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local news

The parent trap

School environments can be stressful for queer families, but a new group seeks to change all that

by Inga Sorensen

If you're a sexual minority parent, Joseph Tam wants to hear from you. "I want to know their concerns. I want them to have support," says Tam, a Portland school board member.

Tam organized a Feb. 3 meeting which included himself, district personnel and sexual minority parents who have children in the Portland Public Schools system.

It was the first such meeting aimed at creating an organized and ongoing entity that specifically gives voice to lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans parents concerned about safety and equity in the public schools.

"It's essentially an advisory committee. Our intention is to help make the schools safer and healthier places," says Bonnie Tinker, executive director of Love Makes a Family Inc., which promotes the rights and visibility of gay and lesbian families.

According to Tam, who is also a civil rights investigator for the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries, similar groups already exist for other parents with particular concerns.

"The district has a long tradition of getting parents involved in advocating for their children.

For example, we have a group for Hispanic parents," he says, adding he got the idea for establishing the sexual minority parents group after viewing the Portland premiere of *It's Elementary*, a documentary that highlights both the homophobia typically encountered in educational settings and ways to successfully combat it.

"Even though *It's Elementary* wasn't filmed in Portland, a lot of the issues are the same," says Tam.

Those issues may include the critical need to educate and sensitize staff to the broad spectrum of family structures; implementing policies and procedures that deter intolerance, harassment and violence in schools; and employing more inclusive language and curricula.

"We're talking about things like a teacher asking students to draw their family tree. Kids are often asked to do that in kindergarten," explains Tinker, who has two adult children and a son in the eighth grade at West Sylvan Middle School in Southwest Portland.

"Without knowing it, teachers have created a potentially traumatic experience for a student who has same-sex parents. The child has to decide whether to come out, and it usually gets tougher as they get older," she says. "A teacher should be aware of what they're doing and be prepared to respond appropriately, but many times they don't even think about these things."

Tinker cites another example: that of middle schoolers studying a unit on "Family" which makes no mention of households headed by gay men, lesbians, bisexuals or other sexual minorities.

Registration forms and other district paperwork, meanwhile, do not include the descriptive "partners."

"And of course our children often hear the indirect insults based on sexual orientation or gender identity, or they are the targets of such insults themselves if other kids learn that their parents are gay," Tinker says.

Sometimes, too, she adds, the offspring of same-sex couples may become more heterosexually active in order to prove to their peers that "they aren't queer too."

"For gay and lesbian parents a lot of thought goes into where their kids will go to school, because of their family situation," she says. "But many same-sex couples are in the closet. They can't go into a school and ask whether this is a positive and safe environment for their child.... Obviously we would like to see all schools become safe and positive environments."

According to Tam, 10 parents attended the February meeting, which was not widely publicized. He hopes to see more at the group's next meeting in early March.

One mother who did attend was Erika Silver, an out lesbian whose 12-year-old son, Sage, attends Beaumont Middle School in Northeast Portland.

"It was a good first meeting. I emphasize 'first,' because I want to see something really come of this," Silver says, adding she'd like sexual minority youth to become part of the advisory committee "because what we do invariably is going to affect them."

Michael Harris is the principal of Lane Middle School and co-chair of the Portland Public Schools diversity committee, an in-house entity comprising district staff working toward equality and safety in schools.

"It's good that it's in-house, because we know where the bones are buried," chuckles Harris, who attended the February meeting.

It was, he candidly admits, an eye-opening experience.

"Maybe it was old stuff for other people, but for me it was new," he says. "For instance, I had never really thought about the registration forms being so exclusive, nor had I thought about a student having to talk about their family in class—and what that

may mean to a child with gay parents. Hearing that makes a difference, and helps me as we try to make changes."

Jack Bierwirth, superintendent of Portland Public Schools, has directed schools to complete staff training on issues of particular relevance to sexual minority youth by year's end.

Bierwirth also recently met with members of the sexual minority community, reiterating his commitment to make the school system safer and more responsive to the needs of sexual minorities.

Harris, meanwhile, says the diversity committee intends to have a final draft of its recommendations for inclusive curricula by the end of the year.

"It's a start, but I know that we could be doing a lot more," he says.

Tam adds: "But we really need to hear from gay and lesbian parents. We want to support them and we want their support. We can't really do this right without them."

The group meets again on March 3 at 7 pm at 501 N Dixon in the basement L-1 Conference Room. Sexual minority parents within and outside the Portland Public Schools system are encouraged to attend and share their ideas. For more information, contact Love Makes a Family at 228-3892.



Joseph Tam