

The Newtown Bee

Grant to Gay-Straight Alliance Group Sparks School Board Debate

By Larissa Lytwyn

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When Newtown's Board of Education receives a grant, the funds are usually either state-approved and directed toward an academic program or a monetary or gift donation from a private or commercial sponsor. So the unusual nature of a grant approved by the school board this week was sure to spark discussion and, as it turns out, contention.

The board voted 4 to 2 on a \$1,000 contract authorizing Newtown High School's Gay/Straight Alliance (GSA) continued participation in Public Broadcasting Service's (PBS) Human Rights (HR) 101 project.

Inspired by the December 10, 1948, Universal Declaration of Human Rights stating that all people are "born free and equal in dignity and rights," PBS awarded 15 greater New York area schools with a \$1,000 grant for them to devise an instructive unit on human rights issues.

Newtown High School was the only Connecticut applicant approved for the program. Accompanied by their advisor, social studies teacher Jan Brooks, the GSA traveled to New York City last October 4 to present their project idea to PBS's education center and the region's 14 other participants.

According to the PBS website, Newtown's GSA is "creating a unit of study about the issues facing gay youth" to ultimately enable all students "to understand their own beliefs, fears, and intolerances."

When the contract was initially presented to the school board during a regularly scheduled meeting December 12, Secretary Andrew Buzzi wanted more detail on what approving the grant would entail. "This is a contract between Newtown High School and an outside party," Mr Buzzi said during the meeting. "I want to know what exactly this is about."

Upon learning from Social Studies Department Chairman Candi Dietter that the grant would allow students to access PBS materials including a 55-minute *Frontline* tape, Mr Buzzi expressed a desire to see the video before making a decision.

The item was moved to the January 6 agenda. Having viewed the tape, *Attack on Gay America*, Mr Buzzi learned from Ms Brooks and Newtown High School Principal William Manfredonia that the GSA was planning to use one 15-minute segment from the tape.

Mr Buzzi wanted to know which segment would be used.

The decision was made to move the vote to 9 pm on January 8 so that more information could be obtained.

By the January 8 meeting, board Chairman Elaine McClure, Vice Chairman Lisa Schwartz, and Board member Paul Mangiafico, in addition to Mr Buzzi, had all viewed *Attack on Gay America*.

Mr Mangiafico expressed concern over the at-times graphic content of the video, saying that it was inappropriate for students, some as young as 14, to view.

Board members Tom Gissen and David Nanavaty, in contrast, believed that the board's potential nonapproval of the grant could send a message undermining the board's trust in the professional competency of Newtown's faculty.

Mr Gissen said he had not viewed the tape because he did not believe it would be appropriate for him to do as a board member. Expressing concerns about the board potentially "micromanaging" issues, he said, "We do not routinely look at every subscription or book in our libraries."

Doing so, he continued, would border on censorship.

He relayed a story about a history teacher he had growing up. "My teacher wasn't supposed to teach us about 'Red' [Communist] China," he said, "but my teacher did anyway because he said that you couldn't teach history without Red China!"

He also referred to educational contentions over whether schools should teach *Catcher on the Rye*, by J.D. Salinger or Hitler's *Mein Kampf* because of their controversial content.

"I believe we should teach [these materials] because they can help us learn," said Mr Gissen. "Otherwise, you end up with 'vanilla' [educational content]."

Mr Buzzi said that his concern over the appropriateness of GSA using *Attack on Gay America* in their project was not at all relevant to his "utmost" trust in Newtown's teachers' competence. "This project is about human rights, civil rights," he said. "I just don't know if we are using the best tools to impart that."

The board agreed that the grant was permissible under board policy 3-303: Gifts, Bequests and Subsidies.

Ms McClure agreed that the issue was a sensitive one and suggested that district school counselor Judith Blanchard review all future potentially controversial materials. Mr Mangiafico and Mr Buzzi expressed concern over the long period it took for the board to gather all relevant information to the grant.

Mr Buzzi questioned why the grant was not presented to the board long before December 12; Mr Nanavaty suggested that the "timeliness" factor was irrelevant to the contract itself.

The grant challenged board members to examine how it would handle similar potentially controversial issues in the future.