

Nightmare at Franklin

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Emer O'Shea knew something was wrong the minute she picked up her daughter from Franklin Elementary School. The third -grader was normally very perky upon seeing her mother and new baby sister, but this time she glanced at her mother without indicating what was wrong, except to say that the school's social worker had visited the class.

But Emer soon heard from another parent about what had happened in her daughter's class that day, and she was both stunned and mortified. The next day her young daughter finally opened up with a question that would baffle most parents of an 8-year-old child, "Mommy, is it possible for a man to have an operation to become a woman?"

Transgenders and transvestites. These were the topics that a staff member at Franklin School in West Newton chose to teach to a class of third -grade children. The school's social worker described to the children that some men like to dress up as women, and yes, some men even have operations to change into women.

The opportunity for this "teachable moment" - the kind that Superintendent Jeff Young likes to portray as merely responding to some child's "random questioning" - occurred when the social worker was describing various families outside of the traditional mommy -and-daddy norm and showed the class a picture of a woman with two children, asking what they saw in the picture.

A child then raised his hand to tell her (are you sitting sit down for this?) that he thought the picture was of a man who had a sex change operation and was now a woman. Apparently, the child's own father was undergoing such an operation (which he/she has since completed).

The social worker then elaborated on this "teachable moment." But this wasn't just any social worker employed by the Newton Public Schools. This was Laura Perkins, former board member of GLSEN, the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network; or rather, "Laura Perkins, MSW, Franklin School and the Newton Early Childhood Program," according to the GLSEN

Boston Conference, where she hosted a seminar in which the "Rationale for integrating GLBT (Gay Lesbian Bisexual Transgender) issues in the early elementary years will be presented" and "classroom lessons demonstrated."

As a result of this particular "classroom lesson," Emer's daughter was petrified. For an 8-year-old accustomed to a child's world of Santa Claus, the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny, the little girl had nightmares, and explained to her mother she was scared that her baby sister could turn into a boy.

So Emer did what any normal responsible parent would do - she demanded an explanation from the principal, Cynthia Marchand. She and several other parents from this class met with the principal who, according to Emer, responded defensively and fully backed her staff member.

Emer then went to Superintendent's Young's office with her concerns. She handed Mr. Young a written description of what happened, whereupon the superintendent promised to respond to her soon. He didn't. So after three weeks, she called to make an appointment. As Emer described it, Mr. Young remarked that the Parental Consent Law didn't apply to this situation because, he claimed, the topic of discussion was not planned for. He concluded that it was really just "a teachable moment." When I asked the superintendent via e-mail if it is the policy of the Newton schools to teach 8-year-old children about sex change operations, he responded "No").

"Arrogant" is how Emer described the superintendent's demeanor towards her. He declined to shake her hand at the meeting's end, and didn't even bother to acknowledge the baby she was holding.

The superintendent wants us to believe that just because the class was taught by a GLSEN activist who has specialized in "integrating GLBT issues in the elementary years" and even though the principal, social worker and probably half the school knew that there was a child in that very class who just happened to have a father who was undergoing a sex change operation, there is no evidence that this was planned, or rather, set up. So, in Mr. Young's convoluted logic, the state law which mandates that parents must be informed whenever anything of a sexual nature occurs in the classroom did not apply here.

It just happened, you see. A mere coincidence. Just like a few years before when a Burr School first-grade teacher chose to out himself to his first-grade class. This was a hide-from-the-media moment for the superintendent, since it was later revealed in Bay Windows, the Boston gay weekly, that the teacher had discussed this probable scenario with his principal well in advance of his proclamation to his class of 6-year-olds.

Predictably, Emer got nowhere with the school administration. She went through the typical phases that any parent who raises these issues is forced to endure. The stalling, ignoring, belittling. The attempts to isolate her, put her on the defensive, make her feel like the aggressor - the intolerant, unsympathetic, backward parent: common tactics to make parents like Emer go away. After all, Mr. Young and his cohorts now have years of experience dealing with such parents.

But Emer would not go away.

Fed up at the lack of response from the school, she raised the issue in front of a large audience of staff and parents at Franklin's curriculum night. "Can we see the social worker's curriculum for this year, as last year there was inappropriate information given to the elementary-age children?" she publicly asked Cynthia Marchand. In other words, could the principal guarantee that staff members would not teach the young children about men having sex change operations?

To which the principal responded that she would speak to Emer in private about it (a preferred tactic by Newton administrators). Emer would not back down; after 10 months of being ignored she demanded an answer right then and there. But the principal wouldn't budge.

As Emer described it, afterwards Mrs. Marchand coaxed her into her office, whereupon she loudly chastised Emer for "her inappropriate behavior." She berated Emer because (you'd better sit down again for this) the Franklin School father who had a sex change operation and was now a "woman" had been sitting in the audience with his wife (they're still married) when Emer broached this highly sensitive topic.

"Cindy, stop shouting at me!" Emer responded to her child's principal. (My calls to the principal and social worker for comment were not returned, but Mr. Young did respond by e-mail: "No," the social worker and principal

would not be suspended or reprimanded, he wrote. He ducked my question as to whether or not he intended to apologize to Mrs. O'Shea, stating that he and other staff had already "spoken with the parent already.")

Emer had enough. She decided to pull her daughter out of the Newton Public Schools and, at great expense, send her to a private school. (Mr. Young again responded "No" when I asked if the school department would be paying for the child's private school tuition). A few days later, she walked into the Franklin office once again, this time with her now fourth-grade daughter and infant baby to inform the principal and secretary that her child would no longer be attending Franklin School. "Good," Mrs. Marchand allegedly responded, in the presence of Emer, the secretary, a teacher and Emer's daughter. The principal then turned and walked away.

Think of that. Think real hard.