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September 26, 2005

Via first class mail and e-mail

The Honorable Patricia O'Neill, President
Montgomery County Board of Education
850 Hungerford Drive
Rockville, Maryland 20850

RE: *Just Say Now to Comprehensive and Inclusive Health
Education*

Dear President O'Neill:

The community forum sponsored yesterday by TeachThefacts.org was a great success. For your information and that of your colleagues on the Board, I am providing below the articles from today's *Washington Post* and *Washington Times* reporting it. Included, in italics, are my comments on the reports, which I believe you will find useful.

In addition, here are two links to the TeachTheFacts.org blog, which provide some overall description of yesterday's forum:

<http://www.teachthefacts.org/2005/09/gearing-up-for-forum.html>
<http://www.teachthefacts.org/2005/09/todays-teach-facts-forum-was-perfect.html>

Sincerely,

David S. Fishback

cc: Dr. Weast (hard copy only)
Dr. Frieda Lacey
Brian Edwards
George Margolies
Barbara Pearlman

Sex-Ed Panel Aims to Sway Lessons on

Gays Montgomery Urged to Reject Teaching Homosexuality as Choice
By V. Dion Haynes Washington Post Staff Writer Monday, September 26, 2005; B03
Montgomery County school officials drafting a new sex education

curriculum should reject lessons suggesting that homosexuality is a condition that can be reversed, speakers at a community forum said yesterday.

"A person's sexual attraction cannot be changed at all. There is no data to suggest that," said Paul A. Wertsch, a physician and chairman of the American Medical Association's committee on gay and lesbian issues, speaking before about 100 parents and other community members at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School.

Wertsch was among the health educators who spoke at the forum sponsored by Teachthefacts.org, a parent group established to support the education curriculum proposed last year by the county Board of Education. The curriculum, which the parent group considered comprehensive, was dropped in the spring to settle a lawsuit brought by other parents who thought some of the lessons, including a demonstration of how to put on a condom, were too explicit.

With the school board starting from scratch on a sex education plan, both sides are campaigning fiercely to influence what Montgomery eighth-graders will hear about homosexuality and what 10th-graders will hear about contraceptives

Teachthefacts.org and the plaintiffs in the lawsuit -- Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum and the Virginia-based Parents and Friends of Ex-Gays and Gays -- are seeking representation on an advisory committee that will work with the school system on devising the lessons. The school board will select the committee next month.

The settlement, while not prohibiting the discussion of homosexuality, required schools to drop materials that described Baptist groups and other religious denominations as less tolerant of gays.

Speakers yesterday, citing numerous studies and personal anecdotes, attempted to counter their opponents' desire to include in the curriculum the viewpoint that homosexuality is a lifestyle choice that can be changed with therapy.

Robert Rigby Jr., a special-education teacher at Falls Church High School, said that he spent 17 years in reparative ministries trying to become straight and that during that time, "my life was an ongoing disaster." Rather than change his attraction to men, Rigby said, the therapy left him depressed and suicidal. Finally, he said, "a Baptist pastor said the words that changed my life: 'Robert, God made you the way you are, and God loves you the way you are.' "

In a phone interview, Michelle Turner, president of Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum, said: "There is no conclusive truth that sexual [orientation] is something you are born with. Where's the science?"

[NOTE: Perhaps Ms. Turner should have attended the Forum and had the science shown to her.]

She added that the judge in the case ruled that if the school system addresses the issue of homosexuality in class, teachers must include viewpoints from more than one perspective. "If you open Pandora's box, you have to address everything that comes out of it."

[NOTE: This is precisely the point that Dr. Weast addressed in announcing the settlement of the lawsuit. MCPS retains the right to decide what will be in the curriculum. As I am sure your attorneys have explained, there is no constitutional right to have every "side" of an issue discussed in the curriculum. If that were the case, CRC could force MCPS to teach creationism alongside evolution, or Holocaust Denial assertions alongside teaching about the World War II Holocaust. It would be a disaster if MCPS decided not to deal with important health issues on the grounds set forth by Ms. Turner. If such a lawsuit is ever filed again, this time MCPS will be ready to respond to this frivolous argument. And there will be other groups prepared to assist, legally, as well.]

Alexandra Koneff, 41, who has a sixth-grade daughter and a fourth-grade son in the school system, said she supports the approach sought by Teachthefacts.org. "I know kids are growing up a lot faster," said Koneff, who lives in Bethesda. "I want to make sure [my children] have all the information they need, not just a part of it."

Organizers of the forum showed "Protect Yourself," a seven-minute video that was intended to be part of the curriculum. The video opens with a young woman in a pharmacy standing before a row of condoms. She asks what the best ways are for young people to protect themselves from sexually transmitted diseases and pregnancy. The video then shows shots of several teenagers, who respond that refraining from sex or using condoms are best. At the end, the woman uses a cucumber to demonstrate how to put on a condom.

Glenn Northern, sexuality education policy manager at Planned Parenthood Federation of America, praised the video. "It mentions abstinence seven times. This is not simply giving lip service to abstinence."

Turner said the school system is clear in teaching against smoking and using illicit drugs but sends a mixed message on sex. "Why would they teach kids how to have sex when there are so many physical and emotional dangers?" she said.

[NOTE: What Ms. Turner misses in her comparison is that there is never an appropriate time to smoke or use illicit drugs. On the other hand, at appropriate times in life, sex is something nearly

every person will experience, hopefully in contexts that enrich their lives and the lives of their partners. At some point, hopefully an appropriate point, people begin having sexual relations. But whether they begin at the appropriate time in their lives, or earlier than they should, they need to know how to minimize unwanted pregnancy and sexually transmitted infections.]

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2005/09/25/AR2005092501309.html>

Parents seeking tolerance of gays

By Jon Ward THE WASHINGTON TIMES Published September 26, 2005

A Montgomery County parents group yesterday hosted a forum in Bethesda to promote teaching about and acceptance of homosexuality in public-school sex education.

"It is critical for [Montgomery County public schools] to continue its tradition of promoting tolerance in a population as diverse as ours," said Christine Grewell, co-founder of Teachthefacts.org (TTF).

The group hosted an afternoon forum at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High School, which was attended by about 100 people.

One speaker, David Fishback, said conservatives see the county's sex education debate as "the next Kansas," referring to the debate over evolution versus intelligent design. "We cannot let that happen here," said Mr. Fishback, who helped shape a sex-education curriculum that was scrapped by the county school system last spring.

In May, a federal judge ruled in favor a lawsuit against the curriculum that said the course discriminated against religious beliefs and promoted homosexuality. Schools Superintendent Jerry D. Weast then scrapped the entire course and disbanded the citizens committee led by Mr. Fishback, saying he would guide the production of a new course.

Mr. Weast has disclosed little information this year about his progress.

A new citizens committee will be chosen Oct. 11.

Mr. Fishback said yesterday's forum was "educational" and responded to a similar meeting held last month by a parents group that opposed the curriculum, Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum (CRC).

One key issue that Mr. Weast will have to decide is whether to include instruction about "ex-gays." TTF denounced the idea of

"ex-gays" at the forum, saying efforts to treat homosexuality as a mental illness or a disease are harmful and destructive.

One of the afternoon's seven speakers, Paul A. Wertsch of the American Medical Association (AMA), said that beginning with controversial sex researcher Alfred Kinsey in the 1940s, there has been some evidence that homosexuality is inborn.

He cited examples of homosexual behavior in animals and brain studies on homosexual men and women.

"There is probably a genetic influence. We're not sure what it is. You probably inherit some predisposition to" homosexuality, Dr. Wertsch said.

[NOTE: The Times article does not mention Dr. Wertsch's further discussion of the research showing an interplay between genetics and hormonal activity in the womb, which appears to result in whatever sexual orientation a child is born with. If you wish, I can provide you with copies of the slides from Dr. Wertsch's power point presentation.]

Dr. Wertsch, who said he became interested in homosexuality when he found out that his son is homosexual, heads the AMA's committee on Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Matters. He said there is no evidence that same-sex attraction can be changed, discounting the 2001 study by psychiatrist Robert L. Spitzer that found that "there is evidence that change in sexual orientation following some form of reparative therapy does occur in some gay men and lesbians."

"If Spitzer had interviewed me 15 years ago, I would have told him I was cured," said Robert Rigby, a Fairfax County public school teacher who talked about how he tried to overcome his same-sex desires for 17 years, but is now happily homosexual.

[NOTE: The old Citizens Advisory Committee thoroughly considered Dr. Spitzer's work, and had it analyzed by a Committee member who was also a medical doctor and a medical epidemiologist. She reported to us the same methodological flaws that Dr. Wertsch noted yesterday.]

Mr. Fishback and Mrs. Grewell equated the CRC with an effort by "right-wing" groups to teach "particular theological doctrines" in the classroom.

Mrs. Grewell, whose daughter is in high school, said those who favor abstinence-only sex education do not want any instruction on homosexuality in the classroom.

CRC President Michelle Turner said Mr. Fishback's committee and TTF have ignored scientific facts from sources such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the surgeon general, which discourage homosexual activity.

Mrs. Turner said she and another CRC members tried to introduce

to the committee data showing that homosexuality is a health risk, but "it was shot down every time."

[NOTE: As I am sure you know, the health curriculum already contains full information on the risks involved with the full range of sexual behaviors in the Sexually Transmitted Disease unit, and all CDC materials are available for teacher use. What, in fact, occurred - as I explained to the Board in correspondence last year - was that Advisory Committee Member Henrietta Brown sought to add to the Family Life and Human Sexuality unit essentially the same materials - but only those materials referencing homosexuality. In other words, even though both heterosexual and homosexual activity pose risks, the only risks Ms. Brown sought to discuss were the homosexual risks, in order to marginalize gay people. It was that selective duplication of information that led the full Committee to reject Ms. Brown's suggestions. The bottom line, I believe, is that Ms. Turner continues to slander MCPS by asserting that the MCPS curriculum ignores the risks of STIs.]

Mrs. Turner was in St. Louis, where she spoke at a conference for conservatives about CRC's efforts. She said schools should teach that there is evidence showing that homosexuality is a choice. "CRC has never said that homosexuality is a mental disorder. We firmly believe that it is a choice," she said. "There is no conclusive scientific research or data that proves beyond a shadow of a doubt that proves that homosexuality is something you are born with."

[NOTE: Ms. Turner's statement that "CRC has never said that homosexuality is a mental disorder" is certainly news to me. The entire tenor of CRC's March "town hall meeting" was precisely that. Moreover, the repeated attempts by CRC and PFOX to press the efficacy of "reparative therapy" puts into question Ms. Turner's veracity on this point. The leading proponent of reparative therapy, Joseph Nicolosi, premises his entire approach on the assumption that being gay is a mental disorder caused by bad parenting. This notion has been rejected by every mainstream medical and mental health professional association.]

<http://washtimes.com/metro/20050925-104445-4214r.htm>