

Gay, lesbian curriculum to start in fall

Toronto board seeks to provide academic support for secondary students

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TORONTO — Braced for controversy, the Toronto Board of Education has introduced a new alternative school program for gay and lesbian dropouts, many of whom have been hounded out of the mainstream.

The first class opens in September under the tutelage of an openly gay teacher, with backup from a lesbian teacher, said Toronto school trustee John Campey. "We'll have both male and female teacher models."

The full-time curriculum will meet provincial education guidelines for secondary schools, but will be "adapted slightly" to meet the students' needs, Mr. Campey said in an interview yesterday.

For instance, high school computer courses do not generally teach students that Alan Turing, "the inventor of the computer, was gay," he said. Such knowledge could help gay and lesbian students realize "that there are other people like them out there, that it is possible to make a contribution."

Mr. Campey said some of the stu-

dents enrolled in the new program run by Oasis Alternative Secondary School have had "horrific school experiences." Some have been beaten up because they are gay, others have been hounded out of school by verbal harassment, others have simply felt acutely uncomfortable.

"There comes a point where you get tired of being called 'fag' in the hallway," Mr. Campey said.

For the past several years, as part of its human sexuality program, the Toronto school board has assigned a social worker to provide support for gay and lesbian students, he said. While several Toronto secondary schools provide excellent support to gay and lesbian students, "we aren't there everywhere yet."

The classes, loosely modelled on well-established programs offered to alienated gay and lesbian youth in New York City and Los Angeles, will be held in space donated by the Metropolitan Community Church, which caters to a large gay and lesbian congregation.

The Toronto initiative is called the Triangle program after the pink triangle symbol worn by many gay activists. It is described as a tran-

sitional program, aimed at getting the students back on track academically while teaching "coping skills" that will allow them to return to an integrated school setting. There will be about 20 students from Grades 9 to 12 in the first special class — the first of its kind in Canada.

The goal is not to segregate gay and lesbian students, but to provide temporary specialized help to those who are in dire need, said Mr. Campey who is, himself, gay. The program also may appeal to heterosexual students with gay parents, because such students are often subject to harassment as well.

Within the school board, even those who would have fought "tooth and nail" against the Triangle program five or six years ago, are "not very aggressive in their opposition" today, Mr. Campey said.

"It ties in with our goal of trying to meet the educational needs of all of our students."

Rev. Brent Hawkes, senior pastor at Metropolitan Community Church, said it is not unusual for any kind of new program to be misunderstood. "Some people who are really homophobic are going to exploit this and

go nuts with it," he predicted. "But the controversy will die down after a while."

Mr. Hawkes said an alarming number of gay and lesbian students are at risk of dropping out of the school system because "they do not feel safe, they feel harassed. . . .

"In most classes, most people would not feel comfortable about being open, being themselves."

In the Triangle program, students may feel freer to ask such questions as: "I have heard that Michaelangelo was gay. Is that correct?"

They may feel less inhibited about asking how many gay people were killed along with Jewish people in the Holocaust, Rev. Hawkes said. "In a class about law and society, it may be natural for people to ask questions about laws that discriminate against gays and lesbians. In biology classes, people may ask questions about why people are gay."

Rev. Hawkes was effusive in his praise for the alternative school program, but said the Board of Education has to do a lot more to make all schools more welcoming. "Not many schools are making an effort."