

School District Under Fire for Hosting Scouts Assembly

by Tim Cwiek (First Published in the Philadelphia Gay News on December 11, 2014)

A Chester County public-school district that hosted a Boy Scouts of America (BSA) recruitment assembly in September 2014 has come under criticism.

The Freethought Society, a nontheist organization, wants the Octorara Area School District to stop hosting BSA recruitment assemblies. District officials say the BSA Chester County Council hasn't been shown to discriminate and will be allowed to continue holding assemblies on campus. The school district is based in Atglen, Chester County.

Margaret A. Downey, president of the Freethought Society, said BSA discriminates against nontheists, gays and other groups. She said BSA shouldn't be allowed to recruit in public schools during regular school hours.

Downey plans to attend an Octorara school board meeting to explain her position. "I will attend a school-board meeting to inform the public and more school officials that it's irresponsible to allow BSA to recruit during school hours, on school property," Downey said. "Allowing the assemblies conveys that BSA is endorsed by teachers and administrators." Octorara Area School District superintendent Thomas L.

Newcome issued this statement about the BSA assemblies:

"The school board feels this is a local matter and will address it as such if residents express a concern to either the administration or the school board. If any student has been harmed by the BSA presentations or if discrimination is brought forward in regards to local troops, the school board should be made aware and the district will address the situation. The district is welcoming to many organizations — and each has detractors. It has been our experience that the BSA troops in the Octorara community are open and welcoming to all children and have provided great opportunities for many to thrive."

Newcome said he discussed Downey's concern with the board. "Since no person in the Octorara Area School District has registered a complaint to either myself or to the school board about our practice to allow the Boy Scouts of America to present a recruiting assembly with the children in the early

elementary grades, the board members have directed me to let Downey know that the practice will continue into next September unless addressed as a local concern," he said. "As we discussed, Downey's fight is with the national organization, not our local organization — which has shown no discrimination in practice that anyone has brought forward."

Downey said the school district's position won't go unchallenged.

"Dr. Newcome is letting a blatantly discriminatory group on campus and that's totally unacceptable," Downey said.

She expressed concern that board members don't fully understand the impact of BSA's exclusionary membership policies.

"Just because there isn't an active BSA discrimination case in Chester County doesn't mean that the BSA doesn't discriminate," she said. "Literature, evidence and incidents around the nation and BSA's own membership application have made it very clear that gays and atheists aren't welcome."

Downey also said a public school isn't an appropriate venue for a BSA recruitment assembly.

"The fact that BSA is a private club should be enough evidence that a public school is the wrong venue for recruitment," she continued. "Let them recruit in private religious schools since that is where they will find their target audience."

She hopes enough pressure will be applied to prevent another BSA recruitment assembly at the Octorara Area School District.

"The next BSA assembly may take place in September 2015, so we have until June of 2015 to put a lot of pressure on the school district to stop this shameful activity on campus," Downey said. "The Freethought Society has members with children in that school district. We represent them, because they've requested anonymity as they are fearful of retaliation."