

[WEATHER >>](#)

[STOCKS >>](#)

[TRAFFIC >>](#)

[OBITUARIES >>](#)

[COMMUNITIES >>](#)

[MULTIMEDIA >>](#)

DAILY DIGEST

[Oil begins flowing from southern Iraq](#)

The southern oil fields had been among the first installations secured when U.S. and British forces launched the ground war March 20.

[Talks open on North Korean nuclear program](#)

U.S. officials say they want a "verifiable, irreversible end to North Korea's nuclear program."

[NCSU studies alternatives to hog-waste lagoons](#)

North Carolina hog farmers are skeptical that anything works better than lagoons.

[Wanted: sample of your DNA](#)

A nonprofit foundation is trying to collect DNA donations and the donors' family trees to pinpoint geographic origins of forebears.

[Autopsy photo laws, battles grow](#)

Debate continues over public access to autopsy photos in Florida while North Carolina weighs a bill.

[Magnet school cuts upset parents](#)

Wake limits enrollment at three year-round schools to avoid overcrowding, but some say they are underutilized.

[Soaked fields delay planting](#)

Wednesday, April 23, 2003 6:10AM EDT IN THE SCHOOLS

Sexual identity is tough topic

By DELAWESE FULTON, Staff Writer

RALEIGH -- Sex is often difficult for adults and children to discuss.

Add issues such as homosexuality and other types of sexual orientation to the conversation, and tensions and voices are likely to rise.

But increasingly, the need to talk about sexual orientation is growing at home and in schools, experts say. And the more you talk about it, the better.

As students approach middle and high school, they undergo physical and emotional changes -- puberty and adolescence. They are defining and learning who they are. It can be an exciting and a trying time.

With sexual orientation, it can be a much more confusing and painful time.

That's why over the course of four training sessions, about 160 school guidance counselors and 30 school nurses in the Wake school system gathered in January and earlier this month to talk about ways to help students who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, transgender or bisexual cope with their feelings and the attitudes their classmates, instructors and community have toward them.

"This is an issue that's not going to go away," said Ron Morrow, executive director of the N.C. Alliance for Athletics, Health, Physical Education, Recreation and

what schools can do to help

- * Stop name-calling and other forms of harassment.
- * Set the standard in classrooms by creating rules.
- * Investigate harassment and bullying.
- * Encourage groups that support safety for the entire school community.

SOURCE: SAFE SCHOOLS N.C.



Michael Dillow, a gay student at Athens Drive High School, answers guidance counselors' questions during a meeting of the Gay-Straight Alliance, which addresses concerns of gay and lesbian students. Staff Photos by Chris Seward



Robin Allen, who has a gay son who graduated from a Wake County high school, talks to Gay-Straight Alliance members.

advertisement

advertising

[• NC State Distance Education](#)

shopping

[• Special Advertising Sections](#)

[•Makin' Cents Coupons!](#)

travel

[• Travel Ads From The Paper](#)

education guide

Farmers yearn for less rain because the ground is too wet to plow or plant.

[No doubt about this one](#)

After losing in double overtime Monday, the Flyers score six goals to rout the Leafs and claim series.

[UNC adds 2 to staff](#)

Assistants Jerod Haase and C.B. McGrath follow Roy Williams from Kansas.

[Selling job gets tougher](#)

Profits are squeezed as sales and margins fall.

[Hot technology now](#)

Krispy Kreme uses new tools for its old-fashioned doughnuts.

Dance. "And by the way, you can't make somebody gay. And you can't make somebody straight."

During a session in early April, the counselors and nurses heard from two gay students with starkly different experiences at their respective high schools. The students joined representatives from the Triangle Gay-Straight Alliance Support Network and from the Parents, Families, Friends of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Persons to address the counselors and social workers, answering questions and giving feedback.

One student, a 16-year-old junior, participates in theater at Enloe High School. (His mother, although comfortable with his sexuality, asked that his name not be disclosed.) The student described his experience at Enloe as very positive and supportive, and he said he has faced little ridicule from his peers.

"Enloe has a more acceptable environment," he said. "We have all people from different walks of life."

But Michael Dillow, 17, told counselors a different story: He said he hates attending classes at Athens Drive High School, where he feels the school community is not supportive of his being gay.

From his second- to fifth-period classes, Dillow said, he does not talk unless he is spoken to.

"I watch everyone. I examine the people, and I make a judgment call," Dillow said, explaining how he tries to avoid being called names. Even his younger brother catches flak, Dillow said, because of his older brother's sexual orientation.

His mother, Deborah Dillow, wishes her son could get more support from the school when problems like those pop up.

"My main concern is the treatment he gets from administration," Deborah Dillow said. "They have told him he needs to hang out 'with his own kind.' "

Deborah Dillow said she also is disappointed that school officials haven't taken a stronger stance on the sexual orientation issue.

"Number one, they could address the issue head-on," she said, by making it clear to students that antigay slurs are hate words that won't be tolerated.

School officials did not return calls for comment.

Featuring educators who specialize in the following programs:

- [Continuing Education](#)
- [MBA Programs](#)
- [Private Schools \(K-12\)](#)

sponsored by:

But Wake administrators say they have dealt with the issue and that they urge tolerance of all students, regardless of sexual orientation.

They point to the school system's sex education policy, adopted in November, that broadens what is taught in grades seven through nine to include not only information about contraception and teen pregnancy, but also tolerance for gays and lesbians.

Eric Sparks, senior director for guidance for Wake schools, said this is the first year that the school system has held training sessions to update and educate school counselors and social workers about helping homosexual and other students deal with their sexuality.

"What we have found is that counselors in the field did not receive any [or much] training in their graduate work regarding this," Sparks said. The goal is to help all students and to give school staff the understanding, vocabulary and rules they need to help students, he said.

In the four training sessions, gay students shared similar sentiments as Dillow and the Enloe student. Some students said that they would like all staff to have training in the sexual orientation issue.

Support groups reach out

Melissa Siebert, director for Safe Schools N.C. and a member of the Triangle Gay-Straight Alliance Support Network, said the number of gay-straight alliance groups has increased over the past several years as more students feel comfortable about who they are sexually.

"About five years ago, there were two [GSA groups] in Chapel Hill, one in Wake, maybe four total," Siebert said. "And now, there are 12, mostly in Wake."

But, she said, there is a downside to gay students' growing visibility: criticism and harassment. Like the debate over sex education itself, many parents would rather not have their children deal with issues such as sexual orientation.

Siebert said all parents, students and educators need to be aware and respectful of each others' feelings.

Five years ago, the Chapel Hill-Carrboro school board became the first in the state to include sexual orientation in its antidiscrimination policy for students and staff. It also extended the policy to its recruitment and hiring practices.

Policies against discrimination and intolerance are one

way to deal with the problems gay students face, but Michael Dillow and the Enloe student say that schools and society need to foster acceptance, not just legislate it.

Staff writer Delawese Fulton can be reached at 836-4952 or dfulton@newsobserver.com.



[Help](#) || [Feedback](#) || [Contact Us](#) || [Parental Consent](#) || [Privacy Policy](#) || [User Agreement](#)

Â© Copyright 2003, The News & Observer Publishing Company. All material found on triangle.com (including newsobserver.com, carynews.com, chapelhillnews.com, smithfieldherald.com, and easternwakenews.com) is copyrighted The News & Observer Publishing Company and associated news services. No material may be reproduced or reused without explicit permission from The News & Observer Publishing Company, Raleigh, North Carolina.

The News & Observer Publishing Company is owned by [The McClatchy Company](http://TheMcClatchyCompany.com).