

I was wrong

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I was wrong. Several readers and family members convinced me that a column I wrote earlier this fall contained a serious mistake. Since I often encourage people to examine, and sometimes change their views, I must be willing to do the same.

In October, I criticized a teacher who responded to a seven year old student's question, "Are you gay?", by answering "yes." I also called the teacher's actions "inappropriate" for telling students that he and his partner hoped some day to adopt children.

The teacher's actions will be shocking, disturbing and offensive for some readers. And in thinking about this issue, I talked with leaders of some Minnesota statewide principals groups who felt the teacher should not have discussed his sexual orientation.

Some will agree with the Anoka Hennepin Board's "directive" on this issue. As Mary Olson, Director of Communications and Public Relations for the Anoka-Hennepin explained, while expecting that respect should be maintained toward all people, the board directed that "homosexuality (should) not be taught/addressed as a normal, valid lifestyle." Furthermore the board expects that district resources not be used to "advocate the homosexual lifestyle."

But, as Minnesota State Senator Scott Dibble wrote me, "I'm sure you aren't proposing that teachers make no reference to their life outside of the classroom whatsoever. As such, you're asking gay and lesbian teachers to live up to a pretty extreme standard if you maintain that any mention of their life is out of bounds."

Many educators have family pictures on their desk. Assuming "straight" people can display pictures of husbands or wives, shouldn't gay and lesbian teachers be able to do the same?

Dibble strongly agreed that teachers should not tell students of any age "here is the right sexual orientation for you." At the same time, he spoke about the sins of "omission and hostility," and their consequences. Dibble explained that many gay or lesbian people have experienced name-calling and sometimes physical assault because they were "different."

Dibble believes, and I agree that public schools should help students of different races, religions and backgrounds come together to learn. The public schools should be teaching the "3's"; but also helping youngsters learn to deal with each other."

Dr. Daniel Jett, Superintendent of the West Metro Education Program, which includes Minneapolis and 10 suburban districts, believes that the elementary curriculum should discuss diversity and different kinds of families. "Today's students are growing up in an array of families: sometimes headed by a man and a woman, sometimes a single parent or grandparent, sometimes two men or two women. This is a fact. Promoting acceptance of each other does not mean we are advocating any particular form of family."

Sexual orientation is very controversial for some people. Teachers can have a huge impact on their students. But being honest about yourself is not the same as telling students what they should do. At this, and other times of the year, one thing we should advocate is respect.