

Anti-bullying bill subverts Catholic curriculum: group

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Peter J. Thompson/National Post

Dalton McGuinty's Liberals' Bill 13 would require all school boards to implement policies that combat bullying and “promote a positive school climate that is inclusive and accepting of all pupils, including pupils of any race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status or disability.”

A private group of Catholic parents is worried Ontario's proposed anti-bullying legislation, Bill 13, will force the religious schools their children attend to change fundamental Church teachings on homosexual behaviour.

“Our concern is that this anti-bullying legislation is meant to bring a change in the Catholic curriculum,” said Teresa Pierre, director of Ontario Catholic Parent Advocates, which wants to see Bill 13 dropped. “We are concerned about the potential erosion of Catholic principles.

“The province’s goal is to change Catholic social teaching in our schools under the cause of ending homophobia. I think they’re following the momentum of a social agenda that has been at work for the past 10 years.”

Bill 13 would require all school boards to implement policies that combat bullying and “promote a positive school climate that is inclusive and accepting of all pupils, including pupils of any race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status or disability.” It also calls for “activities or organizations that promote the awareness and understanding of, and respect for, people of all sexual orientations and gender identities, including organizations with the name gay-straight alliance or another name.”

Ms. Pierre said Catholic parents want to rid all schools of bullying and that can be done without changing Catholic social teaching.

She said her group believes that Dalton McGuinty, the Premier of Ontario, wants to force Catholic schools to allow groups like gay-straight alliances that would end up promoting homosexuality as acceptable, something that goes against official Church teaching.

“We would not tolerate negative speech toward anyone based on his or her sexual orientation in our schools,” she said. “Nevertheless, we don’t want society telling the Church what is proper behaviour and what it should teach.”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church says homosexual behaviour is “intrinsically disordered” and “under no circumstance can it be approved.” However, the Catechism also teaches that homosexuals “must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.”

The Church in Ontario has always held it can have its own teaching because it is protected under law. The Constitution Act of 1867 gave the right for a separate Catholic school system in Ontario and that privilege was upheld under the Charter of Rights and Freedoms.

But some observers of this recent controversy say teaching that gay behaviour is wrong but gays should not be bullied sends a mixed message.

The fundamental teaching of the Catholic Church that gay behaviour is “disordered” is also part of the bullying equation, said Matt Mills, editorial director of *Xtra*, a national gay and lesbian newspaper.

“I think the one way to ensure bullying of gay students is to ensure there are no support groups for gay kids to go to,” he said.

“I’ve been to many gay-straight alliance events in schools and what it is a bunch of kids, gay and straight, watching movies and eating pizza.”

Meantime, the Ontario Catholic bishops and Catholic educators are trying to write policies that would combat bullying but also stick to Catholic teaching, as well as be acceptable to the province. It is expected the policy will be presented to the government early in 2012.

Joanne McGarry, president of the Catholic Civil Rights League, said she is confident that the bishops and educators will come up with a proper compromise.

“The policy should be as comprehensive policy and should cover all kinds of bullying not just gay issues. We shouldn’t lose sight of that. But I believe what McGuinty is doing is in the right spirit of helping students.”

Catholic schools already have clubs in place to help gay students and others deal with bullying, said Nancy Kirby, president of the Ontario Catholic School Trustees’ Association. The new legislation is needed to end bullying but it must be instituted in the Catholic schools within a religious context, she said.

“We teach chastity to all our students, whether they are gay or straight,” she said.

Last week, Mr. McGuinty told reporters in Windsor the new legislation is meant to send a “strong signal to all Ontarians of all faiths, of all backgrounds, all places of origin, all culture, all traditions, all ethnicities: in our province and in our publicly funded schools, schools are going to be warm, welcoming, and accepting of all our children — regardless of their sexual orientation,” Mr. McGuinty said.

“Catholic schools will have gay-straight alliances,” he added. “What they call them is up to them.”

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