

## Local News

# Family life curriculum up for grabs in Fairfax

by Sheila Walsh

Seven dissenting members of a school board-appointed committee recommended February 23 to remove all mentions of homosexuality from the Fairfax County sex education program.

"The lessons and corresponding media create a picture of sympathy for homosexual youth that far surpasses possible mistreatment and disrespect," wrote the dissenting members of the Family Life Education Curriculum Advisory Committee [FLECAC] in their Feb. 23 minority report to the school board.

Twenty-three FLECAC members voted in support of the majority's report, which recommends keeping lessons on homosexuality in the sex education program. The school board will vote March 6 on the future of the sex education program, known as the Family Life Education Curriculum. It appointed the panel in January 1994 to review the way the county teaches about homosexuality, AIDS, safer sex practices, and abstinence.

Mychele Brickner, a FLECAC member who helped write the minority report, said she feels lessons on homosexuality could be harmful to students.

"With students that age, it's normal to go through a period of identity confusion," said Brickner, a former nurse who has three children enrolled in Fairfax County public schools.

Brickner said she feels telling students in high school that one in ten people are Gay and that homosexuality is perfectly normal would cause even more confusion.

Students might think they are Gay just because they feel a little different, she said.

"I don't think we should be planting seeds like that if some kids at that stage and age are confused," she said. "It's a dangerous thing."

The dissenting members called their 75-page report "Family Life Education: Approaching an Abuse of Children and Teachers?"

"The propaganda is aimed at instilling fear and guilt in young people and blaming society and religion for the plight of young people who suffer from identity confusion and suicidal tendencies," the dissenters wrote. "Certainly, hate crimes, verbal abuse, and violence must be addressed whenever they occur," the minority report continued. "However, research indicates that many variables influence homosexual suicide and many transcend the issue of sexual orientation."

The minority report was referring to a 1991 study conducted by researchers at the University of Minnesota and the University of Washington. The researchers found that nearly one third of self-identified Gay male adolescents from the nation's Pacific Northwest and Upper Midwest may have attempted suicide, some more than once. The study found other risk factors besides homosexuality, including "family problems."

The dissenting FLECAC members also issued a "minimum recommendation" in case the school board does not vote to nix the two lessons about homosexuality taught in district high schools. Under that recommendation, teachers would inform students that many Gay people are able to change their orientation through reparative therapy. Teachers would "distinguish between moral judgments about homosexual behavior — about which people may in good conscience disagree — and the treatment of homosexual persons."

"Depressed and confused students," the committee recommended, "should not be directed toward 'hotlines' that affirm homosexual behavior — as the current lessons direct them."

"Students should be given concrete examples of the kinds of mistreatment (name calling, degrading graffiti, harassment, violence) that violate respect for homosexual persons as human beings," the dissenting FLECAC members wrote in their 'minimum recommendation.'

Marianne Vakiener, who heads a group seeking to keep the Gay lessons in the district's curriculum, said she is not sure how the board will vote March 9.

"I think the vote will be very close," she said. "I think people on both sides of the issue are speaking up and realizing their voices will count. I'm more hopeful now that they will save lessons than I was in December."

"When I first started mobilizing people in the beginning of January on this topic, I thought 'the board has gone with the minority in the past but we'll have to try.' But there are so many people mobilized on our side that I'm more hopeful we have a chance."

Patrick Mullins, chair of the Fairfax County Republican Committee and an opponent of the lessons on homosexuality, said he too is unsure how the board will vote. The first Fairfax County school board election will be held this November. Current school board members, said Mullins, are trying to gauge what will sell to the voters rather than what is best for the school district.

Mullins also noted that the Republican majority on the school board may bode well for the dissenting FLECAC members. Fairfax County Republicans, he said, plan to campaign on Republican Gov. George Allen's agenda this November. That agenda, he said, includes Allen's recommendation to make the Family Life Education Curriculum optional for school districts around the state. Some Gay activists opposed Allen's recommendation, saying it would endanger recent strides made in AIDS education and in debunking negative stereotypes of Gays.

"As the chairman of the [Fairfax County] Republican Party, I've got problems with [the Family Life Education Curriculum] just as a lot of other people do," said Mullins. "We're more in tune with the type of Family Life Curriculum Gov. Allen proposed."