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## **Countering the Backlash Against Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students, Families, and Staff in Minnesota Schools**

***A Primer on the Minnesota Family Institute's  
Anti-LGBT Agenda for Public Education***

***Plus: Steps Toward Stopping the Backlash***

Making sure our schools are safe and welcoming for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender persons is vital to fulfilling public education's mandate to create learning environments where all students thrive. Unfortunately, efforts to end discrimination, harassment, and marginalization of LGBT people can be hampered by anti-LGBT reactionaries who have grown increasingly sophisticated in their methods.

The Minnesota Family Institute's "S.O.S." program (Save Our Students: Rescuing Our Youth from Sexual Confusion) is a well-funded, well-organized, and well-attended seminar which purports to educate parents about homosexuality. S.O.S. also trains parents to obstruct efforts to create public schools that welcome LGBT people.

The Minnesota Family Institute website offers a taste of their alarmist rhetoric:

"S.O.S. is a seminar designed in response to the numerous calls from parents concerned that their authority is being undermined. . . . Under the guise of safety and diversity, [gay] activists are introducing children as young as first grade to sexual lifestyles that are unhealthy and dangerous. These kids are encouraged to accept and celebrate perversity even before they have an understanding of normal sexuality."

In 2004 and 2005, S.O.S. seminars were held in the Twin Cities suburbs of Blaine, Crystal, Elk River, Fridley, Maplewood, Shorewood, and Wayzata, as well as Cannon Falls, Detroit Lakes, Grand Rapids, and Rochester in Greater Minnesota. Along with approximately 100 other adults, a PFLAG member attended the S.O.S seminar held on Saturday morning, January 24, 2004, at Redeemer Lutheran Church in Wayzata. For the \$15 registration fee, seminar participants received a three-ring binder with 75 pages of material.

Our *Primer on Countering Anti-LGBT Backlash in MN Schools* offers a behind-the-scenes look at what happens at an S.O.S. seminar, along with strategies that community members can use to successfully counteract anti-LGBT methods.

## What Happens at a Minnesota Family Institute “Save Our Students” Seminar?

The Minnesota Family Institute’s S.O.S. seminar is a carefully scripted anti-LGBT presentation that allows no discussion. The January 2004 seminar offered a good overview of the type of material an attendee can expect to encounter.

### ***Introduction to the “Homosexual Agenda” in the Schools***

Barb Anderson, a public school teacher and co-developer of S.O.S., identified the SEED (Seeking Educational Equity and Diversity) teacher training program as a conduit for gay activists to enter school systems, undermine parental authority, and promote Gay-Straight Alliance student clubs which she alleged are, in effect, sex clubs.

### ***The “Science” of Reparative Therapy***

In a videotaped talk, ex-gay Karen Hart, a licensed psychologist from northern Minnesota and a member of the National Association for Research and Therapy of Homosexuality (NARTH), drew on the work of Joe and Linda Ames Nicolosi to explain same-sex attraction as developmental, rather than innate. Lesbians are said to have had poor relationships with their mothers, experienced sexual abuse, and grown up in homes where males are viewed as predatory. Similarly, the theory claims that due to poor relationships with their fathers and male peer group, male “pre-homosexual” youth are vulnerable to the advances of older gays. Because homosexuality is seen as preventable, Hart argued that homosexuals deserve access to reorientation therapy: To not provide such access was presented as a violation of their rights.

### ***Personal Testimonial from an Ex-gay***

Ex-gay Kevin Petersen, a married actor with three children, presented himself as having fit the supposed profile of a young man predisposed to homosexuality. Peterson said he now recognizes that he had been “recruited” into homosexuality, a technique that he in turn later practiced: “When I was an activist, I recognized how important it was to get to the teens. . . we were recruiting those who already had the attraction into what I now call a ‘deathstyle.’”

### ***Action Steps Recommended for S.O.S. Attendees***

Attendees were encouraged to take the following action steps and report back to the Minnesota Family Institute.

1. *Meet with like-minded parents to form a parents’ rights committee.* Attendees could fill out a form to be put in touch with other parents in their community.
2. *Educate yourself on the topic of homosexuality and the gay agenda.* Attendees watched a video by the Christian ministry Mission: America, *No Tolerance for Truth: What Our Children Are Learning About Homosexuality*. A Family First publication, “A Parent’s Manual to the Homosexual Agenda in Public Education” was also recommended.
3. *Know your legal rights.* The manual presented to all attendees contains a misleading legal overview. For accurate information, download the *LGBT Policy Checklist for Minnesota School Districts* at [www.pflagtc.org](http://www.pflagtc.org). For specific questions, call OutFront MN in the Twin Cities at 612-822-0127, ext. 230; statewide call 800-800-0350, ext. 230.
4. *Tour your school for visual clues of the “gay agenda” and request that they be removed. Review the selection of books, posters, and materials in the school library and school counselor’s office.* Participants were encouraged to ask their school to order pamphlets from Eagles’ Wings, a local affiliate of the Christian ex-gay ministry Exodus, “so that sexually confused youth can have access to the truth and get help.”
5. *Write letters to the editor in your local papers.*

### ***Dealing with School Boards and Superintendents***

A Minnetonka school board member suggested locating a friendly “sponsor” (such as himself) to raise objections to LGBT issues at board meetings. He recommended explaining that such objections indicate you’re “doing what’s right for kids.”

### ***Audience Questions***

The only opportunity for participation or feedback comes at the end of the seminar when attendees can submit questions on note cards for the seminar leaders to answer if they so choose.

## What Strategies Underlie the “Save Our Students” Seminar?

### ***The message does not appear hateful, but seemingly compassionate.***

Perhaps the most disorienting aspect of S.O.S. is its seemingly kindhearted stance. Seminar participants are told that a “pre-homosexual” student should not be shunned or ridiculed, as this will only drive the young person toward homosexuality. According to Anderson, “What we need to get across is that the loving, caring response to students with same-sex attractions is to show them there is a way out of these feelings that are unnatural.”

### ***Anti-LGBT arguments appear to be backed by science.***

The case for dealing openly and respectfully with LGBT issues in public education rests on an understanding that sexual orientation and gender identity are inborn; that LGBT people, though a minority, are commonplace; and that widespread discrimination and harassment, if unchecked, can lead to higher rates of suicide and other risky behaviors among LGBT youth. To counter these arguments, the S.O.S. seminar puts forth studies of questionable validity, often published in the scientifically dubious NARTH Bulletin. These studies supposedly show:

- The size of the gay population has been vastly exaggerated;
- Gay teens who attempt suicide are doing so because of other risk factors;
- Mental stress in gays and lesbians is not in response to discrimination because research in the Netherlands, where social stigma is less of a factor, still shows they have a higher rate of mental disorders;
- Surveys of ex-gays show one third are able to overcome homosexuality; reparative therapy raises self-esteem and decreases depression.

### ***Only limited images of LGBT people are presented.***

Ex-gays are the predominant image of LGBT people presented, thus giving credence to the theory that homosexuality is a developmental stage that can be overcome. Other images—drag queens, cross-dressing men, a man holding another man, a gay male teacher coming out to an assembly of young children, and students marching in LGBT Pride parades—are accompanied by a sad shake of the presenter’s head. The implication is clear: such images are scandalous and a negative, anti-LGBT reaction is appropriate.

Images of LGBT people engaged in activities mainstream America would consider wholesome are entirely absent, as are images of LGBT families. Anderson sidestepped a question about the psychological health of children of LGBT parents by emphasizing that these children are deprived of having both a mother and a father.

### ***Groups that support LGBT protections in education are marginalized as extremist fringe groups.***

The presenters monitor LGBT organizations closely and quote published material from national groups such as PFLAG and GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network) as well as local groups District 202 and OutFront Minnesota. The quoted material is framed as scandalous; other times, the organizations are misrepresented. GLSEN, for example, is said to put impressionable young people up in fancy hotels to indoctrinate them into the “gay lifestyle.”

### ***Religious objections are placed in the background.***

Given that the focus is on public education, the S.O.S. seminar shrewdly does not put religious objections to same-sex attraction front and center. However, it does draw generously on material from Christian ministries. To deflect possible objections to a specifically Christian agenda, the point is made that ex-gay ministries exist for many religions.

### ***Individual LGBT supporters are not singled out for attack.***

When asked whether a local teacher (shown in a video clip announcing a GSA meeting) is lesbian, Barb Anderson implies she knows the answer, but won’t say because she isn’t sure. She urges the audience to focus instead on how this teacher is attempting to influence their children. It appears that S.O.S. would not engage in personal attacks.

**Turn the page to learn how you can counter these strategies . . .**

## Steps You Can Take to Counter Anti-LGBT Activity

### ***Attend an S.O.S seminar.***

Visit [www.mfc.org](http://www.mfc.org) to check the posted schedule. If the S.O.S. seminar comes to your area, consider gathering a small group of LGBT supporters to attend the seminar together, perhaps through an LGBT-friendly church in your area. If you do attend, *do not plan to confront the seminar leaders or participants*. You will not have an opportunity to do so. The seminar is carefully scripted and does not allow for discussion, except to submit questions on notecards.

What attending the seminar does provide is an invaluable opportunity to learn the strategies of the Minnesota Family Institute first-hand and to determine who in your area is involved in their organizing work. Share what you learn with PFLAG ([schools@pflagtc.org](mailto:schools@pflagtc.org)) and OutFront Minnesota ([www.outfront.org](http://www.outfront.org)).

### ***Create a positive alternative.***

Although finding out that an S.O.S. seminar will be conducted in your community can be disheartening, recognize that it can also present a galvanizing opportunity. A basic principle of community organizing is that people will take positive action in response to a threat. The S.O.S. seminar represents the kind of threat that can motivate LGBT allies to work to create respectful learning environments for LGBT students, families, and school staff.

In at least two communities, LGBT supporters attended the S.O.S. seminars and subsequently organized alternative seminars that gave community members accurate medical information about sexual orientation and gender identity.

### ***Get involved in your local school.***

Use the S.O.S. seminar as a wake-up call. Ask: Can our community do more to create respectful schools for all, including LGBT students, families, and staff? Get to know what is happening in your school district. Contact the school guidance office and ask to speak to the LGBT contact person. Too often school staff only hear from anti-LGBT forces. Introduce yourself to staff as a supporter of LGBT inclusion. Applaud the positive steps they're taking. For more ideas, including Minnesota resources, download the *Guide to Creating LGBT-Respectful MN Schools* at [www.pflagtc.org](http://www.pflagtc.org).

### ***Know the law is on your side.***

Though the S.O.S. seminar attempts to paint a murky picture of the legal rights available to LGBT Minnesotans, our state offers some of the strongest legal protections in the nation for LGBT students and school staff in public and private nonreligious schools. For accurate information about how the Minnesota Human Rights Act and federal Equal Access Act apply to schools, download the *LGBT Policy Checklist for Minnesota School Districts* at [www.pflagtc.org](http://www.pflagtc.org). For specific legal questions, call OutFront MN at 612-822-0127, ext. 230 in the Twin Cities; statewide call 800-800-0350, ext. 230.

### ***Debunk the supposed “science” of anti-LGBT arguments.***

The Minnesota Family Council S.O.S. seminar presents seemingly scientific documentation for their claim that homosexuality is chosen and can be overcome. However, “reparative therapy” has been denounced by every reputable professional group concerned with the health and welfare of young people. Ten national medical, educational, and psychological organizations, including the American Academy of Pediatrics and the National Education Association, argue against giving youth access to reparative therapy in the pamphlet, “Just the Facts About Sexual Orientation & Youth: A Primer for Principals, Educators & School Personnel.”

### ***Stress increasing mainstream acceptance of LGBT people.***

When anti-LGBT forces attempt to marginalize LGBT people, counter with examples of mainstream acceptance, such as the support by the American Academy of Family Physicians for same-sex parenting. Or cite the protection that corporate America is giving to transgender employees: Fifty-three Fortune 500 companies now cover transgender employees in their non-discrimination policies, including Minnesota-based companies Best Buy and General Mills.

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