

Protection for sexual minorities

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Hamilton's public school board last night approved a controversial sexual orientation policy, as a divided crowd of at least 150 packed the board's chambers.

Trustees were nearly unanimous in the vote to accept the sexual orientation pillar of the equity policy, which aims to combat heterosexism and homophobia in schools, outside of schools and through an unbiased curriculum.

The policy has drawn fire from traditional-family advocates who fear being labelled and having their kids disciplined for their views.

But it was cheered as the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board voted. Only trustee, Lillian Orban, abstained: she wanted, but couldn't get, heterosexuals added to the policy intended to protect sexual minorities.

"As more than one trustee said, it's about time," said Lyla Miklos, a member of the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender advisory committee to the City of Hamilton.

Trustee Tim Simmons said, to applause, that it was like the school board "had come out of the closet."

Last month, trustees deferred a vote on the policy after an opponent alleged a lack of public input. Board staff assured trustees consultation was done properly. But the delay meant that a litany of pro-policy speakers were heard, as the policy returned again to the board's committee of the whole. It needs final approval June 16.

Speakers last night included Chantal Mancini, president of the Ontario Secondary School Teachers Federation, District 21, who cited a gay Ajax teen's suicide as the result of homophobic bullying.

Wayne Irwin, minister of Centenary United Church at Main near MacNab, added a different Christian view than heard last month.

Irwin said his church strives to walk in the way of Jesus Christ, who sided with those who were ostracized by the religious of his day.

Brendan, a gay youth from Westmount Secondary, said he's a youth who'll benefit from the board policy as it works to ensure safe spaces for all students in the board.

"Even now, I have the odd day where I just want to die," he said.

In discussion, the board noted it will find a way to ensure students with deeply-held religious views can be exempted from content they object to. It may include notation on Ontario Student Records.

Jim Enos, vice-president of the Hamilton-Wentworth Family Action Council, which represents families with traditional Christian values, was "disappointed but not surprised" that the policy passed.

"It's a pretty serious policy for some people," he said.

He's concerned that the board has a policy but no guide for implementation. It has yet to be developed.

"People have already come to me seeking references to other schools... I'm advising people to use their own judgment," he said.

Sexual orientation now part of equity policy

What is it?

Hamilton's public school board wants to ensure its policies and practices, in class and out, are anti-homophobic and anti-heterosexist. It is doing so through the sexual orientation pillar of its new equity policy, which already has anti-racism and anti-classism sections.

Traditional-family criticism

Members of a Christian traditional family group and an orthodox priest said they want the board to just use its anti-bullying policy to protect everyone instead of striving to protect gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people. They say traditional views are being attacked, and one opponent said homosexuality is treatable.

The other side

A teachers' union cites the suicide of a 13-year-old gay Ajax student and victim of homophobic bullying as a reason for such a policy. Others note violence, name-calling and the board's secular nature as reasons for the policy.

The board response

Chuck Reid, associate director of education, said recent law suggests it's not enough for a board to react to incidents: they must be proactive with a policy like this. He says beliefs aren't being outlawed, but the board wants to ensure targeted groups are not subjected to hate speech, bullying and violence.