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Training for counselors debated

Group: School advisers shouldn't be taught about gender identity and sexual orientation

By **TODD SILBERMAN**, Staff Writer

Guidance counselors in Wake schools find enough need to help students deal with issues of sexual orientation that the district offers extra training to fill gaps in their formal college preparation.

Yet a policy group that previously pushed for abstinence-only sex education in North Carolina schools says universities should not be teaching future counselors and school social workers about issues of sexual orientation and gender identity.

A proposed revision in state training standards says that counselors and social workers need to be informed about various targets of discrimination, including sex roles as well as factors such as race, creed and national origin.

But the N.C. Family Policy Council, which calls itself a watchdog of "traditional family values," objects to that language, arguing that it would allow tolerance of unwanted behavior in the state's public schools.

Under pressure from the organization, the State Board of Education delayed a vote last week on a set of new standards. Those standards would apply to college and university programs that prepare counselors and social workers for North Carolina public schools.

The Family Policy Council also takes issue with the suggestion that counselors have to demonstrate the ability to "acknowledge, respect and support diversity."

"The North Carolina Family Policy Council agrees wholeheartedly that each person should be respected," the organization's lawyer, Jere Z. Royall, said in a letter last month to board Chairman Howard Lee. "However, not all forms of diversity should be supported."

The board put off a vote on the standards after members split on the question of enumerating targets of discrimination. Some members leaned toward more general language that would encompass discrimination in any form.

"We don't want anyone discriminated against," said Patricia Willoughby, a board member from Raleigh.

But groups that advocate for gay and lesbian students support the proposed revisions and say school professionals need to be well-informed about the issues facing students. By not spelling out those issues in education programs, counselors and social workers might be at a disadvantage, and some students might be placed at greater risk.

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"Gay and lesbian students are at a higher risk of suicide and depression," said Ian Palmquist, executive director for programs at Equality N.C., a statewide advocacy organization focusing on issues of sexual orientation.

"They're often the most in need of services from counselors or social workers," he said. "They need to know they'll be treated fairly rather than subjected to someone's personal religious beliefs. We've seen cases that, if not spelled out, school professionals think there's an exception there, and they don't need to treat students equally."

According to the Family Policy Council, "sexual orientation" is an undefined term in North Carolina law. Including it in revised standards, the council says, could allow counselors and social workers to condone cross-dressing, transsexuality or pedophilia.

Palmquist takes issue with that concern. "Sexual orientation is well-defined, both in medical literature and in laws around the country, and nowhere does it include pedophilia," he said.

Discrimination

Schools are asking for help dealing with the issues that the revised guidelines would address, said Melissa Weiss, executive director of Safe Schools North Carolina. The group focuses on eliminating discrimination and bullying on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Weiss said the organization has provided training for Wake school counselors. This week, it is working with counselors in the Statesville-Iredell school district.

"A lot of counties are realizing the importance of this issue," Weiss said. "We believe that it's the counselors' responsibility to be there for all students, and they need to be trained in those issues as well as all issues of human differences and diversity."

At least one student agrees that counselors should be sensitive to specific forms of discrimination.

"With every different form of discrimination comes a different situation," said Tom Driscoll, a junior at Wake Forest-Rolesville High who is trying to organize a Gay-Straight Alliance at the school. "Counselors need to understand the specifics."

The attention to discrimination in the proposed guidelines, including factors related to sexual orientation, follows guidelines set by national organizations that accredit colleges and university programs that prepare guidance counselors and school social workers.

"This standard is stating quite clearly those areas where we need to focus," said John Culbreth, a professor of counseling at UNC-Charlotte. He is chairman of the national accrediting organization for counseling education programs.

"There is a significant proportion of students who are questioning their sexual orientation," Culbreth said. "We want students to have access to counselors who have been trained to deal with those issues."

Gary Shaffer, associate professor of social work at UNC-Chapel Hill, said students must feel that schools are open to their concerns.

"They often don't seek the kind of support that might be helpful to them," Shaffer

said. "There are so many kids in the schools that have mental health and social service needs that go unserved because of how they're perceived."

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