

Premier calls for 'gay-ed' tolerance  
School refuses to excuse Muslims  
Teachers flocking to diversity class

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Premier Dalton McGuinty is urging parents who seek to exclude their children from "anti-homophobia education" at a downtown Toronto school to be more tolerant.

"To me this speaks to a kind of broader issue. What kind of society do we want to live in, what kind of society are we trying to build?" the Premier told reporters yesterday.

"I think the kind of society that we should all aspire to is where we respect each other's difference. That's fundamentally what this is all about and I think our children should be taught to respect the differences that we manifest."

Some Muslim parents at Market Lane Public School met Tuesday night with the Toronto District School Board to discuss their desire for the exclusion of their children from classes on families with same-sex parents.

Some parents said they felt their religious rights were being trampled on in the name of gay rights. About 10 to 15 per cent of the 560 students at the school are Muslim.

The board has refused to accommodate their request. Children with same-sex parents have the right to have their families represented in educational material in the same way other kinds of families are included, said board officials.

Even though students are excused from sexual education classes on religious grounds, the board says anti-homophobia education does not include descriptions of sexual activities.

McGuinty said it's "up to the trustees" to determine whether parents can pull children from the classes, but he noted that tolerance is a two-way street.

"It's important all our children - all our children - have the opportunity to learn about those things that distinguish one of us from the other and that they learn to respect those differences," he said.

The Halton District School Board, like the Toronto board, says no one is exempt from anti-discrimination education because of religious beliefs.

"We know they are going to be in class with kids of same-sex parents and they have to respect that, treat everyone kindly and not exclude them," said Suzanne Muir, diversity co-ordinator for the Halton board and a Muslim.

While some Muslims may feel that education about same-sex families amounts to tacit approval of gay lifestyles, Muir says she sees it differently: Islam teaches equity.

It's important to create a positive environment in all grades, she said.

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Chris D'souza, equity officer at Dufferin-Peel District School Board, referring to popularity of same-sex seminar for teachers

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"If a kindergarten teacher is talking about who is in your family and a child draws a picture of two dads, you can't ignore it and say, ` Draw a mommy.'

"That's the reality of public schools. Families are different. We may not agree, but we have to respect these families."

Tarek Fatah of the Muslim Canadian Congress said he supports the Toronto board. "These (families) want selective human rights that protect them and not others. These parents want absolute control of their children. They are scared their children will grow up with their own thinking, that young women will grow up with independent ideas."

Others support Muslim parents' right to remove children from discussions of same-sex relationships, saying a Muslim child might experience "turmoil" adjusting to different views.

"We're not trampling on anyone else's rights," says Zafar Bangash, president of the Islamic Society of York Region.

"We don't want our children subject to that kind of thinking. It's very clear in our belief that marriage is between a man and a woman. It goes against the core beliefs of Muslims; our understanding springs directly from the Qur'an."

Schools are the place where different cultures and orientations naturally collide and in the last 20 years boards have become more experienced with the issues emerging from an increasingly diverse population. But dealing with those issues hasn't necessarily become easier, say those charged with promoting equity and protecting students' human rights.

"Some of the old problems around gender and sexual orientation still exist but are really exacerbated by the influx of non-white immigrants," said Chris D'souza, equity officer at the Dufferin-Peel District School Board.

"We have pockets in Peel, in Markham, in central Toronto where you can only use the word 'non-white,' you can't use 'visible minority' because 80 per cent of the students are 'non-white.' We need to be reflecting that diversity in the administration pool and the classroom."

D'souza is organizing a conference on Saturday designed to sensitize teachers and administrators to diversity issues. Yesterday it was already overbooked with more than 225 educators expected to spend half their day off learning about ethnicity and faith issues in the classroom. "It's current. It's in the media. People want to know more about it," he said.

You can't touch on race or religion without inciting emotion and public debate, said Edward McKeown, who was education director of the old Metro board.

Issues around homosexuality really started emerging in the education system after Toronto's infamous bathhouse raids in 1981, he said.

"The Toronto board was certainly on the cutting edge," he remembered yesterday. "They had a policy and a practice as far as homosexuality was concerned. It was a reality that existed in life and homosexuals were not to be discriminated against."

By 1991, when an Ontario court ruled the Peel school board couldn't prohibit a Sikh student from wearing a ceremonial dagger in school, there was barely a ripple of concern in Toronto schools, said McKeown.

Since 9/11, schools have worked overtime to provide students with a safe haven from ethnic, cultural and religious bias, said Patricia Hayes, a human rights officer with the Toronto board.

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