



NPR's "All Things Considered" (Originally broadcast 9/13/04)

MELISSA BLOCK, Host: This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Melissa Block.

Sex education has long been a controversial subject. In Massachusetts this school year, there's a new element to the debate. Now that the state Supreme Court has legalized same-sex marriage, some advocates say teachers have an obligation to talk more in class about gay and lesbian relationships. From Boston, NPR's Tovia Smith reports.

TOVIA SMITH reporting:

Seventeen-year-old high school senior Sam Zegas says his teachers in the quiet suburb of Winchester barely ever mention the words 'gay' and 'lesbian.' Whether in grade school discussions of family or high school discussions of English lit or even in sex ed, Zegas says the subject was never really on the radar screen.

SAM ZEGAS (High School Senior): It makes me feel bad because it invalidates the person I am.

TOVIA SMITH: Zegas says the conspicuous silence made it a lot harder for him to accept himself as gay and to come out of the closet.

SAM ZEGAS: There were times when I got very depressed about it. I couldn't picture my life further down the road because I didn't know. I didn't what that looked like; I couldn't even imagine it. And that's what changed, that's what changed on May 17th. **This is a message from the government of Massachusetts saying, 'This is now part of the social norm.'**

TOVIA SMITH: Zegas is one of many hoping that the day gay marriage became legal in Massachusetts will also mark the beginning of a new openness in schools. Already, some gay and lesbian advocates are working on a new gay-friendly curriculum for kindergarten and up.

LUCIA GATES (Counselor, Lexington Elementary School): I think in this case, we need definitions. That's one of the key things teachers want.

TOVIA SMITH: Lexington Elementary School counselor Lucia Gates sits around a table with other teachers, administrators and activists brainstorming on to construct a new teacher's guide to deal with topics many had long been told to stay away from.

LUCIA GATES: But there's a whole host of words here your average elementary teacher is afraid to use because they just don't know what to say.

Unidentified Woman: Right.

LUCIA GATES: No one has told them how to answer the question: 'What does "gay" mean?'

TOVIA SMITH: **But many teachers say they're less afraid now since the high court decision legalizing gay marriage.** Deb Allen teaches eighth-grade sex ed in Brookline. She keeps a picture of her lesbian partner and their kids on her desk and gay equality signs on the wall. Allen says she's already been teaching a gay-friendly curriculum for nearly a decade, but she says she does begin this year feeling a bit more emboldened.

DEB ALLEN (Eighth-Grade Teacher): In my mind, I know that, 'OK, this is legal now.' If somebody wants to challenge me, I'll say, 'Give me a break. It's legal now.'

TOVIA SMITH: And, Allen says, teaching about homosexuality is also more important now. She says the debate around gay marriage is prompting kids to ask a lot more questions, like what is gay sex, which Allen **answers thoroughly and explicitly with a chart.**

DEB ALLEN: And on the side, I'm going to draw some different activities, like kissing and hugging, and different kinds of intercourse. All right?

TOVIA SMITH: Allen asks her students to fill in the chart with yeses and nos.

DEB ALLEN: All right. So can a woman and a woman kiss and hug? Yes. Can a woman and a woman have vaginal intercourse, and they will all say no. And I'll say, 'Hold it. Of course, they can. **They can use a sex toy. They could use'--and we talk--and we discuss that.** So the answer there is yes.

