



**Deciding Who Decides:
The Debate Over a Gay Photo Exhibit in a Madison School
Teaching Note**

Introduction

This case was written as one of a series of four cases looking at issues of leadership from the perspective of a school superintendent. The case has not yet been used in a teaching situation. Thus this note is exploratory and prospective. It is hoped that teachers and facilitators who use the case will add their comments and reflections so that this note will begin to reflect actual classroom experience.

Synopsis

This is a three-part case. The (A) case (7 pp.) describes the initiative of four teachers at the Hawthorne Elementary School in Madison, Wisconsin to mount a photo exhibit about gay and lesbian families in the library of the school in the spring of 1996 without the involvement of parents in the decision. Hawthorne was a magnet school stressing an arts curriculum, open classrooms, and an explicit commitment to diversity that went beyond the District's broad statements in support of diversity and equality. Hawthorne itself was a diverse community. One-third of the students were magnet students, drawn to the school by its progressive program. But the school also included students from the conservative, blue-collar neighborhood in which it was located and from the nearby, subsidized housing complex.

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The previous year, after a contentious seven-week decision-making process involving teachers, parents, and both the school and district administrators, Hawthorne teachers had won the right to have the school used in a documentary showing how “anti-homophobia” programs had been integrated into elementary school curricula. The brouhaha had left bad feelings and hardened positions, in an environment in which relations between the teachers and their very powerful union on the one hand and school administrators on the other had been difficult for years. When the Hawthorne teachers went to their principal, she bucked the issue upstairs. The Superintendent’s office said the exhibit needed to be made more inclusive by the inclusion of photos of “traditional families”.

In the midst of the negotiations between the teachers and the superintendent’s office, the issue was the subject of a newspaper story, generating a wider public debate. Supporters and opponents groups widened and hardened and the decision fell squarely into the lap of Superintendent Cheryl Willhoyte.

The (A) case ends with her stating her inclination not to make the decision but to push it back down to the Hawthorne community. The (B) case (5 pp.) describes the public meeting, mandated but not attended by Willhoyte and chaired by the Hawthorne principal, to discuss the issue. Just before the meeting, the teachers union voted not to participate in the decision-making group set up as part of Willhoyte’s plan. They argued that their contract gave them complete control over teaching materials and they had already decided that the exhibit was appropriate. The two-hour meeting, attended by 100 people and held in the Hawthorne library (and spilling out into the adjoining hall) was raucous and inconclusive, with the decision-making group deciding to meet again the following evening.

The (C) case (4 pp.) describes the considerably less contentious second meeting, at which a compromise was hammered out in the group: the exhibit would be in a room off the main library, parents would be notified and could request alternative activities for their children, and the exhibit would be available either for drop-in visits or entire classes. There was continuing disagreement about the resolution and the process by which it was developed. Within a year, the assistant superintendent who had been involved in the issue had left the Madison system and the Hawthorne principal had been transferred to another Madison school.

Teaching Objectives

This case was written for discussion of superintendent leadership. It could be used for considering general leadership issues, principal/superintendent division of responsibility, appropriate role of parents in educational decision-making, and the implementation of a commitment to tolerance of diversity. The following leadership issues flow out of the facts of the case:

- (A) Problem analysis and definitions.

- (B) Who should make what decisions?
- (C) What is the relationship between the nature of the issue and the design of the decision-making process?
- (D) Do the people who have to live with the policy have any special claim on the content of the decision or the process of decision-making?
- (E) When is it appropriate for those in authority to deliberately increase the conflict and tension among those in the community?

Teaching Plan

(A) Study Questions. It might be useful for students/participants to consider the following questions when reading the (A) case in preparation for class discussion:

- (1) Should Willhoyte make this decision? Why? Why not?
- (2) What would be a good result here? What should be the objective?
- (3) Should the exhibit be displayed as the teachers planned it?

(B) Class Plan. The discussion of the (A) case might be divided among the following segments:

- (1) What should Willhoyte do?
- (2) What is the place for her opinion on the appropriateness of the exhibit?
- (3) How does this issue fit with the overall goals of the School?
- (4) What options does she have other than deciding it herself?
- (5) Which would you choose?

A quick reading of the (B) case would lead to conversations about whether the community meeting served any purpose and how they should handle the meeting the following night.

Finally, the (C) case would open up a discussion around the question of whether the agonizing process was worth all the bad feelings that appear to have remained.

(A) Questions. I'd begin with the question, "what's the problem here?" pushing students/participants to analyze the problem and think about the problem as having different definitions for the different players. That would lead to a discussion around the question, "Should Willhoyte decide?" And that in turn will lead to brainstorming alternatives to her just making the decision herself. After analyzing her options, hand out the (B) case and ask, "How do you assess her plan now?" to be followed by, "What should be their strategy for the second meeting?" Finally, the

(C) case would stimulate a broader conversation about whether the process was worth the consequences.