

## 'We're Back to Square One'

School Board proposes smaller citizens advisory committee and prepares to oversee rewriting of county sex-ed program.

[By Alex Scofield/The Almanac](#)

July 13, 2005

Before Andrew Bennett began his senior year at Walt Whitman High School, he applied on a whim last summer to sit on a county citizens advisory committee on the county's sex-ed curriculum. "My mom was really surprised," Bennett said.

It was the beginning of a year full of surprises and a lesson in politics and the legal system for Bennett. Last November, the Montgomery County Board of Education approved revisions to the county's health education curriculum for 8th- and 10th-graders. Six months and one federal lawsuit later, Jerry Weast, superintendent of county schools, scrapped the revisions and dissolved the citizens advisory committee on which Bennett sat.

Montgomery County Public Schools and the School Board now go back to the drawing board. Last month, the School Board reached a legal settlement with the two plaintiff organizations who filed suit over the curriculum: Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum (CRC) and Parents and Friends of Ex-Gays and Gays. The plaintiffs will be reimbursed \$36,000 in legal fees, and future sex-ed curricula will avoid mentioning religion.

"We're back to square one, basically, and we've got what I consider pretty much a clean slate," said Christine Grewell of Silver Spring. Grewell and two other parents at Albert Einstein High School co-founded Teach the Facts, an organization that supported the proposed sex-ed curriculum.

STATE LAW MANDATES that county public schools systems provide education on "family life and human sexuality."

Several years ago, the School Board recommended that public school staff begin revising material for teaching about sexual orientation — county teachers currently may not initiate discussion about homosexuality, although they may answer students' questions on the subject.

In November 2004, the School Board approved a series of revisions to the curriculum, and "Protect Yourself," a video on contraceptive use.

Before the year ended, the battle lines were drawn between Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum and Teach the Facts. Both continue to maintain Web sites and dueling blogs ([www.mcpscurriculum.com](http://www.mcpscurriculum.com) and [www.teachthefacts.org](http://www.teachthefacts.org), respectively).

A central part of CRC's and PFOX's opposition to the curriculum materials was the treatment of the issue of homosexuality.

Turner says she has no opposition to the course addressing homosexuality, but CRC and PFOX want the curriculum to include an "ex-gay" perspective as well — stating that people who experience same-sex attractions can choose not to act on them and embrace a heterosexual identity.

"The scientific community has [dismissed it]," Bennett said, referring to the American Psychiatric Association, which says there is no published scientific evidence supporting the efficacy of "reparative therapy" as a treatment to change one's sexual orientation.

Fisher of Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum said he favors inclusion of the ex-gay standpoint in the revised curriculum. "We support the discussion of [homosexuality] in the classroom. ... How can you have a comprehensive discussion [without the ex-gay standpoint]?" said Steve Fisher, of Citizens for a Sensible Curriculum. "Obviously, we will want to know why the issue is so verboten."

MORE THAN 200 people went to a CRC meeting at the local Johns Hopkins campus in Rockville in March to view "Protect Yourself."

Turner felt that neither "Protect Yourself" nor the designed printed material placed enough emphasis on the risks sexual activity poses for students.

"They need to teach about all of it — the risks, the consequences, the impact that it has on families,"

Curriculum Chronology



Turner said. "They've got to show all aspects to this because there are serious consequences." Bennett and Grewell both viewed "Protect Yourself" as a flawed video, but one whose virtues outweighed its negatives. Both mentioned the video's MTV-style production – switches from color to black-and-white, and the veering camera angles. Bennett joked that he had to watch it with his head tilted.

But Bennett said there was nothing raunchy about the video, and that he felt perfectly comfortable watching it with a parent. "I know how students would react to something like this. ... It was completely factual," Bennett said. "It was years in planning, years in research."

"In a seven-minute film, it mentioned abstinence 10 times," Grewell said. "That video was pilot tested, and it was approved."

Turner, however, took exception to statistics "Protect Yourself" cited on the effectiveness rates of condoms.

"The effectiveness ... effectiveness for what?" Turner said. "For preventing pregnancy or transmitting disease? ... And the implication that condoms, when used for oral or anal intercourse, are equally protective."

When Weast suspended the use of "Protect Yourself" in May, he said it was due in part to questions concerning some of the information contained the video.

IN MAY, PFOX and CRC filed a federal lawsuit against the School Board, Weast and the county school system. Judge Alexander Williams of the U.S. District Court of Maryland issued a restraining order on implementing the program, which was set to be piloted at three county middle schools and three high schools later in May.

Williams ruled that the plaintiff's rights under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution were violated by the curriculum's materials, provided to teachers, that described various religions' views on homosexuality.

"The Court does not understand why it is necessary, in attempting to achieve the goals of advocating tolerance and providing health-related information, Defendants must offer up their opinion on such controversial topics as whether homosexuality is a sin, whether [AIDS] is God's judgment on homosexuals, and whether churches that condemn homosexuality are on solid theological ground," stated Williams in his ruling.

By the end of the month, "we scrapped the curriculum, we scrapped the video, we scrapped the committee," said Pat O'Neill of the School Board. "We are making a fresh start."

WILL ANOTHER COURT battle become necessary a year from now?

"I can't predict the future," said Brian Edwards, county schools spokesman, but he emphasized that "that this will be a well-researched, well-developed curriculum."

In the legal agreement, both sides concurred that a revised curriculum will not mention religion. As for whether the ex-gays viewpoint is included, "I doubt that it will," said O'Neill of the School Board, emphasizing that staff, and not advisory committee members, will write the new curriculum. "There was nothing in writing [in the legal agreement] indicating that the ex-gay viewpoint will be expressed."

Fisher at Citizens for a Responsible Curriculum described himself as "cautiously optimistic." It is too early to decide whether inclusion of the ex-gay standpoint is a make-or-break issue CRC, said Fisher. However, he believes forthcoming revisions will likely be acceptable. "We're going to take Superintendent Weast at his word," Fisher said.

Grewell isn't as optimistic. "I am 100 percent positive that when the new curriculum ... comes to the Board for pilot testing, there will be another lawsuit," she said.

BENNETT GRADUATED from Whitman last month, and he will attend Vassar College in New York. He'll stay tuned to next year's developments as the school staff develops a new curriculum.

"I'm most definitely going to follow along," said Bennett, who feels confident that a new curriculum will be in place a year from now. "I don't see any turning back. ... I'm confident the School Board and committee will learn from past mistakes. [I hope] students finally get to take advantage of the curriculum that these people have been working on for years."