

## **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Parents in the School Systems**

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*Abstract:* Families headed by lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender parents are often invisible in or underserved by the school systems. To create important school-home partnerships, schools need to become better informed about these families, including the wide variety of family constellations they comprise, the social obstacles they face, and the reasons why a functional parent may be excluded or remain invisible when the family presents itself. Homophobic views, religious beliefs, traditional ideas about gender categories, and heterosexist assumptions may contribute to a school professional's discomfort addressing these issues. Resistance also may stem from lack of information about these families, lack of experience and comfort speaking about sexual minority issues in general, a mistaken equation of sexual orientation with sexual behavior, and lack of specific training in how to speak to children about these issues. Additionally, school professionals may fear that being affirmative on sexual minority-parented family issues will expose them to administrative criticism or objections from heterosexual parents. The use of anti-bias and informational training, new curricula, liaisons to outside organizations, and official policy guidelines from school administrations are discussed.

There have always been children with gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (sexual minority) parents, and current estimates put the number between 6 and 14 million (Editors of the *Harvard Law Review*, 1990). Yet, until recently there was little discussion of their needs in the school systems. In the past decade, however, societal tolerance for diversity in family structure and sexual orientation has increased as has the visibility of lesbian and gay parents in the media. In addition, there has been what is sometimes termed a "gayby boom": a movement among "out" gays and lesbians to create families through donor insemination, adoption, and surrogacy (Martin, 1993; Weston, 1991). The result is that more families with sexual minority parents are identifying themselves in the schools, at the same time as more school professionals are bringing to their work an awareness that these families exist and that they require specialized knowledge.

At present there are few school systems that have the information, experience, comfort level, or even the willingness to address the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender-parented families. Despite the increasing visibility of such families, few published research studies have focused on their needs in the school systems, or even acknowledged that sexual minority-parented families exist. (Caspar, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992). In addition, there are also few sexual minority parents with the necessary resources to educate school professionals about their needs.

It is well established that the development of school, family, and community partnerships can help children succeed in school and in later life (Epstein, 1995). By extension, it can be assumed that efforts to improve communication among school professionals, sexual minority parents, and the entire school community will be a tremendous help to the success of children with

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This article contains excerpts from interviews conducted for the study presented by Martin (1998a) and dissertation research by Ryan (1998). The excerpts are direct quotes from parents and teachers participating in the interviews.

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sexual minority parents. It is therefore important that school psychologists, teachers, administrators, and other professionals begin the processes of opening dialogue and gathering information on issues of sexual orientation, gender identity, and diversity of family constellation that will prepare them to address the specific needs of children from these families. Furthermore, programs need to be developed that provide school professionals with language and structures for introducing and discussing these issues with children, parents, and other school personnel. The purpose of this article is to inform school psychologists about the specific needs of families headed by gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered parents toward creating a productive home/school partnership.

Research in this area is sparse and exploratory at present. Samples are of necessity nonrandom. Therefore, caution must be observed in generalizing to a wider population. Some suggestions from the authors represent their assessments based upon personal observations that are not yet supported by hard research data. It is hoped that they will serve as a starting point for further exploration and dialogue.

### **Identifying the Family Members**

Research has shown that when parents are made part of a comprehensive delivery system, students perform better academically and socially (Keith, Keith, Quirk, Sperduto, Santillo, & Killings, 1998; Pyszkowski, 1989). To involve parents, however, they must first be identified as such. In general, families with sexual minority parents do not conform to the model of two biological parents under one roof with their offspring (Caspar, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992; Hulsebosch, & Koerner, 1996; Martin, 1998a). In fact, the range of diversity in family constellation is nowhere so great as among sexual minority-parented families. There may be biological parents who are not actual caregiving parents or even legal parents in the family system, as is the case with sperm donors, surrogate mothers, or birth parents in an adoption situation. There also may be full functioning parents in the system who have no biological ties to the child and no legal recognition as parents as is the case when a biological mother's lesbian partner, for example, assumes a full parenting role. (Though there are some places in the country in which same-sex couples have been able to extend legal

parenthood rights to both parents, this option is available to only a small number of families.) Furthermore, many sexual minority families contain more than two parents in more than one household, including biological parents plus those parents' partners or same-sex partners from previous relationships who continue to co-parent after separation. Working with these families effectively requires discarding any traditional notions about what a family constellation should optimally be (Martin, 1998a). It requires, instead, defining a child's parents as those people who meet two criteria: they have the intention to be parents, and they assume the responsibilities and functions of parents. What this means is that neither biology nor legal rights of parenthood (the two criteria we are most inclined to use in traditional definitions of family) will be the determining factors.

One significant challenge for school professionals in working with sexual minority-parented families, then, is identifying the child's true family constellation; that is, those people who have the functional roles of parents. Identifying the functional parents is essential to the development of effective working relationships between the family and school personnel. Some families will make this easy by coming in and clarifying the situation right away.

We approached the principal on the school tour and said, "We are lesbians and this is our daughter Sarah. We chose to have her through donor insemination with an anonymous donor, so she has no father. We talk about it openly in the family and Sarah can answer people's questions. Can you comfortably respect us as a family in your school?" (A lesbian mother, Martin interview, 1998a)

It is most advantageous for the child, the family, and the entire school community when a family chooses to be completely open with everyone about having sexual minority parents. Among its many benefits, openness about the nature of the child's family facilitates free discussion in the classroom about family diversity, encourages children to address a broad range of issues of difference and tolerance, furthers the social integration of a child with sexual minority parents, allows educational and mental health professionals to make the best possible referrals for a given family with sexual minority parents, permits the whole school community to understand the nature of and offer

support in a family crisis and elicits the activities of all parents and school personnel who wish to support and promote diversity. While openness will not eliminate discrimination and may even invite acts of harassment or negativity, visibility will create open channels of communication with which to respond to any incident.

Unfortunately, however, most families choose not to be so open for a variety of reasons. Some feel that their children's origins are private and not relevant to school concerns. Some live in fear that disclosure might affect a child custody dispute. Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender parents are still at great risk for losing custody of their children simply because of their sexual orientation (Pollack, 1995), and may be in danger of or have fear of relatives and others using that information against them (Caspar, Schultz, Wickens, 1992; Goodman, 1996). Others are closeted at their jobs and in their neighborhoods, fearing real discrimination if exposed (Pollack, 1995). In most places sexual minority people are not protected in employment or housing and can lose their jobs and homes because of their sexual orientation (Pollack, 1995). Sometimes a child with special needs requires schooling in a particularly conservative school environment or geographic area, causing the family to choose nondisclosure in the interests of the child's and family's safety from homophobic harassment. Still other families have acclimated to a homophobic society by generally keeping as low a profile as possible, in fear of the more subtle forms of discrimination and social rejection. They may be concerned that children will not want to play at their house or that the children's parents will not permit them, that their child will be excluded from invitations like birthday parties and sleep overs, that there will be teasing comments made in the schoolyard, etc. If the language used in school brochures and orientation meetings omits any recognition of family diversity, then these families may conclude that they would not be welcome or acknowledged. Furthermore, in many families the children themselves, especially beginning with the middle school years, may request that their parents not disclose the family composition because of discomfort in peer relations. In addition, there are many families who do not identify their true family constellation because they themselves work on heterosexist definitions of family and may fail to recognize that the biological mother's partner, for example, has a full parenting role and

is, therefore, a parent and family member (Martin, 1998a). Instead, they may identify her as a family friend even within the family and may represent her to outsiders as a friend or omit mention of her altogether, which obscures her role in relation to the child.

Families who do not disclose that they are sexual minority-parented are mostly likely to present themselves as if they were heterosexually parented families and remain invisible in the system (Martin, 1998b). For example, they may introduce the child's biological father and mother to the school system, ignoring current same-sex partners.

Linda never came with me to parent teacher conferences because we didn't want to have to explain why my "boarder" was interested in Julie's grades. Also, Julie's father would come, so we just looked like your regular divorced family. It's been easier to leave it at that. (A lesbian mother, Martin interview, 1998a)

Similarly, a transgender parent may stay away from the child's school altogether, to avoid the issue completely:

Even though I was open with all our neighbors about my sex change, I stayed away from Teagan's school because I thought it would be easier. (A transgender parent, Martin interview, 1998a)

In addition, a single sexual minority parent can remain invisible by saying nothing and allowing school personnel to presume heterosexuality. It may, therefore, become the school's task to encourage more complete and accurate disclosure.

### **Obstacles to Serving Sexual Minority-Parented Families' Needs**

Once a family with sexual minority parents is known to the school, their needs must be understood and served. There are numerous obstacles, however, to achieving these objectives. They roughly break down into 11 categories.

1. One significant obstacle will come from the homophobic prejudices or religious beliefs of individual school professionals and administrators (Ryan, 1998). Those school personnel who believe that same-gender relationships are sinful or repugnant may not provide the atmosphere of acceptance that these families need.

Supposing you have on your faculty somebody who's a born again Christian,

or who is a staunch Roman Catholic. You have to be very straightforward about knowing that there may be conflict and fear. And how do you, um, wiggle that into the fact that you have a child who also deserves to be treated fairly and have a good education? (A school administrator, Ryan, 1998)

An atmosphere in which all views are respected will help to identify those professionals who hold negative views about same-gender relationships and help them avoid positions of conflict with respect to sexual minority-parented families.

2. In addition to directly negative beliefs about homosexuality, there are the heterosexist assumptions of most people that create a belief in the inferiority of such families (Hulsebosch & Koerner, 1996; Martin, 1993). This may be expressed as a general unease with the idea of sexual minority persons raising children as subtle "concerns" about whether these children are suffering or simply as unawareness that the "Leave it to Beaver" family is being used as a standard.

I am in favor of gay rights, you know, but I can't help thinking that these children would have a better life in a normal family. (A teacher's comment in a workshop, Martin, 1998a)

Such concerns reflect a lack of experience with sexual minority-parented families and a lack of familiarity with the research on children's well-being in them (Patterson, 1992). Viewpoints such as this may negatively impact on the way a professional works with a sexual minority-parented family.

3. Paradoxically, the authors have observed in their work with school professionals that another barrier to serving these families is the desire to appear to be liberal-minded, because it results in an unwillingness to acknowledge views that may be biased. As it becomes politically correct to demonstrate acceptance for sexual orientation diversity, many people who have prejudices are unwilling to reveal them, thereby missing opportunities for education that could raise consciousness. They may oppose efforts at integrating sexual minority parents into the school's policies without openly discussing why.

Oh, this school is so liberal that we have no problem about gay parents. (A teacher in a workshop, Martin, 1998a)

This well-meaning teacher has quickly glossed over the inevitable complexity and attendant

discomfort that any school has integrating new perspectives and curricula on sexual minority-parented families. An atmosphere that welcomes all views, encourages free expression safely, without judgment, and acknowledges that any school community is a work in progress with respect to these issues will help to facilitate open discussion (Ryan, 1998).

4. A powerful source of resistance to embracing families with sexual minority parents comes from people's anxiety about and investment in male and female gender role behavior (Lewin & Lyons, 1982). The notion that persons in same-gender relationships are not adequately behaving in accordance with their gender role (i.e., that lesbians are not feminine or that gay men are not "real" men) and the attendant concerns that their children will be insufficiently masculine or feminine may pose a difficulty in working with these families.

5. In addition, many people demonstrate considerable discomfort encountering challenges to the notion that gender comes in only two categories (Feinberg, 1996; Garber, 1992). Transgendered people, encompassing a very diverse group of those for whom two mutually exclusive gender categories have proven insufficient, are only just now becoming visible and beginning to tell their stories. Most people have had little opportunity to expand their awareness of gender issues. Our cultural anxiety about violating gender norms is significant and can be a huge barrier to accepting differences. In fact, even those people who have become completely comfortable with the idea that gays and lesbians can parent as well as heterosexuals can find the notion of a parent who has crossed gender lines deeply distressing.

6. A further pervasive obstacle to supporting sexual minority parents in the school system is the popular misconception that a same-sex sexual orientation is more sexually focused than a heterosexual orientation and that, therefore, talking about sexual minority people means talking about sexual material that is embarrassing, private, or inappropriate to children (Caspar, Schultz, & Wickens, 1992; Martin, 1998a). Some school personnel will view sexual orientation as a "private" issue that is inappropriate to discuss, confusing the notion of sexual behavior, which should indeed be private, from sexual orientation, which for heterosexuals is in complete public view. However unwittingly, such school professionals may mistakenly regard ordinary openness,

including common expressions of affection between same-sex partners as inappropriate sexual behavior. Some parents have had their openness described as “flaunting” and have been discouraged from telling people about their sexual orientation (Ryan, 1998). Sometimes, such discouragement is framed as in the child’s best interests.

The teacher said that while she had no problem with us she was sure there were parents in the school who could make trouble and it would be better for our child if we kept it quiet. (A lesbian mother, Martin interview, 1998a)

We were told that we were welcome in the school, but we should be “discreet” and not hold hands at school events because my son might get teased. (A gay father, Martin interview, 1998a)

7. Teachers and other school professionals also may fear that if they open up discussion of sexual orientation issues they will be asked questions about explicit sexual behaviors they are not equipped to handle. The reality is that there is no more need to discuss details of same-sex sexual acts than there is to discuss details of mixed-sex acts. The issues are family constellation, family relationships, loving partnerships, and the groupings of adults who care for children.

8. Another difficulty in working with sexual minority-parented families arises from the general discomfort people have with discussing something they have never discussed, including not knowing what language to use and being concerned about saying something inadvertently offensive. A child raised by two dads, for example, may have very personal ways of identifying and distinguishing them (e.g., Daddy and Papa, Pa Jim and Pa Dave, etc.). Additionally, transgendered parents may have very personal preferences as to how gender-specific pronouns are used. Ryan (1998) found that sexual minority parents find it difficult when school personnel fail to show interest in knowing the names their child calls them. One teacher, faced with a family of several adults and children at a parent-teacher conference said, “Forgive me for having to ask this, but what exactly is, I mean, who is —?” This teacher should not have had to ask forgiveness, or should the words for the question have been so difficult. She was embarrassed at not knowing something she could not realistically have known. School professionals need to be encouraged through staff discussion and printed material such

as the booklet *Opening Doors: Lesbian and Gay Parents and Schools* (Brickley, Gelnow, Marsh, & Ryan, 1998), to acknowledge what they do not know and ask in a supportive way for accurate information about each person’s relationship to a given child.

9. Serving the needs of families with sexual minority parents also is impeded by the lack of information available to school professionals on sexual minority issues in general and on the needs of these families in particular. Lipkin (1996) noted that teacher ignorance about homosexuality is not surprising because there has been no preparation or training on these issues. It parallels the challenge to school professionals in the 1970s when curricular diversity required the addition of African-American, Asian American, and Hispanic-American materials. There will be a time lag before materials are widely available; however, resources do exist.

10. School personnel are further limited in their ability to address these families’ concerns by their lack of knowledge of or experience with answering questions from heterosexual parents. They may have concerns that taking a gay-affirmative stance will elicit objections from heterosexual parents that they feel unequipped to counter. It can be frightening for a teacher or school psychologist to work with parents who are upset that gay-parented families have been mentioned in class. In addition, school personnel also are likely to lack knowledge of and experience with discussing these issues with children in the classroom or in counseling situations.

11. Finally, school professionals may be concerned with violating administration policy and whether the administration will support their actions. It is risky for school personnel to take a proactively affirmative stance toward families with sexual minority parents if they believe that their administration will not get involved when objection arises from other parents. Sears (1996) noted that administrators often

acquiesce to a scissors-and-paste mentality of curriculum development in which only the most mundane, least controversial material survive the scrutiny of self-appointed moral vigilantes or the self-censorship of timid school officials. (p. 208)

A teacher or school psychologist can only be effective in this with a full, openly discussed, preferably, written policy of support from the administration.

### **Addressing the Needs of Families with Sexual Minority Parents**

Addressing these obstacles will require a comprehensive effort by the entire school community. The six suggestions represent various means by which the needs of sexual minority-parented families can be met.

1. One important means of addressing the issues is through anti-bias training for school professionals. Such training should create an atmosphere in which prejudices can be acknowledged and addressed. Those professionals whose religious beliefs preclude their support of the idea of sexual minority parenting could be respectfully identified. They can then be encouraged to separate their personal beliefs from the needs of a given family or to excuse themselves, if necessary, from making decisions for a family that might reflect their bias. As one school administrator (Ryan, 1998) stated:

Your humanity should never be in question, obviously, but there are some religious convictions that fly in the face of single gender relationships that are very hard to erode. As a school leader you have to be open about this sources of tension and people just have to be able to be heard and respected for that. (p. 113)

Besides identifying existing homophobic and homonegative prejudices, the aim of anti-bias training would be to challenge those prejudices with educational and experiential material that could lead to greater understanding of sexual minority persons in general.

2. In addition to anti-bias training, school professionals need specific education in the unique and complicated issues facing these families with respect to legal parenthood and custody, societal homophobia and heterosexism, the difficulties they may have interacting with their extended families, workplaces, health care suppliers, religious institutions, etc., the unique internal dynamics that may arise in families facing such difficulties as well as the particular strengths such families may have to offer in their diversity and their societal vantage point (Martin, 1998a). Lipkin (1996) noted, "If educators attempt to bring about change without proper training, there is a great risk of failure. The least homophobic teacher may be incapable of answering accurately the most basic questions about homosexuality" (p. 56) and, by extension, about sexual minority parenting. Furthermore, the education of school

professionals on this topic should take the form of a "sustained and serious academic discourse within the disciplines of the school" (Lipkin, 1996, p. 56), recognizing that our understanding of these issues will of necessity be changing as society changes and new research comes to light.

3. An important factor in serving families with sexual minority parents is the writing, dissemination, and discussion of administrative policy on issues of gender, sexual orientation, and diverse family constellations. This assures all professionals that they will receive support from the administration for handling in an affirmative way with issues of sexual minority parenting. It also lets all parents in the school community know where the school stands on these issues.

In developing official policies about sexual minority-parented families, it is useful to remember that heterosexually parented families enjoy complete openness about their family constellations, and that sexual minority parents who are willing to be open can be similarly supported and encouraged to do so in all arenas including the classroom, the administration, parent associations, special projects and committees, the larger community or neighborhood, and even the media. If members of the school community express discomfort about an affirmative policy with respect to sexual minority issues, then official policy can be used to emphasize the school's support for diversity and willingness to address objections on a case-by-case basis. School personnel are helped in this task by a policy that clearly states the school's intention to prevent and to not tolerate any destructive or harmful expressions of homonegativity and to work proactively to promote tolerance and understanding. A parent in Ryan's (1998) study noted:

At our school we suspend students for racial slurs, but we do not for gay or lesbian slurs. Leadership can no longer tolerate words like "fag." You have to make a commitment to these families—a commitment [where] you feel comfortable intervening. (p. 113)

Note also that homophobic insults affect heterosexual children by intimidating them into or out of certain behaviors for fear of being called faggots (Brickley, Gelnaw, Marsh, & Ryan, 1998; Pharr, 1988). Girls may be pressured into unwanted sexual activity with boys to counter accusations of lesbianism (Pharr, 1988). When policies that welcome and affirm diversity with

respect to family constellation, sexual orientation, and gender identity are made clear and public, all members of a school community become less vulnerable to pressure from homophobic comments and actions.

4. In addition to raising consciousness, educating about sexual minority-parented families, and setting school policy that affirms diversity, school personnel will need training in how to talk about these issues to children. Gelnaw, Brickley, Derman-Sparks, Carter, and Wardle (1996) addressed the need for school personnel to become aware of the language they use with respect to family constellation. They note that "Using terms such as your 'real mom or dad' or your 'natural' mom or dad when referring to adopted children's families is confusing and hurtful. Always talking about 'mommies and daddies' as an all-purpose statement about families leaves out a lot of children" (p. 11). Caspar, Schultz, and Wickens (1992) found that school personnel are often uncomfortable using the words "lesbian" and "gay" around children. They went on to assert that "Teachers must know that using these words will not cause homosexuality and that they are not inappropriate words to use with young children" (pp. 132-133). Video materials such as *Both of My Mom's Names Are Judy* (Lesbian and Gay Parents Association San Francisco, 1994) and *It's Elementary*, (Chasnoff & Cohen, 1995) are valuable resources for stimulating discussion and increasing professionals' comfort with the language necessary to address these issues. In addition, Ryan (1998) found that both school personnel and parents suggested with equal passion that training for school personnel should involve sexual minority parents themselves. Whether the parents come from within the school community or are spokespersons for sexual minority parenting outside of the school community, school personnel can benefit from the opportunity to meet them and gain greater insight into their family issues.

5. New curricula will be necessary for teaching family issues that include education on family diversity and sexual orientation beginning as early as pre-kindergarten. Some schools already use curricula that address a variety of prejudices such as that devised by Derman-Sparks (1989), though these often do not include mention of sexual minority issues. Prince (1996) noted that

When administrators look at the issue of

gay and lesbian curriculum inclusion, their usual response is either to ignore the issue and hope that it will fade away or to relegate the issue to the health or sex education curriculum. (p. 30)

Similarly, Sears (1996) stated that "The integration of lesbian, gay, and bisexual topics or persons in the school curriculum appears too radical for many educators" (p. 208). Progress on this issue will be made one school at a time. As new curriculum materials are being developed that include sexual minority family issues, each school has the opportunity to adopt them and put them into active use. In so doing it becomes a laboratory for the study of tolerance training on these issues, and a role model for change toward the full acceptance and inclusion of all people.

6. Finally, it is important that ongoing open discussion be maintained among professionals and between professionals and the community of school parents, so that anxieties, discomforts, and concerns can be voiced and addressed directly. Active liaison with organizations serving sexual minority parents (see Table 1) will help to keep the dialogue open as well as keep the school community updated on important resources available. In addition, knowledge of these organizations allows school personnel to refer parents to sources of support and community outside of school. The greater the support and the more active and visible the dialogue on these issues, the greater the likelihood that sexual minority-parented families will feel safe enough to be completely open. Sears (1996) found that "Those fathers and mothers who were most publicly 'out' were most likely to provide a supportive home environment" (p. 195). The benefits of such a supportive home environment, coupled with the safety and supportiveness of the school, accrue not just to children with sexual minority parents but to the rest of the school community as well.

### Additional Recommendations

There are five additional recommendations that school officials should consider.

1. The school environment can help by using inclusive language and making direct statements of nondiscrimination that invite sexual minority parents to feel safe enough to identify themselves. (Language should refrain from using terms like "gay families" or "lesbian families," and, similarly, the term "heterosexual families," but

**Table 1**  
**Organizations Serving Sexual Minority-Parented Families**

Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE) 2300 Market Street, #165 San Francisco, CA 94114 (415) 861-5437 E-mail: colage@colage.org Website: www.colage.org	Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN) 121 West 27th Street, Suite 804 New York NY 10001 (212) 727-0135 E-mail: glsen@glsen.org Website: www.glsen.org
Family Pride Coalition, (formerly GLPCI) PO Box 34337 San Diego, CA 92163 (619) 296-0199 E-mail: admin@familypride.org Website: www.familypride.org	Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) 1101 14th Street NW, Suite 1030 Washington DC 20005 E-mail: info@pflag.org Website: www.pflag.org

rather describe them as “lesbian-parented families” or “heterosexually parented families,” so as not to make unwarranted presumptions about the sexual orientations of the children in those families.)

2. School brochures and information sheets should clearly state that families of all constellations and parents of all sexual orientations are welcomed. Note that this will assist not just sexual minority-parented families, but a variety of nontraditional family constellations as well. All families benefit from acknowledging the range of diversity represented in their school community, which depicts the complexity of the greater society for which the children are being prepared (Hulsebosch & Koerner, 1996).

3. All forms to be completed should abandon the “Mother’s name” “Father’s name” format and replace it with “Parent’s name,” ideally providing space for up to four parents. This allows a gay male couple who co-parent with a lesbian couple in a different household, for example, to represent adequately their family.

4. In addition, school interviews or information forms should ask the question, “Is there anyone else involved in your child’s life on a regular basis who assumes a role similar to that of a parent?” This invites a family to give accurate information about the adults who are caring for the child, even when they choose not to use the term “parent” for all of the relevant caregivers. A family welcomed in this manner may still choose to remain invisible for various reasons, but, by and large, the likelihood that they will identify themselves to someone at the school is greatly increased.

5. School professionals should be aware that families may have very different comfort

levels about disclosure. They may be especially concerned that the information not be shared with an employer, with other parents in the school who might react negatively, or with an ex-spouse who might bring a custody action. School personnel can help parents understand that the professional team responsible for their child (teacher, guidance counselor, psychologist, administrator, etc.) must be fully informed and free to discuss the relevant information about the child’s family with each other, while also agreeing to keep confidentiality with respect to the larger school community, so that other teachers and parents are not told. It would be helpful if the family’s reasons for requesting confidentiality are thoroughly discussed and understood. It may be helpful to remind parents that the price of keeping secrets is often a loss of a sense of belonging fully to the school community, which must be weighed against other potentially negative consequences of disclosure.

### **The Path of Change**

The suggestions and recommendations of this article may seem unrealistic to many school professionals. Not all school systems are prepared to meet the challenges of nurturing a positive partnership with sexual minority-parented families. While the most important first step is the institution of a district-wide policy affirming these families, for schools in districts that lack such a policy, a good beginning can be made with school wide diversity awareness programs. Nevertheless, there are schools that actively seek to create a welcoming, informed, and proactively supportive environment for sexual minority-headed families. They are doing so against the

backdrop of controversy and are encountering the conflict inherent in a process of change. Spring (1988) observed that "Conflict occurs as different groups attempt to have the educational system serve their own interests and ideologies" (p. 23). The proponents of traditional concepts of family are understandably invested in an educational system that continues to stigmatize same gender relationships and the family structures that are built around them. As our understanding of human society increases, however, more school professionals are coming to realize that diversity, while not necessarily easy to comprehend at first, is one of our greatest educational strengths. Families with sexual minority parents provide us with a challenge to meet the educational needs of all our children.

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