

Published: February 25, 2004 in Education Week

Commentary

Separation of Church and School

School administrators and boards shy away from confronting the issue of homosexuality.

By Deborah M. Roffman

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Like Matthew Shepherd, the young gay man memorialized in perpetuity by the searing image of a lonely post fence on the plains of Wyoming, a little boy in Lafayette, La., has put another new face to the human cost of hatred and bigotry in America.

On Nov. 11 of last year, 7-year-old Marcus McLaurin was standing in the recess line at Ernest Gallet Elementary School when a classmate asked a question about his mother and father. Marcus replied that actually he didn't have a mother and father, that he had two mothers instead. The curious classmate wanted to know why, and Marcus responded it was because his mother was gay. "What does that mean?" the classmate asked, and Marcus explained, "Gay is when a girl likes another girl."

The teacher's response was swift and unequivocal. Marcus was chastised in front of his classmates and told that gay is a "bad word" that should never be spoken at school. He was denied recess and sent to the principal's office. The following week, he had to attend a special "behavioral clinic," where he was forced to write time after time, "I will never use the word 'gay' in school again."

Equally heartrending was what occurred when Marcus came home the day of the incident. Said his mother, Sharon Huff: "I was concerned when the assistant principal called and told me my son had said a word so bad that he didn't want to repeat it over the phone. But that was nothing compared to the shock I felt when my little boy came home and told me that his teacher had told him his family is a dirty word. No child should ever hear that, especially not from a teacher he trusted and respected."

When I read about this story, one of my first thoughts was of a man I had met just a few weeks before. He was the parent of children attending a school that had recently taken a strong anti-discrimination stand toward the issue of sexual orientation. The policy had stirred controversy, and the man was one of a small group of parents at the center of it.

The man was warm, gracious, and deeply compassionate. His love of children, everyone's children, was palpable, and I know he would have been horrified by the treatment of Marcus McLaurin and his family. He was also a self-avowed fundamentalist Christian. At his core, he believed that homosexuality was a terrible sin, unconditionally against the laws of God. The school's position—perceived by this man as tantamount to approval and even promotion of homosexuality—violated his deep religious beliefs and was therefore offensive. He contended

that unless the school adopted a position compatible with his own, it was obliged to avoid the issue altogether.

Many school administrators and boards shy away from confronting the issue of homosexuality because they fear precisely this kind of reaction. Often it is the fear of controversy or confrontation itself, or its potentially explosive or divisive aftermath, that drives the avoidance. Ironically, however, it is often the very schools that make a strong and bold commitment to diversity within the school community which have the most difficult time over this particular issue—precisely because they do work hard to ensure that members of diverse groups feel equally acknowledged and valued for who they are.

In this situation, the needs of two particular groups within a school community—homosexuals and those whose religious or other personal values compel them to condemn homosexuality—may appear totally at odds. The seeming impasse often feels to all parties like a no-win diversity dilemma of the first order, a zero-sum game in which if one side "wins," the other surely "loses."

As the case of young Marcus McLaurin so pointedly teaches us, schools do not have the luxury of putting the issue on hold because it seems too scary, confusing, or daunting. The clear and present developmental, emotional, and educational needs of children must always trump adult needs to avoid uncomfortable topics, sidestep challenging conflicts or controversies, or impose their own personal values on other people's children. Moreover, as long as we keep talking and acting as if this issue is about adults and their needs, rather than children and theirs, we'll remain locked into a zero-sum mentality.

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Years of work with schools and school communities across the country have convinced me that the issue of homosexuality and schooling is potentially a huge win-win for any community bold enough to tackle it head-on. A successful journey begins with clarity about the role of schools in children's lives and the principles on which effective schools can, and cannot, base their policy and practice decisions.

Schools fundamentally are institutions of learning. They exist primarily for the purpose of providing meaningful education in a physically and emotionally safe environment conducive to maximal learning. Children who come to school and feel targeted, mistreated, stigmatized, or marginalized because of who they are, or who their families are, must focus their emotional energy on surviving, not learning, and are therefore denied their constitutionally protected right to walk into a school building as the equal of other students in the building. While laws may vary, the moral case can be made that sexual orientation, like gender, race, religion, ethnicity, and other protected identities, cannot be allowed to interfere with a child's right to equal educational access.

Protecting this right for gay adolescents, and for the children of a gay parent or same-sex partners, is in no way the same thing as "promoting" or even showing approval of homosexuality, any more than demonstrating fairness toward boys, Roman Catholics, or African-Americans proves that a school is endorsing a particular gender, religion, or race. Moreover, the very notion of "approval" is beside the point; schools are obligated to be neutral about each of these aspects of identity. In other words, in the interests of safety and fairness, an individual's gender, race, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation must be rendered irrelevant (except as it contributes to learning through and about diversity) to the learning environment.

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What nonsectarian schools correctly cannot use as a basis for policy and practice decisions—either deliberately or by default—are the religious or other personal viewpoints of individual members of the community, no matter how absolutely or deeply held these views might be. Even if this were somehow appropriate, where would schools start? Whose faith-based beliefs should they choose to promote or to ignore? How would they decide? How could they possibly select one without diminishing or demonstrating disrespect for all others?

But while schools have no obligation to defer to particular personal or religious views, they do have an obligation to honor and appreciate the diversity of opinions, religious and otherwise, that exists in any community. And therein lies the solution to zero-sum thinking: Making schools safe environments for gay or lesbian students or parents requires making schools equally safe for respectful dialogue with those whose religious views forbid homosexuality. In my classrooms, I will fight for the right of all my students to be who they are and to be treated with respect, whether who they are is gay or fundamentalist Christian. It's the same right in either case, and cannot fully exist for one without existing for the other.

Today, the word "tolerance" has fallen out of favor with many groups rightly pressing for an equal place at the table in American society. I wonder if they're thinking about the word in its most minimal and negative sense, as in "to tolerate," or put up with someone you don't like or respect, only because you have to.

True tolerance is not something that the relatively powerful confer on the relatively powerless. It is always a two-sided equation, and therefore equally balanced, as in a truce. In an act of true tolerance, both sides agree to disagree, perhaps permanently, in regard to deeply held personal values. They also agree neither to condemn nor mistreat one another over these differences—even though each may continue to feel genuine disapproval toward the other.

True tolerance is neither an attitude nor a necessary but distasteful compromise. It is, in itself, a deeply moral and selfless act. It requires that people put aside some of their most deeply held personal values, and the very human desire to want to impose them on others. At its core is the shared belief that there exists something far more fundamental and significant than our differences: our common humanity. It is because of this abiding respect for the humanity we share, despite areas of enormous disagreement, that we willingly agree to treat one another, and to speak to and about one another, with fundamental respect.

As I am always reminding schools, tolerance is easy when it's easy. In situations where we want

people to treat us with greater tolerance, or when our differences are perceived as relatively insignificant, or when it is in our self-interest to be seen by others as "tolerant," it's easy to be accommodating. It is most difficult, most powerful, and therefore most moral if and when we truly abhor what the other stands for. To get past our differences, and often deeply felt and long-standing animosity, we must willingly choose to dig further and further beneath our personal values and beliefs to uncover our common humanity. That's the truly hard part, and the truly moral part.

True tolerance occurs not when we accept our differences because we have to, but when we accept our differences because we want to for the greater good of us all. Modeling this kind of tolerance on behalf of our children, over an issue as potentially explosive and divisive as homosexuality, might be the best kind of gift we could give them.

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