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Support scarce, gay teens say Physical and verbal harassment common in school, students and advocates report

By MICHAEL EASTERBROOK, Staff Writer

Students once chucked Tater Tots at Michael Dillow, who is gay, as he was eating lunch at Athens Drive High School in Raleigh.

At Enloe High School in Raleigh, Anna Creagh says she has been called "dyke" so many times that it hardly bothers her anymore.

A student at James B. Hunt High School in Wilson was suspended last week for insulting and then pushing gay 11th-grader Jarred Gamwell as he talked on a pay phone. Gamwell says it was the only time anyone has been punished for the harassment he regularly endures.

Teasing is an everyday part of high school life. Yet some gay and lesbian teenagers say they draw more ridicule and torment from their peers than any other group of students. And, they and their advocates say, most schools' policies against bullying don't go far enough to protect them from abuse based on sexual orientation.

"It can be very hostile at times," said Gamwell, 17. "I don't like walking down the hall by myself. You never know what is going to happen."

The issue came into the spotlight recently when officials at Hunt High removed posters Gamwell had made in his campaign for student body president. School officials said the posters, in which Gamwell humorously highlighted his homosexuality, were disruptive.

Gamwell said he has been jeered, pushed and pelted with tennis balls and coins since he came out in ninth grade. Once, a student dropped a plastic garbage container on his head.

Another gay student at Hunt High said he also has been insulted and has had objects thrown at him.

"I cannot name one day that I haven't had something said to me," said Aaron Burns, 14, a ninth-grader.

Robert Kendall Jr., spokesman for Wilson County schools, said he had no knowledge of the suspension of a student for pushing Gamwell. But he said the school system does not permit intolerance of any kind.

Students, educators and advocacy groups say many gay



Anna Creagh, a senior at Raleigh's Enloe High, says she has filed more than a dozen complaints with administrators.

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students fear that if they complain they will provoke even more bullying. Others worry that if they come forward, family members will find out they are gay.

"The problem is that we still have harassment, and we have youth who wouldn't even dream of identifying themselves as gay or lesbian because it's not safe," said Robin Allen, chairwoman of youth advocacy with the Triangle chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. The national group promotes respect for gays and lesbians.

Society has certainly grown more accepting of gays and lesbians in recent decades.

Courts are backing them in important decisions, and dozens of gay characters appear on television. Approval of gays as elementary school teachers grew from 27 percent in 1977 to 61 percent in 2003, a Gallup poll found.

Yet harassment in schools is still common. A 2001 report by New York-based Human Rights Watch found that bullying, abuse and violence are part of everyday life for gay and lesbian students throughout the country.

Last year, the first publicly funded high school for gays and lesbians opened in New York to give students a refuge.

Students say religious beliefs fuel some of the harassment. It sometimes leads to tragedy, said Melissa Siebert, executive director of Safe Schools N.C., a Chapel Hill-based group working to encourage acceptance of gay and lesbian students in schools.

"We're talking about kids who have dropped out of school, are homeless, or have killed themselves," said Siebert. She said the cases of suicide she has heard about occurred outside North Carolina. "These are some serious issues we're dealing with."

In search of help

Michael Dillow, 18, said he began telling friends and family that he was gay three years ago when he was in ninth grade at Athens Drive. Soon, students were shouting insults at him in the hallways and later threw food at him in the cafeteria. One student, he said, even called him a name over the school's public address system.

He said Athens Drive officials assigned him a security guard. The taunts subsided, but by then his hopes for having a normal high school experience had all but evaporated.

"I don't care to ever have to deal with high school again," said Dillow, who left Athens Drive last year, moved to Raeford and plans to earn his diploma through a community college.

"Should I ever have children, they will never attend a public high school."

Kathryn Chontos, principal of Athens Drive, called Dillow's complaints confidential matters and said she was not allowed

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to discuss them. Later in an e-mail message, Chontos wrote that students are encouraged to treat all their peers with respect and kindness.

"If a student reports an incident of harassment we take immediate action to investigate and issue disciplinary consequences when appropriate," Chontos wrote.

Creagh, a 17-year-old senior at Enloe, said she has filed more than a dozen complaints, most involving badgering by other students. But she said school officials did not pursue them.

A co-president of the school's Gay-Straight Alliance, Creagh said posters advertising the alliance are frequently ripped apart and scattered on hallway floors. Still, she said Enloe is more accepting of homosexuality than many other high schools, and most teachers there have tried to foster tolerance.

Like Chontos, Enloe Principal Lloyd Gardner said he couldn't discuss specific student complaints because they are confidential. But he said administrators and teachers strive to create an accepting environment for all students, including gays and lesbians.

"Any concerns of harassment we do take seriously," Gardner said.

Groups such as Safe Schools N.C. and Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays say Gay-Straight Alliances like the one at Enloe can help students by giving them a support network. Adult advocates have met with teachers and guidance counselors to make them aware of the problems.

Some also are pressing school districts to approve new anti-discrimination policies.

Most policies prohibit bullying and teasing based on a student's race, religion, physical attributes and other categories. But sexual orientation is typically not included.

Bill Fletcher, a member of the Wake County Board of Education, said rather than add another special category, teachers and administrators should focus on protecting all students from harassment.





"I don't care if they have pimples or wear glasses or wear 20-year-old clothes," Fletcher said. "It's our responsibility to ensure that all of our students are well treated."

The Guilford County school board added sexual orientation to its policy in January. The Chapel Hill-Carrboro school district has a similar rule.

"Every student in North Carolina deserves and has a right to an education free of harassment," said Siebert of Safe Schools N.C. "That's the bottom line we're working toward."

Staff writer Michael Easterbrook can be reached at 836-5701 or measterb@newsobserver.com.

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