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MAINE SOUTH HIGH SCHOOL

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The Parent Trap

Section: On Society

David and Tonia Parker of Lexington, Mass., saw a red flag when their son came home from kindergarten last January with a "diversity book bag" that included *Who's in a Family*, a book promoting acceptance of gay marriage. The Parkers thought it was their right, as **parents**, to decide when and how to introduce their son to the issue of homosexuality. The Parkers believed the public school, Estabrook, is right to be teaching tolerance of gays but wrong in raising the subject in kindergarten and then indoctrinating 5-year-olds on gay marriage. Tonia Parker says gay **parents** are allowed to come into class and read their material to a captive audience of the very young.

The Parkers did not attack the "diversity book bag" program. They requested notification of any future school discussions of homosexuality so they could have their son opt out. They pointed to a state law defending the opt-out right of **parents**. The school argued that the law pertained to sex education, not discussion of family forms. In a series of E-mails, the school agreed to a meeting, where the Parkers thought an accommodation would be offered. When the school took a hard-nosed stance instead, David Parker refused to leave school property. He was arrested, led off to jail in handcuffs, then allowed out on bail. His trial for trespassing has been delayed for months. A restraining order, still in effect, bans him from the school and its grounds. He cannot attend meetings of the school committee or pick up his son after class. He cannot even vote, since the school is his voting site. The American Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts said the school is on sound legal ground (no surprise there), arguing that "public education would grind to a halt if **parents** had the right to demand classes tailored to each child based on the **parent's** moral views."

Occasionally, the school and its anti-bias committee, with strong gay membership, have argued that the book bag program merely acknowledged the plain fact of same-sex marriages. But the committee's website was more candid, stating that the book bags are intended "to build an atmosphere of tolerance and respect" for "family structure diversity." The site says children "have the option to bring home a diversity book bag," and the school says it gave ample notice to **parents**. But Tonia Parker says she carefully files every notice and never received one on the book bag. The school said the book bag was on display at back-to-school night. Tonia Parker says she attended that event but was never told about the bag. Brian Camenker, head of the pro-family group Article 8 Alliance, which opposes gay marriage, says the diversity bag was there but in an inconspicuous place with no indication of what was in it. Another couple, the Parkers say, knew about the book bag and told the school not to send it, but their child was sent home with it anyway. That family has since left Lexington.

"Left-wing town." The strongly liberal Boston Globe offered some questionable reporting on the controversy. In one report last May, it blandly referred to *Who's in a Family* as "a book that depicts a same-sex couple." Another report quoted a smug educational bureaucrat comparing the Parkers' argument to that of a **parent** who wanted James and the Giant Peach removed from a school. But the dispute isn't about censorship, oversensitive **parents**, or even gay marriage. The Parkers have made no antigay statements and have kept their argument tightly focused on parental rights to allow their children to opt out on issues of sexuality and lessons that implicitly approve gay marriage. Parker refuses to plea-bargain on trespassing until the school lifts its restraining order. The Parkers have assembled a strong legal team to handle the criminal case and a civil suit they plan to file against the school system.

Camenker, who wrote the state opt-out law 10 years ago, says there is no doubt that Paul Ash, Lexington superintendent of schools, has misconstrued it. Even if the law didn't exist, he says, it's mind-boggling that the school would trample parental rights by denying a simple opt-out. Lexington is "an incredibly left-wing town" strongly opposed to the Parkers, he says, but in the rest of the state, maybe 80 to 90 percent of the people who know about the case support the Parkers.

One problem is that gay activists tend to blur the line between tolerance, which the vast majority of Americans favor, and approval of homosexuality, which meets significantly greater resistance. This happens often as lessons of approval are smuggled into anti-bias programs. Another problem is an older one: Public school systems often view **parents** not as allies but as annoying obstacles to be overcome. In this case, as the Parkers' argument goes national, the obstacles stand a darned good chance of winning.

PHOTO (COLOR)

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By John Leo

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