Public Schools and Alternative Lifestyles

By E. Vance Randall

Introduction

Let me begin by relating two stories. In Marian County, located in Northern California, students from the Pleasant Valley Elementary School gathered around their family dinner tables. When asked the usual question of how school went today, many parents were surprised by the responses from their children. Kenny said, “We had an assembly today. We learned that there are all kinds of families [including] two mommies [and] two daddies.” He also shared with his parents new words he had learned such as homosexual, lesbian, and faggot. At the school assembly, skits had been performed. In one skit, one of the girls cut off her hair and ran off with her girl friend. One elementary girl asked her father, “‘Daddy, am I a lesbian? I like girls better than boys.’” (Curtis, 2001).

The second story is a personal experience I had over twenty years ago with a social policy issue that, with the exception of abortion, has now become the most difficult and divisive social issue of our day—homosexuality or same sex attraction with its ancillary questions of same sex marriage and its place in American society. As I was working on my graduate degree at Cornell University, I served as a university chaplain for The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Each week, I and other university chaplains representing a variety of other faiths, met to support each other in our religious work, to learn more about each other and our particular faiths, to plan ecumenical
projects, and to engage in a dialogue about pressing matters related to our work as university chaplains. One of the topics we dealt with was homosexuality. As a group of chaplains, we arranged a meeting with several university students who were gay and willing to visit with us. Our collective goal was enlightenment about homosexuality in general and a better understanding of these students in particular. I remember listening carefully to their stories, being impressed with their sincerity and yet perplexed with their genuine puzzlement about why they were sexually attracted to the same gender, feeling sympathetic with their bewilderment about their personal identity and place in society, and yet, remaining firm in my own convictions that the alternative lifestyle of a homosexual would not bring them the personal peace and happiness they were so desperately seeking. They needed to hear the reaffirmation of their priceless worth as human beings and, that as they pursued their notions of the good life, it would not be found in a homosexual relationship. My conclusions about my experience, admittedly, would not receive universal acceptance, either from radical proponents of homosexual lifestyles or from apprehensive heterosexuals who mistakenly confound the basic humanity inherent in each person with individual conduct which may be reprehensible to them. For example, the revolutionary and militant tone of Michael Swift’s (1987) “Homosexual Manifesto” forcefully precludes any kind of dialogue with those of differing opinions.

We shall sodomize your sons, emblems of your feeble masculinity, of your shallow dreams and vulgar lies. We shall seduce them in your schools, in your dormitories, in your gymnasiums, in your locker rooms, in your sports arenas, in your seminaries, in your youth groups, in your movie theater bathrooms, in your
army bunkhouses, in your truck stops, in your all-male clubs, in your houses of Congress, wherever men are with men together. Your sons shall become our minions and do our bidding. They will be recast in our image. They will come to crave and adore us.

Likewise, religious radicals do little to help the cause of understanding and dialogue with phrases painted on signs such as “God hates faggots,” “Faggots go the hell,” and “Death to Homosexuals.” To use a religious turn of phrase, they reject and demonize the sinner because of the sin. Neither approach will win friends and neighbors but will only polarize and create a hostile environment among a divided public.

The central topic of my paper is the issue of homosexuality and what role, if any, should the public schools play in the public debate over the place of same sex orientation in our society. I will argue that the role of public schools should be minimal. At most, public schools could be forums of understanding but not assemblies of advocacy. This paper has three major parts. First, it will briefly sketch a theoretical framework to better understand the bitter, if not hostile nature, of the social conflict over the issue of homosexuality. Second, it will review and critique the basic arguments for the promotion and advocacy of homosexuality and the use of public schools as a venue for such promotions. The last portion of the paper will highlight instances where curriculum dealing with homosexuality and related issues have been used in public school settings and propose what could be an appropriate approach to homosexuality in public schools. In addition, a proposal is presented for the appropriate role of public education with the issue of homosexuality. The paper then offers a summary and some concluding observations.
Cultural Conflicts and Homosexuality

Culture is a way of life and not just possessing educated thoughts and genteel tastes. It is, as Edward Burnett Taylor (R) proposed, “that complex whole” which embraces all social aspects and human interactions with others and the environment. Culture, in short, is a grand world view of reality. It provides answers to cosmological, ontological, and teleological questions about the nature of man, reality, and the purpose and meaning of life. Culture sets boundaries on belief and conduct and imposes order on chaos. Through cultural norms, individuals learn a moral system of ethical behavior and what constitutes legitimate social and political institutions. It defines fundamental social structures and relationships such as marriage, family, and kinship.

Cultural conflict arises when competing world views offer an alternative system of meaning-making. Along with this alternative worldview comes its own normative system of how the world and human relationships should be. Rival viewpoints compete for the loyalty and commitment of individuals and argue for different moral orders and social arrangements. Competing worldviews threaten the vested interests in the status quo and the personal and collective losses could be immense. The common result is often a culture war, a conflict to determine which worldview will emerge as the dominant one. Depending on the depth and scope of the ideological differences, an accommodationist or pluralistic model may also materialize which provides room for parties of differing viewpoints to peacefully co-exist.

Cultural conflicts in America are a part of our history. In his book, Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America, James Hunter Davidson contends that the arena for the
old culture wars in America was denominational or various religious traditions. With the growing pluralism in America, these major religious traditions (Protestant, Catholic, and Jew) have made peace with each other as they recognize common ground and the social and political benefits or disadvantages associated with any particular religious affiliation have become inconsequential. The locus of current culture wars have shifted from a denominational venue to competition between two contrasting worldviews: a theistic and secular world view, each with their own claim to moral authority and superiority. As Hunter (1991) points out,

“The central dynamic of the cultural realignment is not merely that different public philosophies create diverse public opinions. These instances, rather, reflect the institutionalization and politicization of two fundamentally different cultural systems. Each side operates from within its own constellation of values, interests, and assumptions. At the center of each are two distinct conceptions of moral authority---two different ways of apprehending reality, of ordering experience, of making moral judgments. Each side of the cultural divide, then speaks with a different moral vocabulary. Each side operates out of a different mode of debate and persuasion. Each side represents the tendencies of a separate and competing moral galaxy.” (p.128)

For the theistic worldview, the source of moral authority rests with a divine being. There is a right and a wrong and truth with a capital “T” does exits. For the secularist, moral authority rests with social convention and is a cultural construction. Truth and right and wrong are contextualized within a particular culture. These two seeming incommensurable worldviews provide a framework for understanding better the source of
conflict over a variety of social issues. When a social issue strikes at the heart of a fundamental belief or moral teaching, there is little ground for compromise.

One of these social issues of profound importance is homosexuality. There are few cultural issues besides that of homosexuality or same sex attraction that has caused so much collective and personal angst and consternation for our society. First, it deals with sex, not a taboo topic but a subject which is usually approached with some measure of discretion. Second, homosexuality is about sexual attraction and conduct, which is not only entirely foreign to most people who are heterosexual, but behavior which is proscribed by the world’s three great religions. In their minds, the homosexual movement is the politicalization of a serious sin. Third, most homosexuals, gays and lesbians, have abandoned any pretense of hiding or at least being discrete about the fact that they are attracted to the same sex and often engage in sexual relations with the same sex as well as live together in what is euphemistically called an “alternative lifestyle.” Fourth, homosexuals have come “out of the closet” and into the public square claiming, or demanding, among other things, social and personal tolerance for their sexual orientation and lifestyle with many even demanding that the social and religious norms change from intoleration to acceptance and that their lifestyle be considered as equally valid and moral as any other lifestyle. Fifth, assertions are made that a homosexuals are a protected class, much like gender or race and therefore, are deserving of constitutional protection under the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment.

What is being proposed here is a wholesale reordering of the traditional moral order, a moral revolution. The fundamental unit in the society, the family, is being redefined to include almost any configuration with interchangeable members. The
traditional biological and social roles of father and mother are being blurred into
indistinguishable, irrelevant categories. The concept of marriage, a key social institution,
is being transformed from a union of a man and a woman committed to each other and
coming together to bear children and raise a family to a civil arrangement to guarantee
social benefits and public acceptability. The very idea of moral behavior and the notion
of sexual immorality is being changed to moral relativism. In short, the moral universe
for those with the theistic worldview is being threatened at its very foundation. James
Hunter (1991) observes that “perhaps with the exception of abortion few issues in the
contemporary culture war generate more raw emotion than the issue of homosexuality.
The reason is plain: few other issues challenge the traditional assumptions of what nature
will allow, the boundaries of the moral order, and finally the ideals of middle-class family
life more radically. Homosexuality symbolizes either an absolute and fundamental
perversion of nature, the social order, and the American family life, or it is simply
another way in which nature can evolve and be expressed, another way of ordering
society, and an alternative way of conducting family life” (p.189). It is impossible to
make much sense of the divisive debate in our society about homosexual lifestyles unless
the debate is cast within the larger context of a culture war being waged by two sides
with diametrically opposed world views and incommensurable value systems.

Homosexuality and the Public Schools

The question of what role the public schools should play in the public discussion
about the place of homosexuality in our society presupposes that a substantive case for
the public acceptance and even promotion of homosexual lifestyles has been made. It
also presupposes that the issue has sufficient scope and magnitude to compete with other pressing social problems that warrants the attention and involvement of government agencies such as the public schools. I suggest that such a credible case for the promotion of homosexuality has yet to be made. What arguments have been made in favor of homosexuality and its inclusion in the curriculum of our public schools? Although not exhaustive, the following represent three key arguments advanced in favor of the promotion of homosexuality and its public acceptance,

1. Large Numbers argument. Homosexual advocates contend that those with same sex attractions constitute a large segment our society, around 10% of the population. With the US population estimated at about 295 million, the number of homosexuals in the United States would be 29.5 million. Thus, these large numbers suggest a high incidence of same sex orientation and, therefore, require public attention and action. The 10% figure originated from a misinterpretation of Alfred Kinsey’s 1948 study on human sexuality. More current and accurate research, such as data from the National Health and Social Life Survey by Michael, Gagnon, Lauman, and Kolata (1994) reveal figures more in the 2-3% range. The magnitude of the problem numerically is not nearly as large as proponents would make it to be.

2. Born That Way argument. Much has been made of the assertion that homosexuality is determined genetically even to the extent of an alleged discovery of a “gay gene” (Hamer, Rice, Risch & Ebers, 1999; Satinover, 1999). A person is simply born with a same sex orientation that is innate and unchangeable. Thus a homosexual lifestyle cannot be avoided or changed and a
person cannot be responsible for how he or she is. Any discriminatory action against homosexuals is viewed as unjust because they had no choice in the matter. However, solid research exists that suggests that same sex orientation is not be immutable and that it may be caused by a number of sociological and psychological facts as well as some kind of physiological predisposition (Diamond, 2003; Throckmorton, 2002). Seen from this perspective, homosexuality would be more akin to alcoholism or drug addiction. Evidence that homosexuality is a condition that can be changed is found in growing number of ex-gays and ex-lesbians. For example, see the study by Spitzer (2003) entitled, “Can some gays become straight? 200 subjects who claim to have changed their sexual orientation from homosexual to heterosexual.” As a note of interest, October 11 has been designated as National Coming Out Day. A documentary will premiere nationally entitled, “I Do Exist” (2004). It will feature the transformative live stories of five former gays and lesbians.

3. Human Rights/Equal Protection argument. Building on arguments #1 and #2 is philosophical and legal argument that would endow homosexuals with the same rights, legal status, and social consideration accorded to race and gender. The assertion is made that homosexuality, being innate and immutable, is like race and gender. Therefore, homosexual lifestyles should be protected from any sort of recrimination or discrimination by the Equal Protection Clause of the 14th Amendment. Consequently, viewpoints opposing homosexuality are placed in the same camp as those opposing race and gender: bigoted, prejudicial, narrow-minded, and just plain mean-spirited. However, as Wardle (1996) points out,
“race is an inherent condition, but homosexual behavior is a chosen behavior. Race is passive, homosexual behavior is active. Race is undeniably an immutable, biologically-determined condition, but homosexual behavior has not been shown to be” (127). Thus, the assertion that homosexuality is analogous to race or gender is spurious and clearly falls outside any constitutional protection offered by the 14th Amendment.

Despite faulty assumptions and unproven assertions of these three arguments for acceptance of homosexuality, proponents of homosexuality continue to push for the inclusion of homosexuality into the curriculum of the public schools. There are three major ways in which this is done. The first way is to use the umbrella of diversity or multiculturalism and the celebration of differences. Teachers point out the great variety of people and backgrounds in our society. Differences related to ethnicity, race, language, gender, religion, nationality, and culture are pointed out and deemed as desirable. Each difference is considered equally valuable as the next. Often, sexual orientation and family configuration is included and lumped in with all the other cultural differences. Differences are portrayed as equally valuable and acceptable by mere association with other types of social diversity. In some cases, the curriculum is much more explicit in promoting homosexuality as an acceptable lifestyle. Consider, for example, the debacle in the New York City school system with the “Children of the Rainbow” curriculum. Suggested reading for first-graders was “Daddy’s Roommate,” story of a young boy whose parents were divorced and his father lived with new roommate called Frank. The boy’s father and Frank eat, and work and also “sleep together.” Older elementary children could read about “Heather Has Two Mommies,”
and “Gloria Goes to Gay Pride.” A local school board in the borough of Queens refused to adopt the curriculum. The board president branded parts of the curriculum as “‘dangerously misleading homosexual/lesbian propaganda.’” The chancellor over the New York City school system, Joseph Fernandez, fired the entire school board for refusing to use the books but subsequently reinstated them (“Jack and Jack and Jill and Jill,” 1992; “New York’s Schools: A Classfull of Unions, 1992). Chancellor Fernandez later lost his job over uproar caused by the homosexual component of the curriculum.

Additional piece of curriculum material used to promote homosexuality as an acceptable alternative lifestyle of equal value to any other lifestyle is a video entitled “It’s Elementary.” Technically, the video is an excellent production, a very slick and smooth presentation with a sophisticated and moving script. The video is designed for use in elementary classrooms as well as for professional development of educators and for parent and community groups. The stated purpose of the film is “encourage all adults who care about children’s safety, self-worth, and innate capacity for compassion and fairness to take a fresh look at why and how schools should address gay issues (Chasnoff & Cohen, 1997, 1).” These are laudable goals but they are not realized in the video. Issues are presented from a very one sided point of view. Equal time is not given to a reasoned presentation of an alternative viewpoint about the role of homosexuality, the health dangers of a homosexual lifestyle, or homosexual sex (Cameron & Playfair, 1998; Hogg, et al., 1997). Much is made in the video of the need to avoid stereotyping people, yet the video stereotypes people with differing viewpoints as raging bigots with religion is implicated as part of this bigotry.
A second video, produced by the same authors, was recently released. The focus of this video, “That’s a Family!,” is on the various types of family configurations in our society. Like the first video, its intended audience included elementary students, teachers, and parents. The central purpose of this video is to “help children understand and respect differences of all kinds” (Chasnoff & Cohen, 2000, 4), particularly “family diversity.” While there are elements in the film that are useful in appreciating the diversity of family arrangements, there are two important points that are glossed over or left unsaid. First, any family arrangement or structure is as good as any other. “All families are ‘normal’ families, even though there may be more of some kinds than others” (Chasnoff & Cohen, 19). A major problem with this perspective is where to stop, if any where, in accepting the idea that all families are normal families which implies that all types of families are good for children. Once we get on this slippery slope, it will be very hard to get off. For example, the third Midwest Alternative Polyamory Conference was held this past summer in Wisconsin (Epstein, 2004). Members of this group believe that the ideal “family” consists of multiple adult partners “living in a committed sexual relationship.” They describe themselves as the “new gay” and that they are just several decades behind the gay movement with their own demands for social acceptance and multiple partner marriages. This group has its own magazine, “Loving More,” and will hold its fourth annual Poly Pride Day in New York this fall. So will it be acceptable in the call for diversity to speak in our schools not only about Heather who has two mommies or Steve having two daddies but that Susan has three mommies and two daddies and John has one mother and four daddies? The potential combinations boggle the mind.
Second, gay and lesbian families are included as part of the diversity without a discussion of what this really means. In addition, of the six different types of family arrangements, only the Gay and Lesbian Parents section has a special note to the teacher about the persecution gays and lesbians have experienced over the centuries. True enough, but where are the ways in which society has stigmatized mixed marriages, divorcees, and single parents as outside of the norm?

A second and obvious way homosexuality is introduced through the school curriculum is in health education classes, particularly the unit on sex education and HIV education or in workshops. The most flagrant example comes from Massachusetts, often referred to as “Fistgate.” In March of 2000, employees of the Massachusetts Department of Education held a series of workshops for children as young as 12 years about homosexuality, complete with graphic discussions about homosexual sex and its attendant pleasures and the distribution of a “sex kit” along with various contraceptive devices. One workshop was entitled “’Queer sex for youth, 14-21.’” Three presenters, lesbians and department employees began the session by asking the children if “’how they knew, as gay people, whether or not they’ve had sex..’” Another workshop had the title of “’Putting the ‘Sex’ Back Into Sexual Orientation: Classroom Strategies for Health & Sexuality Educators.’” The central focus of this workshop was to emphasize the fact that “’we are fighting against people who deny publicly, who say privately, that being queer is not at all about sex. . . We believe otherwise. We think that sex is central to every single one of us and particularly queer youth.’” (Camenker & Whiteman, 2000). Titles of other workshops included “Lesbian Avengers: How to Promote Queer Friendly Activism in Your Schools and in Your Lives,” and “It’s Elementary in Our Town:
Getting Gay and Lesbian Issues Included in Elementary School Staff Development, Curriculum Development, and the PTA.”

A recent broadcast on National Public Radio just last month illustrates the growing controversy of the nature of sex education in schools with the recent state Supreme Court approval of same sex marriages in Massachusetts. The following are excerpts from this broadcast.

“TOVIA SMITH: But many teachers say they're less afraid now since the high court decision legalizing gay marriage. Deb Allen teaches eighth-grade sex ed in Brookline. She keeps a picture of her lesbian partner and their kids on her desk and gay equality signs on the wall. Allen says she's already been teaching a gay-friendly curriculum for nearly a decade, but she says she does begin this year feeling a bit more emboldened.

DEB ALLEN (Eighth-Grade Teacher): In my mind, I know that, `OK, this is legal now.' If somebody wants to challenge me, I'll say, `Give me a break. It's legal now.'

TOVIA SMITH: And, Allen says, teaching about homosexuality is also more important now. She says the debate around gay marriage is prompting kids to ask a lot more questions, like what is gay sex, which Allen answers thoroughly and explicitly with a chart.

DEB ALLEN: And on the side, I'm going to draw some different activities, like kissing and hugging, and different kinds of intercourse. All right?

TOVIA SMITH: Allen asks her students to fill in the chart with yeses and nos.

DEB ALLEN: All right. So can a woman and a woman kiss and hug? Yes. Can a woman and a woman have vaginal intercourse, and they will all say no. And I'll say, `Hold it. Of course, they can. They can use a sex toy. They could use'--and we talk--and we discuss that. So the answer there is yes.

TOVIA SMITH: In Massachusetts, local districts have broad discretion when it comes to sex ed, and schools range from this one in Brookline to many others that teach abstinence only or offer no sex ed at all. But teachers say gay and lesbian issues come up all day; not just in sex ed, but everywhere from gym class to social studies or biology. And many teachers say they don't want to go there.

TOVIA SMITH: As Camenker sees it, homosexuality should be treated like divorce. Yes, it's legal and, yes, it happens, but when his own parents divorced, Camenker says, none of his teachers celebrated it. But gay rights advocates say that would violate the
spirit of the gay marriage law, as well as long-standing anti-discrimination laws. Pam Geramo is with PFLAG, or Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. She says teachers have to acknowledge reality.

PAM GERAMO (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays): A child could say, `My parents are gay. Where's my family in this picture?' I mean, you can't teach as if black people don't exist. You can't teach as if, you know, any other group doesn't exist.

TOVIA SMITH: With school just now beginning, it's hard to say exactly how much the new gay marriage law will really change what schools teach. Conservatives tend to overstate the point, just as gay rights advocates prefer to downplay it. Both sides know the stakes are high. States around the country are watching Massachusetts as they debate their own marriage laws. And even here, the issue is far from settled. The final word may come in a few years, when voters decide whether to amend the Massachusetts Constitution to ban gay marriage. Tovia Smith, NPR News, Boston (“All Things Considered,” 2004).

The third venue for introducing homosexuality into schools is through safe schools programs. The shocking tragedy at Columbine High School and other school shootings, the rise of gangs in schools, crimes committed by school children against other children on school property all point to a heighten concerned about the safety of our schools. To address these safety concerns, school board across the nation have adopted a variety of policies to ensure the safety of students such as metal detectors at the entrance of school buildings, school resource officers, video surveillance, zero tolerance policies regarding possession of weapons on school property, and educational programs to teach respect and tolerance for each other. One example of this is the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000 (AB537). For our purposes, what is of interest in this piece of state legislation is the incorporation of a prohibition against two additional forms of discrimination and harassment: sexual orientation and gender and the accompanying regulations for implementing the Act. A task force was formed to develop guidelines for implementing this safe schools act. Recommendations from the task force included such things as a survey to collect data about student’s perceptions about
homosexuality, funding to form Gay-Straight alliances in schools, place “positive grade level appropriate visual images” in the schools that would include “all sexual orientations and gender identities,” and “acknowledge lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender historical figures, events, concepts, and issues in the revisions of content standards and curriculum frameworks, when appropriate. Identify and expand the available lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender resources for school library materials” (Assembly Bill 537 Advisory Task Force Report, 2001; Holgate, 2001). While there is much in this legislation that is good, it does open the door for the introduction of curriculum about homosexuality and alternative lifestyles in schools. Although the recommendations of the task force were eventually made optional instead of mandatory, these recommendations clearly go beyond the intent of the legislation. In all of this, the whole issue of whether anyone had religious or ethical issues or questions about the promotion of homosexual lifestyles was never given much consideration until there was a public outcry.

Proponents of homosexuality and alternative lifestyles often make appeals for the need of a safe school environment, particularly protection for students who may have a same sex orientation. They are correct is asking that schools provide a safe environment for all students regardless of the student’s background, demographics, or personal characteristics. But to push for substantial changes in the curriculum and school activities to achieve this end may be asking for more than is accorded to other minority groups without any real justification. Two common reasons advanced for a greater inclusion and consideration for homosexuality is school curriculum activities are the

claims that youth with same sex orientations are subjected to a high rate of harassment
and that these same youth have a disproportionate rate of suicide, some claiming that 30% of all youth suicides are youth with same sex orientation (Cooper & White, 2004). Thus the need for more invasive and prominent intervention is made. Recent statistics released from the National Center for Education Statistics using data from the 2000 School Survey on Crime and Safety (SSOCS) and data from a 2001 survey revealed in 2001 12.3% of the students, ages 12-18, “reported that someone at school had used a hate-related word against them.” The breakdown of the types of words used is: race – 4.2%, gender – 2.8%, ethnicity -2.7%, religion -1.8%, sexual orientation -1.2%, and disability – 1.1%. These figures suggest that while any derogatory or demeaning comments about a student has no place in our schools, the percentage of hate-words about sexual orientation seems disproportionately small compared to the proposals to include fairly substantial changes in school curriculum and activities.

The claim that 30% of all youth suicides involve homosexual students is also an exaggeration. While the death of even one youth for whatever reason is a profound tragedy, this claim of a high suicide rate is not substantiated by the evidence. The source of the 30% rate is from Paul Gibson, a homosexual social worker, who wrote a report that became part of an appendix in a Health and Human Services report published in 1989. Recent research by Professor Ritch Slavin-Williams, a psychologist at Cornell University, suggests that rate of suicide attempts by youth of same-sex orientation are not different than youth who are heterosexual (Savin-Williams & Ream, 2003; Rios, 1997). The point of all this is that while there should be appropriate concern for youth with same-sex attraction, homosexual proponents have greatly exaggerated the scope of the
problem and have often used this exaggerated picture as an entrée to promote tolerance and acceptance of homosexuality in schools.

Proper role of Public Schools with Homosexuality.

Public schools have four basic responsibilities towards students with same sex orientation and with the related topic of the proper place of homosexuality in our society. These are responsibilities or duties are not unique to this subgroup of the student body but apply to all students regardless of their demographics, personal characteristics, or background. First and foremost, every child needs to have a school climate and environment that safe, safe from physical harm and intimidation, safe from violence and threats. Policies should be developed and implemented that provide for the physical safety and well-being of all children.

Second, every child needs to feel emotionally safe and secure at school. Name calling, derogatory remarks, put downs, teasing and bullying, or verbal slurs have no place in a school. The emotional climate of the school needs to be supportive of learning and facilitate the learning and development of all children. Expectations for appropriate conduct and civility need to be clearly taught and appropriate disciplinary action taken against those students and educators who violate a common code of courtesy and civility. This applies equally to gay activism. A parent of a high school voiced her concern that “there is no thought for a ‘safe place’ for kids that understand basic morals. They understand if they stand up for their beliefs they will be persecuted and the administration is condoning it all” (‘Safe’ Schools movement gains ground in Minnesota schools, ).
Third, schools need to teach students about the society they live and in which they will some day be responsible and contributing adults and this instruction needs to be age-appropriate. Just as there is a diversity of persons in society so is there a diversity of viewpoints and opinions. A sense of fairness imposes two duties on schools in this regard. First, the content of school curriculum needs to be as accurate as possible, based on well-documented facts and reason. Second, the alternative viewpoints need to be given a fair hearing. Schools are about education, not indoctrination, pedagogy not ideology. An example of this occurred just this Tuesday. A federal district judge in Detroit ordered the Ann Arbor Public Schools to pay the attorney fees of over $100,000 for Betsy Hansen, a high school student at Pioneer High School (“School Censored Christian Student from Expressing Her Religious Views Against Homosexuality—Ordered to Pay $102,738, 2004). In 2002, the school had sponsored a diversity week which included the issue of homosexuality. The school sponsored a “Religion and Homosexuality” panel. Betsy Hansen, a Roman Catholic, had been asked to give a speech on “What Diversity Means to Me.” School officials censored the her speech and “claimed that Betsy’s religious view toward homosexuality was a ‘negative’ message and would ‘water down’ the ‘positive’ religious message that they wanted to convey—that homosexual behavior is not immoral or sinful” (Federal Judge: Public Schools Cannot Discriminate Against Christian View on Homosexuality, 2003). School officials also denied the student’s request that a member of the panel, consisting of other clergy, also have a member representing the Catholic faith. This was also denied. The judge’s ruling was highly critical of the school district.
This case represents the ironic, and unfortunate, paradox of a public high school celebrating ‘diversity’ by refusing to permit the presentation to students of an ‘unwelcomed’ viewpoint on the topic of homosexuality and religion, while actively promoting the competing view. This practice of ‘one-way diversity’ unsettling in itself, was rendered still more troubling—both constitutionally and ethically—by the fact that the approved viewpoint was, in one manifestation, presented to students as religious doctrine by six clerics (some in full garb) quoting from religious scripture. In its other manifestation, it resulted in the censorship by school administrators of a student’s speech about ‘what diversity means to me,’ removing that portion of the speech in which the student described the unapproved viewpoint.

All of this, of course, raises the question, among others presented here, of what ‘diversity’ means and whether a school may promote one view of ‘diversity’ over another . . . the notion of sponsorship of one viewpoint to the exclusion of another hardly seems to further the school’s purported objective of ‘celebrating diversity’ (Federal Judge: Public Schools Cannot Discriminate Against Christian View on Homosexuality, 2003).

The fourth major responsibility of schools is to honor and respect the views and values of parents. This is a difficult and sensitive task. At minimum, it requires schools to keep parents adequately and honestly informed of content in the curriculum, both in terms of what is taught in the classroom as well as school activities. For example, in Newton, Massachusetts school officials informed parents that the schools would be celebrating a “To B Glad Day,” a seemingly innocuous celebration. What was really
being celebrated at the schools was a “Transgender, Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian Awareness Day” (King, 2003). This is being openly deceptive and dishonest. Parents also need to the opportunity to have their children “opt out” of curriculum that is patently offensive to their basic values. Even the Universal Declaration of Human Rights acknowledges that “parents have a prior right to choose the kind of education that shall be given to their children” (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Article 26, 1948).

These four major responsibilities are owed to every child by the public schools. Every child needs to be treated equitably and fairly. Every child needs to feel safe and secure at school. As an agent of the state with a captive audience, public schools need to exercise great caution in the performance of its assigned duties.

Conclusion

The type of education one receives influences how one perceives reality, what meanings are attached to these perceptions, which social arrangements are legitimate, which personal relationships are deemed proper, which family configurations are considered ideal, and what constitutes moral or unethical behavior. As cultural flashpoints, schools often become battle grounds over which private values, beliefs, and world views will be raised to public orthodoxy. There is simply much at stake and the determination of both the content and process of education is ultimately a political exercise of power to achieve social ends. In addition to the inherent socialization function of schooling, the establishment of public schools and the passage of compulsory education laws greatly exacerbate a tortuous political problem of determining the curricular content of education. Children in public schools are a captive and immature
audience under the auspices of the state. Whatever is presented and taught to children in
public schools takes on the imprimatur of the state. This requires the state to exercise
great caution so as to not advocate, even implicitly, values and beliefs that run contrary to
the fundamental rights of its citizens or violate the basic elements of a common or public
morality.

Proposals to use the public schools as forums to advocate the egalitarian position
or ethical relativism of various lifestyles, such as gay and lesbian lifestyles or same sex
marriages, constitute a brazen attempt to socialize young, highly impressionable and
immature children into believing, with the support of the state, that the traditional notion
of what constitutes an ideal family is but one of many equally good alternatives and that
gay and lesbian lifestyles are but a sample of many equally moral and productive
lifestyles from which they can choose. Such proposals are not sustained by any
constitutional requirements, ignore the vulnerability and immature development of the
audience, and they not accord with a common public morality. In addition, homosexual
activism often presents a one-sided view of alternative lifestyles and diversity, engages in
deceptive practices and, while calling for tolerance and acceptance, is intolerant and
totally unaccepting of any opposing viewpoints. Until the current contentious cultural war
over these issues has moved toward some form of resolution, such proposals to use public
schools as assemblies of advocacy rather than forums for understanding are premature in
terms of the nature of the debate as well as using a protected public forum to advance
personal beliefs as public values.
References


