

## **N.J. controversy over diversity video continues**

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The debate swirling around the embattled New Jersey Evesham school district continued this week, even after the district agreed the week before to stop showing third-grade students a controversial video that includes same-sex parents.

A few hundred people attended the Evesham Board of Education meeting Feb. 13 to discuss the issue, with both supporters and opponents of the film talking about bigotry and intolerance.

The controversy started when the parents of a 9-year-old girl complained that the anti-bullying film "That's a Family," produced by Women's Education Media to promote diversity, had been shown to a third-grade health class. The video included children being raised in gay and lesbian-headed households alongside those with divorced, mixed-race, adoptive, guardianship and single-parent families.

The video drew complaints from parents who objected to the portion showing same-sex parents, saying the school district didn't tell parents about the video beforehand.

Jo Ann Smith, a member of Women's Education Media's board of directors, was dismayed at the tenor of the meeting.

"Disturbing is too mild a word," she told PGN. "The meeting was very upsetting with respect to the number of parents who were coming from a position of fear or worse. They don't understand that this film is about protecting kids in schools."

The school board has referred the matter to a committee who, after taking a "thorough look" at the video, will make a recommendation to the Evesham Board of Education on Sept. 7 on whether they should remove or reinstate it the curriculum.

"I think it was a very short-sighted decision on the part of the school board to suspend showing the film in the first place," Smith said.

The video, targeted to third-graders and made in 2000, has been endorsed by the White House, the National Education Association and the New Jersey Board of Education.

"I don't know what else they need," Smith said. "From listening to the parents, it's pretty clear that there is a lot of hate being expressed."

For many parents, the issue was not the fact that the video contained same-sex couples, but rather that it was not age-appropriate and that they learned about the new video from the news media, not the school board.

Tom Bland, who has two children in the school district, objected to references of artificial insemination, not the presence of gays. "I'm not homophobic," he told PGN. "I work in human resources so my record speaks for itself. [Sexual orientation] doesn't make a difference to me." However, Bland said he objected to a lesbian couple in the video referring to artificial insemination, saying his first-grade daughter doesn't know about heterosexual conception yet.

Jerry Gaffney, a district parent who is homeschooling his three children, saw the video and agrees that it is not age-appropriate. "I think it promotes homosexuality as a position and I don't think all parents would agree with that," he told PGN. "I'd probably be OK with the video if it were shown later [in school]."

Others, from both inside and outside the district, supported the district's decision to show the video.

"I think it's appropriate," Brett Ballanger, pastor of the Prince of Peace Lutheran Church in Princeton Junction, said at the meeting. "It doesn't talk about sex."

Molly Patnik, board member of Mountain Meadow GLBT camp, attended because she "wanted to make [her] family visible." Patnik attended the meeting with her partner of seven years, Rania Gorab, and their sons. "I wanted to show people what a lesbian family looked like."

For Gorab, "the most striking thing was the hate and venom [in the room]. You couldn't help but feel the tone and energy. I'm sorry my boys were here to see that."

Paul Stankiewicz, an openly gay Camden resident, spoke during the meeting, noting that his 8-year-old nephew asked him why people hate gays. "They are bigots," he told him, and said those speaking in opposition to the video should be ashamed of themselves.

Some attendees were more optimistic about the meeting.

"This was a very positive experience," Steven Goldstein, chair of Garden State Equality, told PGN. "Unlike the previous meeting, it was balanced and deeply moving, particularly hearing a student talk about what it was like to be gay. I was in third grade in New York City public schools and I know firsthand that kids in the third grade are old enough to bully. That's why we're here."

Debra Chasnoff, filmmaker and Executive Director of Women's Educational Media, said the controversy in Evesham shows why there is a need for the video.

"Some parents have argued that these issues should be addressed at home, which of course they should," she said in a statement. "But the reality is that teachers in elementary schools across the country report a phenomenon of bullying and harassment based on individual and family differences, especially using homophobic slurs, beginning as early as kindergarten."