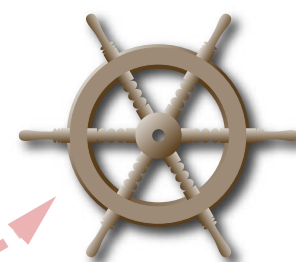


Charting Your Course FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



BATTLING HOMOPHOBIA IN OUR SCHOOLS

By Gérard Cormier, Executive Staff Officer, Outreach Programs and Equity Services

Homophobia (the rejection of homosexuality and systematic hostility toward homosexuals) exists in our society and since our schools are a reflection of our society, we find homophobia in schools as well. Great efforts have been and continue to be made to battle our society's prejudice against homosexuals. These include the Human Rights Act, legalization of gay marriage and promotion of gay pride through parades, etc. Although these initiatives have not yet eradicated homophobia, there is a new openness toward sexual minorities in today's society that was absent 20 years ago. Does this same openness exist in our schools or does our school system lag behind society at large?

I have worked in Nova Scotia's school system since the late 1980s and I must acknowledge that positive changes have occurred in helping to combat homophobia, but we are not out of the woods yet. Too often, we still find that sexual minority youth face numerous problems such as harassment, isolation, as well as verbal and/or physical violence. Recent research shows that dropout and suicide rates among sexual minority youth far exceed those for young heterosexuals. Young people themselves say they feel unsafe at school and that teachers do not act often enough to stop the abuse. There is still a law of SILENCE that must be broken, silence that has continued for far too long. Here are a few approaches that can help break this silence.

THERE MUST BE GREATER VISIBILITY

Classroom discussions, textbooks and day-to-day experiences in our schools must reflect the reality of our society. For example, history courses must talk about the gay rights movement that began in 1969. More emphasis must be placed on teaching about human rights. Our discussions about the family in elementary school must include examples of children with two mothers or two fathers. Posters in classrooms must promote this diversity.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT IS NEEDED

Teachers often wonder "What do we say?" or "What do we do?" They want to know how to act but they have not received the necessary training to show them how to fight against homophobia. The NSTU conducts workshops that give participants tools to deal with these kinds of situations. We examine the myths that still persist today about homosexuality and teach participants how to discredit these myths. We discuss ways to create an "inclusive" classroom for all students. We review recent publications that teachers can use in class. We discuss the Canada-wide survey of students which found that sexual minority youth continue to be targets of harassment in schools. We BREAK the silence by addressing and discussing these issues together.



Gérard Cormier is shown with Cape Breton University Bachelor of Education students. He provided a social justice workshop for the group of students on November 16. This workshop covers various social justice issues including homophobia.

WE HAVE TO START SOMEWHERE

We sometimes get the impression there is too much work to do and we don't know where to start. In fact, everything starts with small moves, small steps, and gradually we notice the homophobic culture that has prevailed for far too long is starting to decline. We begin by reacting immediately when homophobic comments are made. We place posters in our classrooms and hallways to promote diversity. We take training in social justice. We help students form gay/straight alliances in schools. We participate in gay pride parades. We teach by example.

In 1969, we witnessed the decriminalization of homosexuality in Canada. In 1973, the American Psychiatric Association removed homosexuality from its official list of mental disorders. In 1991, Nova Scotia's Human Rights Act was amended by the addition of a protective clause based on sexual orientation. In 1996, the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms was amended by the addition of a similar protective clause. In 2002, a court ruled against a Catholic school board in Ontario, allowing a graduating high school student to attend prom night with his partner. In 2005, Canada became the third country in the world to legalize marriage between persons of the same sex. There truly is a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow.

*This article originally appeared in French in the *Aviso* Fall 2009 edition, p. 24-25.*

The NSTU has a series of posters in English and French that help to address this issue. They have been sent to all schools. To obtain copies email Gérard Cormier at gcormier@nstu.ca.

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