St. Albans High School, asked school board members to consider sexual orientation as part of the diversity policy. Stover wanted gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students to be free of verbal and physical harassment in school.

About four months before Stover spoke, a cadre of teachers and school employees had suggested that sexual orientation become part of the diversity policy, according to Withrow.

"Clayton Stover's comments to the board may have accelerated our plans ... but I was already drafting changes," Withrow said.

Dys expects the policy will lead classroom teachers to teach issues contrary to the beliefs of most parents and families in Kanawha County.

"The board of education should concentrate on improving reading, writing and arithmetic instead of promoting behavior that is unhealthy, unwise and unwinds the moral fabric of the family," he said. "Teachers need to stick to teaching."

He also believes the policy is a step toward encouraging students to embrace same-sex behavior. Dys also said a big problem is that sexual orientation is not defined anywhere in the proposed policy.

He noted that the [Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders](#) lists gender identity disorder as a medical condition. Teachers should help students with the disorder to get the medicine and treatment they need, he said.

"Students shouldn't have their sexual identity forced on them by the government or by the board of education," he said.

Dys also pointed to a June 29 posting on the [Family Policy Council's blog](#), where he disagrees with the assertion that critics misunderstand the proposed changes. The blog quotes a Gay,

Lesbian, Straight Education Network publication that gives school leaders information about how to address bullying and harassment of gay students.

The first two steps include the creation of an anti-bullying policy and staff training for teachers to help them identify and address harassment.

The third step, Dys said, is to establish gay-straight alliances, while the final step is comprehensive curriculum. On the blog, the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network is referred to as "the leading education arm of the radical homosexual agenda."

"Some of the teachers are saying we want to teach homosexuality. Well that's not true," Thaw said. "We have never advocated having them teach homosexuality in schools. What you can find is we will not abide by violence in the schools and we will not abide by bullying."

Thaw asked the question: Who could be for bullying in schools?

Dys said if the school board is going to promote sexual orientation as an issue of bullying, it should be part of a policy on bullying as opposed to the cultural diversity policy.

"Would that have been any less controversial?" Withrow said.

The issue is all about curbing the harassment and poor treatment of gay, lesbian and bisexual students, Withrow said.

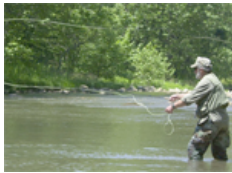
"We're not attempting to teach that sexual orientation is right or wrong. That's not our place," he said. "I think this is just a point of emphasis that we feel, I hope the board feels, is important.... We've got the comments of what some of those students have been through. This is just to raise the awareness."

Dys also is concerned that sexual orientation would be added to a section of the diversity policy on equal opportunity employment. Local parents would worry that a bisexual physical education teacher could not be fired because of his or her sexuality, Dys said.

"If that policy isn't as I have stated it and isn't right, I won't vote for it and I know that the majority on that board won't vote for

it," Thaw said.

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