

Documentary still sparks controversy and change

by Leah Fabel
Nov 08, 2007

WASHINGTON – Ten years ago, a documentary called “It’s Elementary – Talking about Gay Issues in School” raised the wrath of conservatives, but the debate it reflected ultimately changed a part of the landscape of American education.

An updated version of the movie will be released Nov. 28 under the title “It’s Still Elementary,” and filmmaker Debra Chasnoff said she hopes it will highlight the continued need to make schools safe and welcoming for all students.

Since the late 1990s, ten states and the District of Columbia have passed “safe school” laws protecting students from discrimination and bullying based on their sexual identity, according to the Washington-based Human Rights Campaign. As a result, many schools have incorporated lessons on gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender sensitivity, including the use of Chasnoff’s film, into their curricula and teacher trainings.

More than twenty states have anti-bullying legislation but without defined categories of protected students. Several more have regulations or policies, but not laws, against sexual-identity-based discrimination.

Chasnoff believes policy still has room to improve, especially in states lacking any measures. But her opponents lament that policy has already gone too far. Both sides say children pay the price.

With the October signing of Senate Bill 777, California is the most recent state to have seen a battle between the two sides. Its sponsor, state Rep. Sheila Kuehl of Los Angeles, said the bill did little more than make language in the education code consistent with language in the state’s other anti-discrimination laws. Discrimination based on sexual identity, she said, had been illegal in California for eight years.

Paul Weyrich, a prominent member of the religious right, explained it differently in an Oct. 26 editorial on the conservative Web site Newsmax.com. According to Weyrich, SB 777, in conjunction with two other anti-discrimination bills, will enable schools to “become miniature laboratories for redefining nature, implementing ‘gender theory’ and experimenting with the effects of sexual lifestyles.”

At issue in California, as in most states that struggled with crafting safe-school laws, was categorization. Some states, such as Louisiana, New Hampshire and Ohio, ended up with laws that prohibit bullying but do not list categories of students to be protected. Other states, such as California, Minnesota and Iowa, have defined the categories.

Gay rights organizations strongly support laws with defined categories of people to be protected.

“The Supreme Court said that (categorization) gives these policies meaning,” said Lisa Mottet, an attorney with the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force. “Without naming the problem, you can’t fix it or address it head on.”

Mottet gave the example of a high school principal dealing with harassment of gay students, but wary of acting for fear of aggravating parents who don’t want gay students mentioned in a positive way. “If the law says he has to, and it’s his job to enforce the law, parents can complain about it and he can point to the law. Naming the categories of people who are protected gives principals the authority and requires them to take action.”

Linda Harvey, a frequent news and radio critic of the gay rights movement who runs two Web sites devoted to keeping gay acceptance out of the schools, said the focus on writing categories into the laws is part of a manipulative public relations campaign.

“These policies are used to label and self-label with homosexuality at an early age, and then put parents or Christians on the defensive. If you teach (that homosexuality is not acceptable), then you’re promoting violence.”

Harvey believes homosexuality is a complex choice and a dangerous one to make for emotional and health reasons. Though her views are controversial, many share them. Harvey’s commentary appears on Web sites such as World Net Daily, a right-wing news site with a Christian focus claiming 60 million to 70 million unique page views per month.

But according to Chasnoff, the debate on whether homosexuality is a choice is beside the point. “Far be it from any of us to know why anyone is gay, lesbian or transgender. The fact is there are still millions of us. We have children, and our children are in school.”

She hopes her new movie, which includes updates on the original participants, will further promote what she considers a positive legislative trend.

“Iowa passed comprehensive safe-schools legislation this year. What we’re seeing is an emerging safe-schools movement on its feet, and they weren’t there ten years ago.”