

Ex-teacher: Consider rights of gays, too

BY JENNIFER PLACINTO
STAFF WRITER

When the Walled Lake Schools Board of Education approved a first reading of changes to the district's non-discrimination employment policy, Gerald Plas believes they left one very important part out - sexual orientation.

"They left out the obvious group of homosexuals and bisexuals," Plas said. "I just think they ought to deal with it - get on with it."

The recently retired Walled Lake Middle School sex education teacher, who said he has discussed the issue with school leaders for years, said he made some progress with the district in 1986. That year, Plas said, district officials permitted the use of the term "homosexual" in curriculum related to Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome.

But since that time, Plas said, he continued to witness the verbal and physical abuse of gay students which causes students to drop out of school.

If teachers are open about their sexual orientation, Plas said, it would increase the comfort level of gay students.

"If you have closeted teachers, you end up having unhappy employees," according to Plas, who said he himself is not gay. "I think, if you could start by letting the teachers be who they are and make it okay to support the kids who are different, you would see the dropout rate change."

sexual orientation in school non-discrimination policies also leads to gay students turning to drugs and alcohol and committing suicide.

"We end up with kids who are committing suicide because of their school experience," Plas said. "A reason doesn't go by when I haven't heard about a former student committing suicide."

"They would rather quietly deal with the suicides," Plas said of school administrators. "Their priorities are their paychecks."

The Walled Lake resident, who retired within the last month after teaching in the district for 29 years, said these students need teachers to be open about their sexual orientations.

"When the kids have a role model, they have a safe place to go," Plas said.

First-hand perspective

Frank Colasanti Jr., a guidance counselor at Groves High School in Birmingham, couldn't agree more.

Colasanti was the first teacher in the state to admit to his employers that he is gay. And because Birmingham School District has a non-discriminatory employment policy, his colleagues don't have to be concerned about sharing their sexual orientation with others.

"It's very important that all students have positive role models," Colasanti said. "Gay, lesbian and bi-sexual students need to have role models as well."

He compared the gay, lesbian

and bi-sexual student role models to African American students having black role models.

"What happens is if students are not comfortable in their environments... they are likely to turn to drugs or alcohol or harm themselves," Colasanti said. "It's our role as educators to try to minimize the number of kids who do commit suicide."

Denial of sexual orientation has also resulted in teen pregnancies by students attempting to prove they are heterosexual when they are not, Colasanti said.

Policy of protection

Walled Lake, West Bloomfield, Huron Valley and Farmington school districts do not have sexual orientation clauses in their employment policies, staff contracts or student codes of conduct.

"We just follow the federal guidelines," said Lois Lange, Walled Lake district spokesperson. "We are current with the federal law."

West Bloomfield and Farmington schools spokespersons said their policies also comply with federal guidelines.

"Sexual orientation is not a protected class under the law," said Susan Zurvalec, Farmington schools assistant superintendent of staff and community services.

"Our viewpoint has been that that's all covered under no discrimination on the basis of sex," said Gerald Collins, Huron Valley schools assistant superintendent of personnel.

Walled Lake Consolidated Schools Proposed Non-Discrimination Employment Policy

"The board shall not discriminate in its policies and practices with respect to compensation, terms or conditions of employment because of such individual's race, color, religion, sex, age, national origin, height, weight, marital status, political belief, military service, or handicap or disability which does not impair an individual's ability to perform adequately in that individual's particular position or activity."

West Bloomfield and Farmington public schools enforce all types of harassment in their student codes of conduct.

"It would fall under sexual harassment or general harassment," said Steve Wasako, West Bloomfield schools spokesperson.

While the codes do not explicitly list sexual orientation, Zurvalec said, "We have done extensive training about sexual harassment. We don't tolerate that harassment."

What an Odyssey!



OM: Members of the Wooddale Elementary School Odyssey of the Mind team, coached by Barb Samaravich are all smiles about the OM Regional Competition, set to take place from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Saturday, March 28, at Farmington High School. The various problems teams will try to solve include: designing and building a Tow Vehicle and Pageant Wagon; creating a humorous performance including a character who undergoes a morph from human to animal; creating and presenting a skit about an advertising agency commissioned to make a TV commercial about a nutritional project; designing and building a camouflaged structure out of balsa wood and glue; creating and presenting a performance where an inanimate object comes to life; and creating and performing a skit about the dream vacation. More than 100 various school districts are involved at the regionals.

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