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[Home Page](#) [All Pages](#) [Top of This Page](#) [Site Search](#)

GAY/STRAIGHT ALLIANCE CLUBS - UNDERSTANDING OUR DIFFERENCES

Opinion Editorial By Chief Commissioner Mary-Woo Sims

April 3, 2000

Over the last few weeks there has been lots of debate about the B.C. Teachers Federation's motion supporting gay/straight alliances in B.C. schools. As the chief commissioner of the BC Human Rights Commission I would like to share a few thoughts on this issue.

What are gay/straight alliance clubs? Gay/straight alliances are like other clubs that already exist in schools. They provide an opportunity for young gay and lesbian students and their straight allies, who share many common and different interests, to meet in a safe and supportive environment to talk about things that are important to them. Discussions between young people help to promote a better understanding, respect and acceptance of their differences.

At the root of this debate is society's tolerance and acceptance of our differences. Instead of respecting, understanding and at a minimum, tolerating our differences, we let them divide and hurt us. It has been rightly pointed out that kids get teased about many things in schools, including their size, their clothing or how smart they are. This argument has been used to defend the position that we should not have separate clubs focusing on homosexuality. Rather, the argument goes, we should have general clubs that deal with anti-bullying or anti-harassment.

Yes, it is important that we address bullying and harassment. I encourage and support the efforts being undertaken to deal with these issues.

However, it is critical that marginalized youth, such as gays and lesbians or visible minorities, have places they can go where they feel safe and comfortable. Unfortunately, we are not in a place in society where it is safe to be gay or lesbian. Police records indicate that in 1998 the greatest number

of reported incidents of hate crime and activity were against gay men. In a recent public opinion survey conducted by the commission, most British Columbians said that they had the least tolerance for people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students face isolation, harassment, intimidation and violence at school. In 1999 the McCreary Centre Society released the results of a survey, Being Out - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in B.C.: an Adolescent Health Survey. The McCreary Centre Society is a non-profit organization committed to improving the health of B.C. youth through research, information and community-based participation projects. The centre's survey showed that 37 per cent of gay and lesbian youth feel like outsiders at school. Two-thirds often hear homophobic remarks made by other students at school. Even more upsetting, the survey reports that nearly one in five lesbian and gay youth have been physically assaulted at school in the past year.

This study also found that gay and lesbian youth attempt suicide at a far higher rate than other students. The reason gay or lesbian youth are at a higher risk of suicide is not inherent in being homosexual: it is the way our society treats homosexuality. Given the experiences of gay, lesbian and transgender youth, is it surprising that some choose suicide as a way out?

We as a society need to do more to make sure discrimination, bullying and harassment are not tolerated in our schools and communities. We need to make sure our young people know there are options other than ending their lives for dealing with their pain and suffering. Gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students need to know they have other students and teachers they can turn to for support and understanding.

The members of the BCTF have shown great courage in their strong support for gay/straight alliance clubs in schools throughout B.C. Through their support of these clubs, they can only help to create a safer and more accepting school environment for all students.

Let us help our youth to understand and accept differences rather than help them to perpetuate discrimination and intolerance.

[Home Page](#) [All Pages](#) [Top of This Page](#) [Site Search](#)

TRIBUNAL RULING RECOGNIZES OBESITY AS A PHYSICAL DISABILITY

March 28, 2000

VANCOUVER - A decision that Dion Rogal was discriminated against because of his size and weight is a step in the right direction, but does not go far enough to protect groups against whom widespread bias is shown, the BC Human Rights Commission said today.

In March 1994, Rogal applied for a job as a carnival worker with West Coast Amusements Ltd. He is 6'1" and weighed 350 pounds at that time. He was interviewed and hired over the phone. He gave his height and weight and was told that this was not a problem. When Rogal arrived in Vancouver from Saskatchewan to begin work, Bert Dalgliesh, an independent contractor with West Coast Amusements, told him that he was "too big and too heavy" for the carnival's "fast-paced lifestyle."