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OPINION

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IOWA VIEW

Treat gays with respect, but don't add bias to curricula

By CHAD W. THOMPSON

In the April 17 essay, "Push School Policy Against Gay Bashing," Linda Lantor Fandel makes a very good case for protecting Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender (GLBT) high school kids from harassment. But she made it seem as though there is no legitimate reason to oppose such protections.

Fandel favors specific legal protections to help safeguard GLBT students against discrimination and bigotry. She wrote that opponents of such protection at a Lamoni School Board meeting "read from the Bible and threatened to take their kids out of school," but she neglected to explain why.

Those who oppose such

protection for gays are often viewed as Bible-thumping, gay-hating and small-minded. After all, who could possibly be in favor of beating up high school kids just because they're gay? But principled opposition to such protection is not based on a desire to see gay kids get beaten up. Rather, many who oppose such protection are concerned about the impact it may have on school curricula.

Fandel wrote that "it's not enough to have a policy that only prohibits harassment in general. The message should be specific and unmistakable." She said that doing so would be especially helpful if "accompanied by education" to teach students that differences must be respected. So it becomes clear that she is not only asking for a specific amendment to school policy, but a specific educational program as well. In the past, the addition of

the words "sexual orientation" to a school's nondiscrimination policy has been used to justify the addition of curricula to educate kids about the importance of treating gay and lesbian kids with respect. What could be wrong with that?

Most of the curricula I have seen really do address the legitimate needs of GLBT students — namely, freedom from harassment. They also teach students that their homosexuality is an unchangeable condition that must be embraced and acted upon instead of presenting information from both sides of the debate that surrounds sexual orientation, and then letting students make up their minds. In other words, the curricula are biased. Few contain any mention of the thousands of homosexuals who have successfully redirected their sexual orientations through counseling and prayer. When

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they are mentioned, their lives are discredited or ridiculed.

Even though I oppose the bias in such curricula, I agree with their overall message: that gays and lesbians should be treated with respect.

Academics, peer pressure and family life are just a few of the things that can add undue stress to the lives of developing young men or women. The challenges are even more difficult for students who are struggling with their sexual identity. Some of these students face misunderstanding, isolation and sometimes abandonment from friends and family. Everything from name-calling to vandalism is

aimed at young men whose demeanor is even slightly feminine, or young women who come across as masculine. Many of these precious lives are lived in desperation, or ended in suicide.

So what's the solution? I believe both sides must concede at least a few points. Social conservatives and others who oppose policies to protect gay youth must quit ignoring the struggles faced by GLBT students in Iowa and acknowledge that gay-bashing needs to be addressed. At the same time, schools that implement such programs must commit a comprehensive perspective on the nature of sexual orientation. They must work to create a safe environment for students who have chosen not to embrace their homosexuality, as well as those who have.

John Stuart Mill, one of the greatest thinkers of the 19th

century, wrote, "The only way in which a human being can make some approach to knowing the whole of a subject is by hearing what can be said about it by persons of every variety of opinion and studying all modes in which it can be looked at by every character of mind. No wise man ever acquired his wisdom in any mode but this."

This is not to suggest that those who hear a different viewpoint on homosexuality will change their opinions it, but the inclusion of opposing views on any given subject in education is the basis for developing critical thinking in young minds. It is one of the essential building blocks of effective education.

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