

May 17, 2009

Mike McMahon, Board President
Ron Mooney, Board Vice President
Tracy Jensen, Board Member
Trish Spencer, Board Member
Niel Tam, Board Member

Board of Education
Alameda Unified School District
2200 Central Avenue
Alameda, CA 94501

Re: Proposed “Lesson 9” Addition to Caring Schools Curriculum

I. Introduction

The “Lesson 9” proposal is designed to teach children that LGBT people exist, are contributing members of our society, and – as individuals and as families – are entitled to equality, freedom from discrimination and basic respect as human beings. It is hard to dispute the intrinsic value to all children of having their families and their own identities reflected in school lessons. The state task force charged with identifying best practices to implement state laws that prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity lists curriculum inclusion as a key component. And research by the California Safe Schools Coalition demonstrates that when LGBT people and issues are included in the curriculum, *all* students feel safer and school climates *are* safer.
<http://www.casafeschools.org/FactSheet-curriculum.pdf>

The existence of opposition to this one-lesson-a-year addition to the existing safe schools curriculum reflects a dangerous lack of understanding about the relationship between curriculum inclusion and harassment prevention. That lack of understanding is most tellingly revealed in the requests to create an “opt-out” or “parental notification” system that would restrict dramatically when, how and where LGBT people are mentioned in the classroom by requiring teachers to provide notice before talking about LGBT people and issues.

Adopting Parental Notification or an Opt Out System Will Send a Discriminatory Message that Undermines the Very Purpose of the Lesson

The legal opinion provided to the District recommends against permitting parents to opt out but suggests providing parental notification. What that means is far from clear. Even if parental notification simply means informing parents at the beginning of the school year that the lessons are part of the curriculum, singling out lessons that address LGBT people and issues as the only material that requires such special notice sends a discriminatory message that directly contradicts the purpose of the curriculum. If parental notification means anything more than that, then it will function as an effective opt out system, rendering the recommendation inherently contradictory and self-defeating.

The most serious risk is that adopting a parental notification requirement will make it more difficult for teachers to talk about LGBT people and issues in an uncharged way, whether in anytime lessons, at teachable moments or in other contexts. A parental notification rule is likely to silence teachers rather than providing them with tools to improve their capacity to discuss LGBT people issues.

The proposed curriculum recognizes that failing to talk about LGBT people sends the message that there is something wrong with being LGBT. Allowing an opt-out or providing special notification sends the same message. It teaches children that there is something so dangerous, wrong, bad or different about LGBT people that schools cannot even reflect their existence in the curriculum without a special notice to parents that will allow them to avoid the lesson – either officially under an opt-out policy or unofficially through date-specific parental notification.

Permitting families to opt out will undermine the program's effectiveness and is inconsistent with its very purpose. Even if only a few people ever choose to exercise it, creating a special rule that allows students to opt out of this instruction, when there is no such option for any other sort of information, will send an affirmatively hostile message that respect for LGBT families and youth is optional.

Parents can opt out entirely by sending their children to religious schools, but they can't pick and choose which parts of the public school curriculum to accept. State law has created a narrow exception to that rule for sex and HIV-prevention education. But the proposed curriculum says nothing at all about sex or HIV prevention. It involves age-appropriate materials that simply reflect the existence of LGBT families (for example, mentioning that some children have two mommies). There is therefore no legal basis for creating an exception. Just as religious objections don't authorize parents to opt out of science classes that teach students about evolution, religious objections don't authorize parents to opt out of social science classes that teach students about diversity and bias.

Reducing the Risk of Suicide for Children Who Will One Day Identify as LGBT

Even though we cannot identify them today, there is no doubt that there are children in our elementary schools who will turn out to be LGBT. Knowing that some of those children will be LGBT, and given the serious suicide risk that is associated independently with school harassment and with family rejection, every member of the Board and of this community should feel personally responsible for teaching children in our public schools that LGBT people exist and are respected and welcomed no matter what our religious beliefs.

Children absorb what we teach them – at school and at home. If they learn at school that we don't talk about LGBT people to young children, then we're teaching them that there's something wrong with being gay. That's the source of the hostile climate that results in anti-LGBT harassment at all levels in our school system. The children are reflecting back to us what we teach by our silence.

The statistics on *the effects* of anti-LGBT school harassment are staggering. Students harassed based on actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity are more than three times as likely as others to report seriously considering suicide and more than three times as likely to report having made a plan for suicide.

http://www.casafeschools.org/CSSC_Research_Brief_2.pdf; *see also*

<http://www.healthiersf.org/LGBTQ/GetTheFacts/health.html> (15% of LGB students

reported actual suicide attempts compared to 5% non-LGB students). Preliminary reports from a study of LGBT young adults (ages 21-25) who experienced high levels of anti-gay victimization in middle or high school found:

- 68% had attempted suicide, compared with 20% of those who reported low levels of anti-gay victimization during adolescence;
- And the suicide risk continued into adulthood: 44% reported suicidal ideation during the past 6 months, compared with 8% of those who experienced low levels of victimization;
- 48% had put themselves at risk for HIV infection during the past 6 months, compared with 20% of those who reported low levels of anti-gay victimization during adolescence;
- And they were twice as likely to report symptoms of depression or substance abuse problems and reported significantly lower levels of self-esteem, social support and life satisfaction.

	Suicide attempted	Suicidal ideation in past 6 months	Quality of life
High levels of anti-gay victimization in school	68%	44%	Lower self-esteem, social support and life satisfaction
Low levels of anti-gay victimization in school	20%	8%	Higher self-esteem, social support and life satisfaction

http://www.aclu.org/images/asset_upload_file186_27147.pdf; cf. *Pediatrics* Vol. 123 No. 1 January 2009, pp. 346-352 (recently-published companion research demonstrating a similar differential between high and low levels of family rejection). Can any decent member of our community really look at these numbers and advocate against adoption of the sort of curricular materials that are associated with reduced harassment?

The Board Should Demonstrate Leadership by Delegating Responsibility to Create a More Robust Program

The School Board has a responsibility to demonstrate leadership when it comes to creating safe and inclusive school climates. The Board should send a public message to the District and to teachers that they are *expected and encouraged* to identify and to implement *a more robust program* that includes LGBT people and issues in the curriculum, that provides training for teachers and staff where there are gaps, and that encourages teachers who are LGBT to come out, by letting them know that it is safe to be out. One out teacher who is treated with respect by the administration models for all children in our schools the kind of messages we're trying to teach them about respect for others and about self-respect.

Board Member Jensen asked at the first hearing, “If we don’t adopt this curriculum, if someone called her son gay, and he said ‘what’s that,’ what would the teacher say?” The answer given by district staff was that it depends on the cultural competency of the teachers. But it also depends on their courage in the face of a long history of teachers facing retribution for talking about “controversial topics” and about LGBT people and issues in particular. The Briggs Initiative was a generation ago, but many teachers are still justifiably afraid that appearing LGBT-friendly may subject them to a campaign seeking their removal. The Board should be clear that teachers are expected to intervene in harassment, are expected to educate children that hostile or demeaning use of words like gay and queer is hurtful, and are expected to model the appropriate and respectful use of those words: gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender.

The Board should not be micromanaging this sort of curricular development. Administrators and teachers are most capable of identifying effective programs. Consideration by political bodies necessarily turns such issues – even with respect to basic safety concerns – into political issues. The Board should make clear that Superintendent Vital is charged with the responsibility to implement a curriculum that works – this one for now, and a better one if she thinks something more or different is needed. The same goes for racial harassment, which testimony shows is also a serious problem in our district.

Leadership on Racial Harassment and Other Identity-Based Discrimination

The Board also should send a message to the District that it should be working hard to identify the best measures to address other issues in our community, most salient among them the need for a concerted effort to address racial harassment. But the fix for racial harassment may not be more visibility or additional curriculum. These problems are not one size fits all. But they all have solutions, and it's the Board's job to signal to the District that these problems must be taken seriously and that there will be no political reprisals for stepping up to the plate and taking action. And it's the District's job to fix it; if we want to do anything about these problems, we can't afford to have every measure the District wants to take vetted by the Board over a six month period.

Of course, it's also the responsibility of the community to help the District figure out how to fix these problems. The District cannot and should not defer to the community but it should turn to the community for resources and information that can make it more effective in protecting and teaching our children.

It is clear from this process that race discrimination and harassment is also a critical issue in our district. The Board should direct Superintendent Vital to come up with – and to implement – a plan for dealing with it. Again, however, it seems there is little to be gained by making it a political question to be resolved by the Board itself. There simply is no need for board review and micromanaging that politicizes such critical issues.

Of course, it should go without saying that children of color who are LGBT or who have LGBT family members are in a particularly vulnerable position. The District should consider how to address discrimination and harassment at the intersection rather than operating as if LGBT issues pertain only to white students.

Invisibility

While many forms of harassment are at play in our community – and all need to be addressed by the Board, there are two things that are unique about the history of discrimination faced by LGBT people.

First, the use of invisibility to perpetuate social stigma is unique to LGBT people. Silence about LGBT people is a unique form of discrimination that fosters a hostile climate.

Second, while harassment based on race and other identity-based characteristics is incredibly damaging, children who are harassed because they or their family members are LGBT are in a unique situation. They typically do not share that aspect of identity with their family members, and so don't have identity-based support and mirroring at home. This is likely the reason suicide rates are so stark in the LGBT community.

LGBT Community Members as Advocates

Opponents of Lesson 9 have pointed to the emotional intensity among members of the LGBT community in speaking about the importance of reflecting in the curriculum the existence and contributions of healthy, loving LGBT people and families. That emotion is supported by scientific as well as anecdotal evidence of the risk of suicide that results from a hostile climate. And advocacy for the addition of the lesson is well-grounded in the requirements of the law.

But that emotion also reflects the lived experiences of people who understand what it is like to grow up in families with LGBT members or to grow up as people who are, themselves, LGBT. Members of the LGBT community know how crucial it is for our society to undo the discriminatory systems that have kept LGBT people invisible and vulnerable to attack. LGBT people understand, as most straight members of the community cannot fully appreciate, that every day there are children growing up who will one day be LGBT – whether or not they know it already – and that those children need a safer, more supportive society if they are to survive. They need the protection that is promised to them under the law. And it is this Board's obligation to ensure that the District has the capacity, sense of mission and freedom to continue working that is necessary to meet that legal and ethical mandate. It is hard to imagine how the District will be able to provide that protection if it is afraid to do more or afraid to bring each new change or addition to the Board for approval.

II. Opponents Arguments

A. LGBT Focus

Claim: This curriculum focuses on one protected class to the exclusion of others

Response: The repeated claim that this curriculum is singling out one group for special treatment is misguided for at least six reasons:

1. The statistics cited regarding the amounts of different types of harassment are severely misleading because the numbers for harassment based on LGBT status only include victims *who identify as LGBT*. Those figures, therefore, fail to count anyone who is closeted, as well as all the people who suffer LGBT-based harassment even if they're not LGBT.

Several of the recent suicides were committed by straight kids who were nevertheless taunted with anti-LGBT taunts.

2. Other protected classes (gender, race, disability) are immediately visible upon looking at people. It is invisibility that leads to isolation, which leads to some of the most damaging impacts
3. Other protected classes are already represented in the general curriculum (even if not specifically in the Caring Schools Community curriculum), and it is that sort of visibility (being represented somewhere in the curriculum) that is key to understanding and acceptance and, through understanding and acceptance, to stopping harassment.
4. Harassment based on one's status in one of the other protected classes is not leaving teachers feeling like they don't know how to respond; AUSD teachers, however, are asking for help addressing LGBT issues.
5. Even if other types of harassment were as prevalent, there is no similar evidence about children killing themselves because of harassment related to their status in the other protected classes.
6. We single out a group for attention every time we do something like creating a Black History Month or Women's History month. The Americans with Disabilities Act singles out one protected group. The fact that, at this moment, we are focused on being inclusive of one group, is not an argument against this. If we have reason to believe race is a bigger issue, if we are getting complaints about race, let's add a focus on race. But don't let the fact that we're doing an inadequate job on race mean that we have put on the brakes here and do an inadequate job on everything else as well.

The lessons do not *exclude* any group, nor do they *focus* on LGBT issues.

Grade K lesson, "Becoming a Welcoming Classroom," makes no mention of LGBT issues and creates opportunities for students to provide examples of when they have felt welcome and/or had their feelings hurt, for ANY reason, on ANY basis.

Grade 1 lesson, "Who's In a Family?," focuses on just that—who's in a family. The accompanying book describes a wide diversity of families. Students have the opportunity to define for themselves what family means to them. This is not a "gay" lesson. It is inclusive of all groups of people.

Grade 2 lesson, "And Tango Makes Three," addresses alternative types of family structures and addresses issues such as what babies need, responsibilities of parents, and different kinds of couples, which can certainly include LGBT couples as well as others.

Grade 3 lesson, "Talking About Families," features the film "That's A Family!" and is one of the most inclusive classroom tools to address family diversity, including adoption, blended, divorced, mixed race, multi-generational, single parent, *and* LGBT-headed families. The unscripted film in which children discuss families using their own words includes references to race, ethnicity, religion, disability, national origin, *and* sexual orientation (in age-appropriate language right from the mouths of children). The activities focus on how families are similar and different, NOT on LGBT issues.

Grade 4 lesson, “Developing Empathy & Being An Ally,” does introduce GLBT issues in the context of name calling and creating allies. Children are asked about examples of name calling which can include *any* form. The essay that is read about the son of same-gender parents is used as an example to discuss the concept of empathy, *not* to discuss sexual orientation. In fact, students are asked to consider how they might have similar feelings to the author based on their own experiences.

The activity on being an ally, about which the opponents of the curriculum expressed concern that their children would be bullied and labeled for not supporting a family with same-gender parents (based on their families cultural and religious beliefs) is not focused on the author’s family composition, but on inappropriate behavior (i.e., teasing and name-calling) being directed toward him, behavior that would violate school rules regardless of who is engaging in it. The lesson teaches that *all* name calling, including gay-based, is inappropriate.

Grade 5 lesson, “Discussing Stereotypes, Including LGBT,” is also inclusive of other groups of people. In Activity 1 students can select their own examples of stereotypes. Activity 2 focuses on LGBT stereotypes. Activity 3 introduces famous LGBT people. It would be difficult to argue that famous people from other identity groups are not already represented in the Houghton-Mifflin curriculum, in various books, activities, celebrations, classroom posters, etc. The Grade 5 lesson spends a minimal amount of time introducing LGBT visibility.

B. Sex Education

Claim: A discussion of homosexuality is, by definition, sex education and should not be part of an elementary school curriculum.

Response: The lessons clearly do not focus on sex or sexuality. A discussion of same-gender parents is no more a discussion of sexuality than is a discussion of different-gender parents. The curriculum, which was reviewed and crafted by experts, i.e., the professional credentialed classroom teachers in whose hands we trust our children every day, align with age-appropriate curricular standards. The argument about the inevitable discussion of sex is an adult issue that is being projected onto children who are not thinking in these terms. If a student were to ask a question that is inappropriate for discussion at a particular grade level, the expectation is that the teacher would respond appropriately, i.e., not allow the discussion to continue.

In sum, discussions about families with two fathers or two mothers can occur in **exactly the same way** that discussions about families with a father and a mother occur. There is absolutely no reason that either discussion must include a discussion of sexual acts.

C. Legal Issue

Claim: The curriculum is not required by law and may even be in violation of the law and/or the constitution

Response: To the contrary, the curriculum is not only *not* a violation of law, but is arguably mandated by it. The arguments listed in the May 11, 2009 letter regarding “Legal Concerns Regarding ‘Safe Schools’ Curriculum Addressing Sexual Orientation

and Gender Identity” (“Opponents’ Legal Letter”)¹ are without merit. A separate letter is being submitted by a group of Alameda lawyers with far more experience than those who submitted Opponents’ Legal Letter.

D. Allowing for Divergent Views

Claim: The curriculum does not allow for students or their families to have different moral values regarding homosexuality.

Response: The lessons neither require any student (or family member) to believe or agree with any particular viewpoint. Students and families are free to hold any beliefs or values they choose. The District, however, does expect students to *behave* in accordance with the District’s value, which is a *community* value, that all people and families, regardless of their composition, are to be treated with respect. That community value reflects the District’s anti-discrimination policy, the Education Code, civil rights laws, etc.

The opposition is framing its objection in terms of the District *promoting* a particular viewpoint specific to LGBT families which they consider to be immoral. What the District is trying to do is promote *respect* for all kinds of families and, at the same time, *affirming* there is a diversity of families, including LGBT, represented in the AUSD community.

III. Conclusion

We, the undersigned, therefore support the Board in taking action to protect all students in the Alameda Unified School District by adopting the proposed Caring Schools Community curriculum Lesson #9 and not requiring parental notification in any manner that differentiates this curriculum.

¹ Posted on Board Chair McMahon’s web-site at:
<http://www.mikemcmahon.info/Safe%20Schools%20Curriculum%20Letter.pdf>.

Sincerely,

Thomas Bartholomew - Coats

Marianne Bartholomew Coats

Leland Trainor

Ardis A. Anderson

María José Hincz

Marty Semonds

Michael J. Bell

Barry Cheney

~~John~~

~~John~~

~~Robert J. Pineda~~

~~John~~

~~John~~

~~John~~

Adam Shaw

JUSTIN

Carl Sisk

~~John~~

Eli Simon-Williams

Rev. Laura Rose

John Keiser

~~Marianne Bartholomew Coats~~

John Coats

Donna Fyloga

Pat Fyloga RN

Audrey Liag

Tom J (age 8)

MP 116(5)

TIM BELOWAY

Barbara Woth

Bilinda Woth

John Woth

Liz Cleves

Liane Vors.

Walter Gabriel

Judge James

Gregory

John

Kate Crawford

Sam Bull

Alex Adams

Cezary

Chris Sitzer

Sincerely,

Joanne Char

Philip Mayerus
Tracy Orduno-Arcia
Lion Orduno-Arcia

Quana Blue
Amy G. Edwards
M. M. Miller
Pammy Higgins
Joe Faris-Poppe
Armel Manari

Mary B. Abu-Saba
Amanda B.
Kathleen S. Slat

Walter Billing
Janet L. Gibson

Hans Webb
Ingrid Ballmann
Vint S Cook

Cadechi

Madeline Taylor

Sincerely,

Kidney Hosman - GSA Network

Amy Zeman

Olivia Higgins

Michelle

Michelle

[Signature]

Jamie Nyer

Michelle

David Berglund

Anne Rogers

Karl Frasch

Karie Frasch

Bash Bond MD, Barbara Bond

Dr. N. Jackson

Katherine Calvey

Lois

Ida Oberman

[Signature]

Ann Gijer

Jennifer

Jim M. [Signature]

Lois [Signature]

Mary Anne Reno

Robert Killeen PhD

JOLYNN HAMMOND UH

Barbara McClung

Sarah [Signature]

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[Signature]

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Members of the Board:

I am David Teeters and this is my family.
My wife, Marty, is a violinist with the SF Opera.
Holly and Lola are students at Franklin.
I speak as an Eagle Scout, a former high school teacher, a local architect, and as a Dad.

We came to Alameda in September of '01 and we have walked the streets and rung the phones for the fund-raising campaigns the school district has launched in the last 8 years. Holly and Lola were born in Alameda and last year joined us in the Measure H campaign, ringing doorbells in Marty's precinct, first to persuade and then to get out the vote. Like many of you we watched anxiously as the count swung in our favor. In celebration, we felt our family extend beyond the 4 of us.

The girls were also making friends, and as chance saw fit, a best friend started to identify with the opposite sex. I had known gay men and women but never a transgender person... and I had a negative bias. But I was already close to this kid's parents... so I spoke to a therapist whose knowledge of children I very much trusted, and he assured me there was no downside to a close friendship with my daughters. He reinforced my own sense that love is what matters most in a home, and parents who teach by example and with a minimum of hypocrisy.

I don't claim there are no differences between a family headed by a gay couple and our own or that the needs of a transgender family are no different than mine. But when a gay couple brings their family to our house for dinner and we argue politics, I listen with an open heart and I learn. When our friends with a transgender kid go canoe-camping with us, I watch their kid and my daughters struggle for mutual understanding and I see them learn. And again, our family grows larger, by extension.

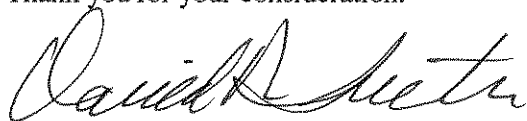
I've had the good fortune of voting, with only one exception, for all of you. I voted for you because you work hard and believe that public education is essential to democracy... and because you would lead with an enlightened heart... to advance the democratic goals of equal opportunity and fairness, including the protection of all minorities. The least you and we can do for these kids and their families is promote an inclusive environment in the primary school that is their social world. This curriculum says that these kids are part of our community. And to allow students to opt out of lessons that extend inclusiveness to LGBT families is to contradict the very purpose of the curriculum.

When people say this is a moral issue, I agree: fairness has ALWAYS been a moral issue.

A moment ago, I asked you "to lead with an enlightened heart" and I'd like to close with a quote from the Oxford English Dictionary -

The 4th definition of enlighten: "In Biblical phrase; to remove dimness or blindness from the eyes and... the heart"

Thank you for your consideration.



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1427 Paru Street
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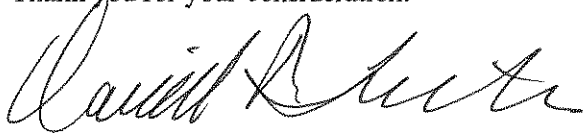
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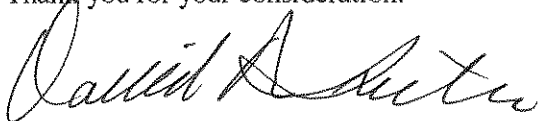
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A moment ago, I asked you "to lead with an enlightened heart" and I'd like to close with a quote from the Oxford English Dictionary -

The 4th definition of enlighten: "In Biblical phrase; to remove dimness or blindness from the eyes and... the heart"

Thank you for your consideration.



David Teeters
1427 Paru Street
Alameda CA. 94501

May 15, 2009

Board of Education
Alameda Unified School District

Members of the Board:

I am David Teeters and this is my family.
My wife, Marty, is a violinist with the SF Opera.
Holly and Lola are students at Franklin.
I speak as an Eagle Scout, a former high school teacher, a local architect, and as a Dad.

We came to Alameda in September of '01 and we have walked the streets and rung the phones for the fund-raising campaigns the school district has launched in the last 8 years. Holly and Lola were born in Alameda and last year joined us in the Measure H campaign, ringing doorbells in Marty's precinct, first to persuade and then to get out the vote. Like many of you we watched anxiously as the count swung in our favor. In celebration, we felt our family extend beyond the 4 of us.

The girls were also making friends, and as chance saw fit, a best friend started to identify with the opposite sex. I had known gay men and women but never a transgender person... and I had a negative bias. But I was already close to this kid's parents... so I spoke to a therapist whose knowledge of children I very much trusted, and he assured me there was no downside to a close friendship with my daughters. He reinforced my own sense that love is what matters most in a home, and parents who teach by example and with a minimum of hypocrisy.

I don't claim there are no differences between a family headed by a gay couple and our own or that the needs of a transgender family are no different than mine. But when a gay couple brings their family to our house for dinner and we argue politics, I listen with an open heart and I learn. When our friends with a transgender kid go canoe-camping with us, I watch their kid and my daughters struggle for mutual understanding and I see them learn. And again, our family grows larger, by extension.

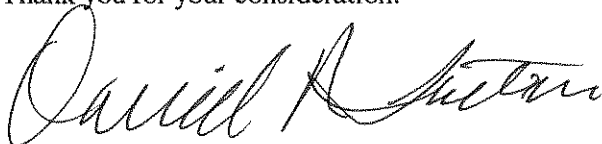
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