

NEA: Gay and Lesbian Shift?

by Warren Throckmorton, P.h.D.

A recent decision by The National Education Association (NEA) may signal a shift in the organization's stance on gay and lesbian issues. Not long ago, the NEA quietly but officially recognized the formation of an Ex-Gay Educators' Caucus, thus acknowledging a group of educators who disagree with NEA publications that state homosexuality is a trait that cannot be changed.

Over the last several years, the NEA has promoted within the schools the concept that homosexuality should be promoted as an alternative form of sexuality despite the objections of many parents and religious groups. The teacher's group has not been receptive to suggestions that some gays and lesbians have changed their sexual orientation to become former homosexuals, or "ex-gays." The recognition of the Ex-Gay Educators' Caucus may point to a willingness to consider the concerns of conservative educators and parents relating to sexual education materials in the schools.

According to NEA procedures, caucuses are approved for the purpose of influencing NEA policy. They are groups of people who share similar concerns and by joining, signal their interest in achieving caucus objectives. One of the largest caucuses in the NEA is the Gay and Lesbian Issues Caucus. Through their influence, the NEA has moved in a decidedly leftward position on matters of sexual education and sexual orientation. Specifically, the NEA was party to the creation and dissemination of the "Just The Facts About Sexual Orientation" pamphlet. This document is sharply critical of programs that support sexual orientation change, thus even questioning the existence of ex-gays.

According to Jeralee Smith, caucus chair, the Ex-Gay Educators' Caucus is entitled to apply for exhibit space at this summer's NEA convention in Washington, DC. Ms. Smith intends to apply but is cautious in predicting how much impact the group can have. According to Ms. Smith: "We can apply to exhibit but the materials we present must be approved in advance by the NEA." And what does the

caucus want school children and other teachers to know? For one thing, promoting gay, lesbian or bisexual identification in middle or high school is not the role of the school. If students are presented with information concerning gay identification, they also should be presented with models of those who have left homosexuality as well. Given the NEA's cold reception to other groups with this message, it remains to be seen if the NEA's recognition of the caucus signals a true willingness to give ex-gays freedom to express their message.

Here's a more cynical scenario. By recognizing the Ex-Gay Educators' Caucus, the NEA is attempting to head off a public relations problem during its annual convention heading into the nation's capital during an election year. How so? The NEA is still a party to a discrimination complaint brought by the Parents and Friends of Ex-gays (PFOX) group over the NEA's refusal to allow PFOX to exhibit at last summer's convention. The complaint was made in Washington, DC and given the pace of deliberations by the DC Human Rights Commission may not be decided until this summer, about the time of the annual convention.

I really hope I am wrong. For the sake of teachers and school children, I hope the NEA leadership is going to be more open to the message of the Ex-Gay Educators' Caucus.

So will the group fail the diversity test again? Or has the NEA gotten one right for a change?

For more information concerning the Ex-Gay Educators' Caucus, go to <http://www.nea-exgay.org> or call 888-532-4678 and leave name and number. You need to be an NEA member to join but you do not have to be ex-gay.

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Update on the NEA

Kathleen Lyons, NEA spokesperson, said caucuses are groups of people that lobby the NEA to make policy changes. "We regard it as their right to lobby the NEA," Ms. Lyons explained. Jeralee Smith, chair of the caucus, said the group wants to educate the NEA concerning the needs of ex-gay students and teachers. "We feel that this group can help educate the NEA concerning the existence of former homosexuals," Smith noted.

Regarding NEA policies on sexual orientation, Ms. Lyons commented that the recognition of the ex-gay group does not mean that the NEA endorses the viewpoint of the caucus. The NEA has promoted the booklet, "Just The Facts About Sexual Orientation" which argues against the possibility of sexual orientation change. According to Ms. Lyons, "We don't endorse the view [of the Ex-Gay Caucus] but we recognize their right to lobby the NEA concerning their views."

Ms. Smith said that the caucus plans to apply for exhibit space at this summer's NEA convention in Washington, DC as a means of furthering the mission of the new group. The Ex-Gay Educators' Caucus website is <http://www.nea-exgay.org>.