

# Duty of care to students ignored in gay school essay debate

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Now the controversy has died down a bit over a Queensland teenager who refused to answer a school assignment question about being gay, let's take a fresh look at how the state and federal governments responded.

A Grade 9 teacher at Windaroo Valley State High School in Brisbane set the assignment, which asked students to imagine living as a heterosexual in a mostly homosexual colony on the moon.

Students were asked to imagine what it was like being part of a minority and what strategies they would use to deal with the experience.

The aim of the assignment was to encourage acceptance of diversity and understanding of the consequences of exclusion, be it through sexual identity, race, culture or disability. The assignment asked students to reflect on what discrimination felt like for the victim.

A 13 year-old student in the class refused to answer the question because, according to *The Sunday Mail* ('Teens failed for stand on gays' 8/10/2006), she did not believe in homosexuality.

In response to this single complaint about an assignment that has been part of the Queensland Studies Authority tolerance package for years, Queensland Premier Peter Beattie called on the authority to drop the exercise.

Although the school has reportedly dropped the assignment, it has not been removed from the state school curriculum. The Queensland Studies Authority is considering its response.

Federal Education Minister Julie Bishop said the assignment was a 'politically correct agenda masquerading as curriculum'.

Windaroo Valley School teachers met last week and passed resolutions condemning *The Sunday Mail* for publishing a 'highly sensational and inaccurate article'. They also condemned politicians for 'their ill-conceived comments on curriculum issues' and called on the Queensland Government to resist attempts by fundamentalist groups to force their views on Queenslanders via the school curriculum.

There are good reasons — that teachers well understand — for school curricula to foster tolerance of religious, cultural and sexuality difference in Australian schools.

Discrimination and homophobia are serious matters in school communities. Research shows that issues relating to sexuality and sexual identity cause emotional turmoil for many young people, leading to mental health problems including suicide. An Australian suicide study found that young gay men are 3.7 times more likely to commit suicide than young heterosexual men.

A Latrobe University study showed that young gay and lesbian students are subjected to high levels of violence, verbal abuse and bullying within schools. Sixteen per cent of young gay and lesbian people have been physically assaulted because of their sexuality and almost half had been verbally abused or bullied. The great majority of this abuse occurred within schools.

While the brunt of sexuality-related abuse falls hardest on gay and lesbian students, others are on the receiving end of terms like 'poofter', 'dyke' or 'faggot' used as insults. Homophobic abuse has the potential to harm all students, regardless of their sexuality, and often occurs at a stage of development when they are very concerned about fitting in.

Schools have a legal duty of care to ensure their students' safety and well-being. Given the reality of sexual discrimination and abuse within schools, it is not an optional nicety for schools to respond, it is a legal requirement. If the Queensland Studies Authority drops this assignment and similar curriculum items designed to foster tolerance, the Queensland Government will be more vulnerable to legal action from current and former students for the abuse they experience under its care.

Family Planning Queensland (FPQ) and the Queensland Association for Healthy Communities (QAHC) support the retention of this Grade 9 assignment. Windaroo Valley High School's attempt to promote a safe, non-discriminatory environment is commendable and fits within Education Queensland's Human Relationships Education policy. Evidence that teachers at the school are standing by the assignment is also welcome.

If this assignment question is dropped from the Queensland school curriculum, it will reinforce the view that homosexuality is taboo and high school students should not be allowed to think about it. Surely *this* would be a political agenda masquerading as curriculum. High school students are already aware of sexual identity issues, and need good quality, non-judgmental information and advice about sexuality.

If Queensland is serious about being the Smart State, we should ensure our school curricula equips students for living in the real world, one that is rich in diversity, in which respect and acceptance are considered core life skills.