

MILTON

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## Complaint spurs review of school diversity policy

By Rich Fahey, Globe Correspondent | October 11, 2007

The Milton School Committee is reviewing its diversity policies following complaints that a 9-year-old girl was verbally abused and physically threatened after she told her fellow third-graders at Tucker Elementary School that her mother is a lesbian.

Virginia Gaffey, the girl's mother, and her attorney have asked school officials to institute a formal sensitivity and tolerance curriculum at all levels. Superintendent of Schools Magdalene Giffune is expected to report back to the School Committee next week.

Gaffey said what began as verbal harassment last January became more serious over the year, and culminated in what her attorney, Claudia Gregoire, in a letter to school officials, called a "group assault" on Sept. 10. Gaffey said six or seven students surrounded her daughter on the playground that day and were "pushing her back and forth," and two hit her. It ended when another child intervened.

After consultations with school officials, a safety plan was devised that involved having the child escorted to her classes by a substitute teacher, but the plan was abandoned after a day and the child was then transferred last month to the nearby Glover Elementary School.

School officials say that privacy and legal issues prevent them from commenting on incidents involving specific students or disciplinary matters involving children, but that the safety and security of every student are of utmost importance.

"It's paramount that we provide a safe environment for our children," said School Committee chairman Beirne Lovely, who said the schools already have policies in place that address discrimination based on gender or lifestyle.

The extent to which current School Committee policies address the specific issue was not immediately clear. Committee member Glenn Pavlicek asked Giffune to review the schools' Second Step program for relevance; Giffune said the program involves conflict resolution more than content, and might not specifically address the area of family diversity.

"We're looking at how this issue has been presented in the past and whether we can do a better job of it," said Giffune. "Any organization periodically reviews its policies to see if they need to be updated."

Now that Massachusetts law allows gays and lesbians to marry, any training should reflect that, say advocates of gay and lesbian rights.

During the Citizens Speak segment of the committee's last meeting, on Oct. 2, both Gaffey and parent Candice Monson - who is married to another woman and has two children in Collicot Elementary School - addressed the issue.

Monson said that there is no formal network of same-sex parents with children in the town's schools, but that she spoke to support Gaffey.

She said she would "like the emphasis on family diversity to account for all types of family constellations in which our community's children are being reared and loved. I don't want us also to overlook other diversity within Milton - race, religion, ethnicity, age, gender, etc."

Monson says that her children have not been subjected to any harassment, and that she and her partner have met with Collicot principal Gerard Schultz, who she said was supportive. Both Monson and Gaffey said they have trained their children how to respond if they are questioned about their family.

Gaffey said her daughter's difficult time at Tucker school had a profound effect, and she no longer feels comfortable discussing her family situation. Gaffey also criticized as "insensitive" what she says was advice given by a counselor at Tucker that her daughter be careful about whom she discussed her family situation with.

Gaffey said that while there have been two minor incidents at Glover since her child transferred there - both of which she attributed to a lack of education - Glover principal Dore Korschun has been supportive. "I like the Glover School,"

said Gaffey. "I'm not angry at the Glover School."

School Committee members said that any disciplinary action against Tucker students would not come under their purview. "That's the function of the individual principals and the superintendent," said Lovely. "Our job is to assess the policies."

Jennifer Chrisler, executive director of Family Pride, an advocacy group for gay and lesbian parents, also called for a structured curriculum that addresses family diversity, but said there was plenty that schools could do in the meantime to improve the climate.

"Teachers can be trained, it can be brought up at school forums, and talked about whenever family issues are raised in the classroom," said Chrisler, the mother of two children in the Newton schools, adding that it is especially important given the state's recognition of same-sex marriage.

Correspondent Rich Fahey can be reached at [faheywrite@yahoo.com](mailto:faheywrite@yahoo.com). ■

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