

Private school director's explicit poems draw fire

Mar 12, 2008 04:30 AM

LOUISE BROWN
EDUCATION REPORTER

In the latest ethical clash between schools and the Internet, a private Jewish school is reviewing samples of sexual and at times violent poetry written by its director – and posted on his website – after some parents complained the content is inappropriate for an educator.

The board of Leo Baeck Jewish Day School, with campuses in Forest Hill and Thornhill, struck a committee of parents to review six poems by director David Prashker. The poems were circulated to parents last week in an anonymous email that called the works "disturbing" and asked whether they felt comfortable entrusting their children's education to the author.

The poems contain the f-word and sexual imagery and one poem begins with the line "the first act of killing is the hardest" and ends with "the second time is remarkably straightforward."

The poems have been withdrawn from Prashker's personal website while the review is underway.

"We have asked a committee of the board to review the content, which we hope will report within days instead of weeks," said board chair Brian Simon.

The school has 800 students from kindergarten to Grade 8.

The controversy comes as Ryerson University considers expelling a student for running a study group that traded homework tips on the Internet site Facebook as well as global concern about students using the Internet to bully each other, intimidate teachers and plagiarize.

"This is a wake-up call for educators not to put anything negative on the Internet that could come back and bite you – exactly what we're telling kids," said Stu Auty, chair of the Canadian Safe Schools Network.

"There's no doubt at all a school principal is a role model. ... To put sensitive material like that on a public website would show questionable judgment."

Toronto poet Ken Sherman said he doesn't believe in censorship but warns artists must also consider what they do for a living and take responsibility for whatever message their art may send out to the community they serve.

"As poetry, this work has a certain amount of energy; it's not that outlandish, and to my mind we should all be allowed to write whatever we wish," said Sherman, who teaches writing at Sheridan College.

"But you also have to consider your position in society, and people's image of what a school principal should be like.

"So yes, he should be allowed total creative freedom – but at the same time he has to be cognizant of his position as a school principal. Why would he put that sort of poetry on his website?"

Prashker, who declined requests to comment, was hired from England in 2004 to oversee both campuses of Leo Baeck, believed to be the only school in Canada following the liberal Reform strand of Judaism.

It is not clear when Prashker, 52, a novelist, playwright, artist and poet as well as educator, wrote the works, although a website selling his writing refers to his "collected poems; 1973-2003," which was before he began working at the school.

Yet, regardless of when the poems were penned, parent Allan Kaufman said he believes Prashker should be removed from office, for having written such material and for having put it on a website.

"It's not that I'm prudish, but I think the sort of imagery he uses about women is degrading, and when the head of a school for young children displays them for all to see on his own website, it shows an appalling lack of judgment," said Kaufman, a lawyer with an 11-year-old son at the school.

"Mr. Prashker should be removed from the school immediately, since we can no longer trust him with the care and custody of our young school children."

Helene Berman, research chair of the Centre for Research and Education on Violence Against Women and Children at the University of Western Ontario, said having the head of a school post such sexually aggressive writing on a website can "contribute to the devaluing of females in our society.

"It's a question of context, and while it's true he's doing nothing illegal, a website is pretty much in the public domain and a principal has a responsibility not to feed into offensive, demeaning attitudes against women," said Berman.