

School dropping anti-gay bullying lessons

By Lisa Leff
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ALAMEDA — The school board blinked.

Under the duress of a lawsuit and threats of recall, the Alameda Board of Education has voted to phase out an elementary school curriculum it adopted in May to prevent anti-gay bullying.

The so-called Lesson 9, which had become an opposition centerpiece in a national anti-gay marriage campaign, will be replaced by a more generic anti-bullying message.

But the board's action Tuesday night did little to ease the tension between gay parents, who want their children protected, and parents who think elementary school is too early to talk to students about gay people.

The new anti-bullying lessons approved by the board, at the recommendation of School Superintendent Kirsten Vital, will be supplemented by children's books that explicitly address six specific forms of bias, including against gays.

"This has torn apart our community," said school trustee Trish Herrera Spencer, the board member most opposed to the gay curriculum and who opposed adding the supplemental books. She said the board's latest action did not take into consideration "the strong beliefs" of all in the community.

The 45-minute Lesson 9, which was to be taught once a year in each grade starting with kindergarten, sparked a lawsuit, accusations that religious families were being discriminated against and threats of a recall election against the three board members who approved it.

Vital said her recommendation was meant to counter complaints from parents opposed to the original lesson because it highlighted only one type of bullying.

"There is not an off-the-shelf, perfect curriculum that is going to work for our community," Vital said, explaining that she wants to solicit book recommendations, bring them back to the school board for approval in a few months and then work with teachers to develop accompanying lesson plans in time for the 2010-11 academic year.

Several parents said they did not trust a teachers' committee to pick books that would both satisfy gay and lesbian parents and parents with religious views that do not condone homosexuality.

"Freedom of religion is protected from harassment and discrimination from anyone. It may be of no consequence to some, but it is a very integral part of many traditional families and should be honored," said Kellie Wood, who has three children in Alameda schools and is part of a group circulating recall election petitions. "If we're all honest, the friction between two protected classes, in particular, will not go away."

Alameda is the latest community to be divided by its school district's desire to curb anti-gay bullying and the concerns of parents who do not want their children to hear about gay and lesbian issues in school.

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During last year's campaign to pass a constitutional amendment to ban same-sex marriages in California, the measure's sponsors ran commercials featuring a Massachusetts couple who unsuccessfully sued their local district for the right to pull their child out of anti-bullying lessons that included references to gay households.