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Baptists: Monitor gays in schools



At the Southern Baptist convention's annual meeting, Rev. Bobby Welch of Fort Payne, Ala., was re-elected president.

AP Photo by Mark Humphrey

By YONAT SHIMRON AND T. KEUNG HUI, Staff Writers

In another sign of their discontent with public schools, Southern Baptists passed a resolution Wednesday urging parents to monitor schools for influences of "homosexual activists and their allies."

The resolution passed unanimously on the last day of the Southern Baptist Convention's national meeting in Nashville, Tenn.

"It expresses our concern that an aggressive homosexual agenda is being taught without the knowledge of parents," said Daniel Akin, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, who attended the annual gathering of about 12,000 church members.

Advocates for gay and lesbian students said the measure surprised them.

"I can't imagine where they're getting their information," said Robin Allen of Raleigh, a member of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

Many Southern Baptists consider public schools hostile to religion. Last year, a resolution urging Southern Baptists to remove their children from public schools was proposed but rejected at the national meeting.

The latest resolution leaves it to parents to decide whether public, private or home schooling is most appropriate.

Public schools in North Carolina can't teach about homosexuality in sex-education classes unless they hold a public hearing on the issue first. Most school districts, including Wake County, have opted not to have such hearings.

The state Board of Education's anti-harassment policy, passed last summer,

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does not specify sexual orientation. The policy prohibits bullying and discrimination among all students.

Still, Southern Baptist leaders have expressed concern with a growing number of high schools that have student-led clubs that advocate for gays and lesbians.

There are 3,000 such clubs across the nation, including 70 in North Carolina, said Kevin Jennings, executive director of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, based in New York City.

In April, the network sponsored a "National Day of Silence," in which participants take a daylong vow of silence to protest discrimination against gay and lesbian students. Students at 19 Triangle middle and high schools registered to participate in the event.

In response, the Alliance Defense Fund, a Christian legal group, organized the national "Day of Truth" for the first time, on the day after the Day of Silence. Students were encouraged to wear T-shirts and hand out cards expressing opposition to homosexuality. It's unclear how many in the Triangle participated.

Jennings, a North Carolina native and the son of a Southern Baptist minister, said schools should be teaching students "how to get along with people different from themselves."

"The Southern Baptist Convention is basically saying, 'Schools have to teach what we think, or we're leaving.' "

With 16.3 million members, the Southern Baptist Convention is the largest Protestant group in the United States. Many say they don't want their children taught that homosexuality is legitimate because they believe it's a sin.

"Homosexual activists and their allies are devoting substantial resources and using political power to promote the acceptance among schoolchildren of homosexuality as a morally legitimate lifestyle," the resolution reads.

Groups that work with gay students said they are more concerned with protecting them.

"I work with students throughout the state, and I hear stories every day of students being verbally harassed and physically harassed," said Melissa Weiss, executive director of Safe Schools NC, a group that works to end the bullying of students because of their sexual orientation or gender identity.

Akin, the Southeastern seminary president, said the Baptist convention would never want any student harassed.

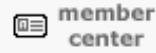
"We do not wish for any harm to come to anyone, including homosexuals," he said.

But Brandon Byers, a 17-year-old student at the N.C. School of Science and Mathematics, said gays and lesbians face subtle forms of harassment and feelings of intolerance.

Two years ago, for example, Byers, who is gay, was discouraged by the Perquimans County High School principal from forming a club because of expected parental opposition. Such clubs, run entirely by students, are permitted by the federal Equal Access Act.

"I respect people's rights to have different viewpoints," said Allen of PFLAG. "But on a school campus, every student should be treated with respect and dignity."

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