

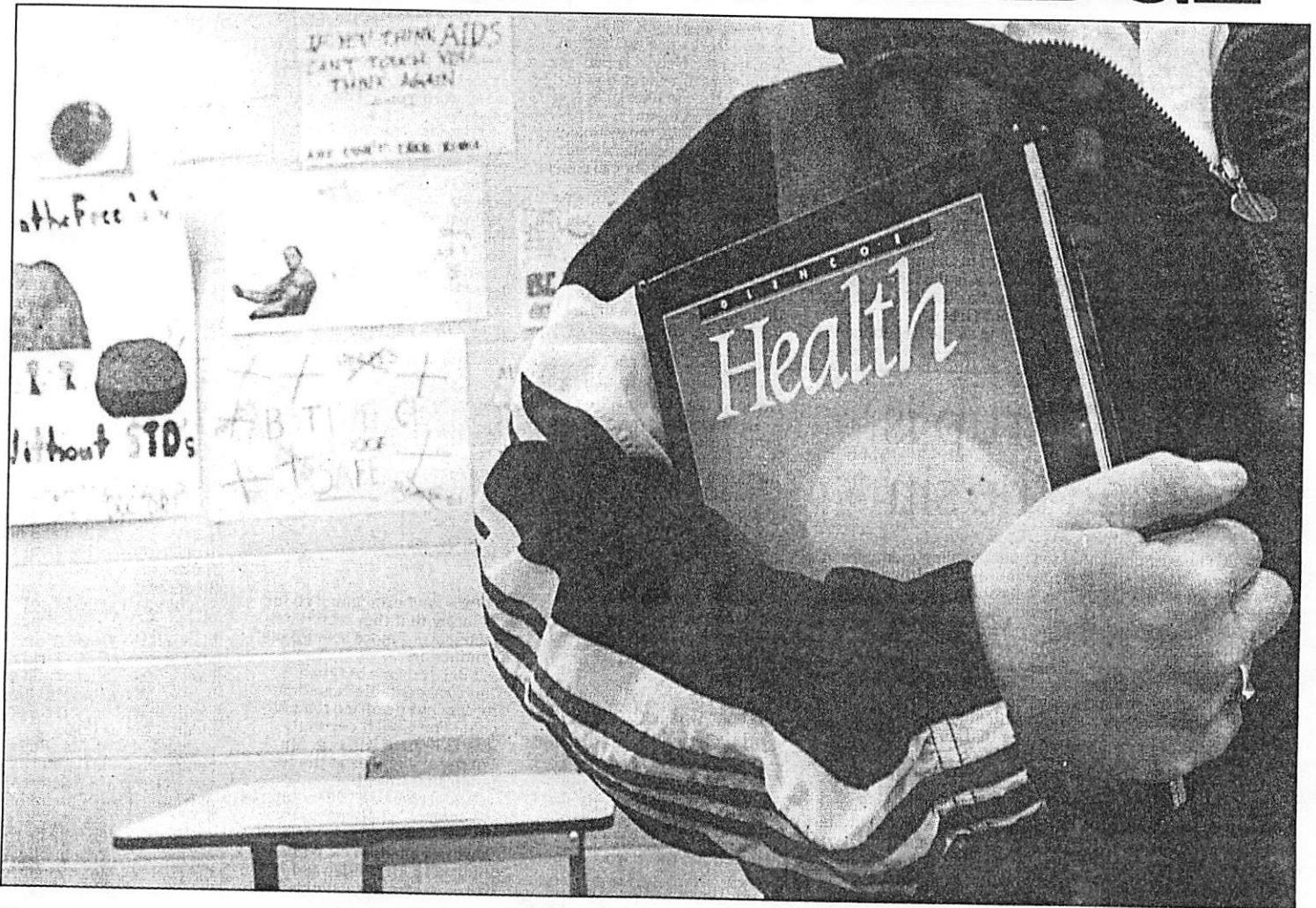
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The Washington Times

SECTION C

CARNAL KNOWLEDGE



Photos by Kevin T. Gilbert/The Washington Times

The Fairfax County School Board faces a decision tonight as to which of two lessons on homosexuality should be included in this sex-education book.



Sex-education coordinator Jerald Newberry

COVER STORY

Policy on teaching about gays to be decided in Fairfax / 4

TOP OF THE NEWS

Woman says Aramony paid for her lavish junkets / 3

DISTRICT

Ex-guard likens prison to 'slave auction' / 3

MARYLAND

Legislators told tourism chokes on smoking ban / 8

LIFE TIMES

New drama relives fight for civil rights / 10

'They're polarizing positions. They will never meet.'

Lessons on gays cause furor in Fairfax schools

Parents are divided on emotional issue

By Maria Koklanaris
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

To Carter Thomas of Burke, the Fairfax County school system's lessons about homosexuality promote an illegal lifestyle in stark violation of his parental rights. "Facts are what the schools are all about. Beliefs are the province of parents," says Mr. Thomas, father of two children at Lake Braddock Secondary School.

"If parents abdicate their authority, that's a tragedy, but there is no room for the government to pick that up." Joyce Parkin of Reston couldn't disagree more.

"I feel very comfortable stating that the lesson plans do not promote nor condemn homosexuality. They simply present the facts," says Mrs. Parkin, mother of two children at Aldrin Elementary School.

"There is no hue and cry from the majority of parents, saying, 'Get these lessons out of there.'"

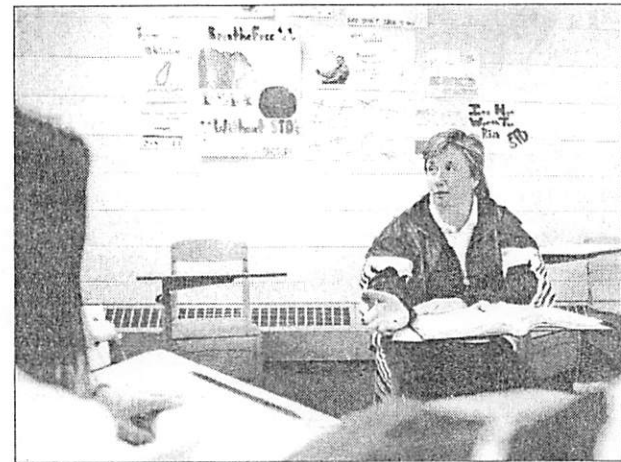
Tonight, the Fairfax County School Board will have to decide whether it agrees more with Mr. Thomas or Mrs. Parkin about how public schools teach sex education.

The two parents illustrate the sharp division over whether the county's sex education program merely teaches tolerance of homosexuals or crosses the line to endorsing homosexuality as a "viable alternative" to heterosexuality.

The board may decide neither view is correct. Instead, it may opt for the middle ground by eliminating some parts of the lessons and toning down others — a course that would satisfy no one.

"We'll never solve this," says School Board member Louis J. Zone, Hunter Mill Republican. "They're polarizing positions. They never will meet."

In the past few weeks, parents, teachers and students have packed School Board meetings and intensely lobbied Mr. Zone



Lisa Langley discusses sexual topics with her students.



Photos by Kevin T. Gilbert/The Washington Times

Joyce Parkin of Reston shows support for the lessons about gays.



Carter Thomas is against teaching kids about homosexuality.

■ "I feel very comfortable stating that the lesson plans do not promote nor condemn homosexuality."

and the other 11 members of the majority-Republican board.

That in itself is not rare. But the nature of the lobbying, because of the subject, has been unusually vigorous and emotionally charged. National groups such as the conservative Heritage Foundation and the liberal People for the American Way have weighed in, with the former urging the board to abandon the curriculum and the latter pushing the board to keep it.

Locally, parents on both sides have spread the word about the curriculum via phone, computer and fax lines. They wrote hundreds of letters to board members, promising that the sex education vote will influence how they cast their own ballots in the first Fairfax County School Board election this fall.

Critics of the program also used notices in church bulletins to get their message out, but many say the law, rather than religion, is the issue.

"We've been called a faction, or 'Christian conservatives,' and those are misleading labels," says Rebecca Bocchino of Burke.

Mrs. Bocchino, a mother of three, says the schools should not teach a subject that violates Virginia law. That law bans homosexual behavior.

"It's truly a grass-roots bunch that has come together," Mrs. Bocchino says. "That to me tells me it has a legitimacy."

Some even felt the issue warranted risking personal or professional repercussions from peers or colleagues. They revealed private lives and thoughts in public.

One student told the School Board and a crowd of 500 people that she is bisexual and pleaded with the board to keep the curriculum in place.

"For many years, I was confused because of my attraction to both males and females," said Liz Hatch, a junior at the Thomas Jefferson High School for Science and Technology. "I thought that nobody else had these feelings, so I was unable to discuss them with anyone."

A sex education teacher told the same crowd that training materials she received were strong-

LEARNING ABOUT HOMOSEXUALITY

Excerpts from Fairfax County schools' lessons on homosexuality, taken from the curriculum guide for teachers. Lessons take up one or two class periods in each grade.

In ninth grade, students:

- Are taught that "we're all sexual beings from the time we're born until the time we die. As we mature we will continually have to evaluate what is best for ourselves sexually."
- Are taught about physical attraction and that such feelings may be confusing, "especially when it is toward someone of the same sex."
- View "What If I'm Gay?" — a 27-minute film about a high school sports star who is coming to terms with his homosexuality. His friends taunt him after they discover a magazine in his room featuring pictures of naked men. (The pictures are not visible.)
- Complete a worksheet on the film. Sample questions: "Which character did you think was struggling with his or her sexual orientation?" "What did Todd do in an attempt to deny his confusion about his sexuality?"

In 10th grade, students:

- Are taught that "same-sex friendships are normal" and that fondness between friends of the same sex "does not generally translate to overt sexual behavior."
- Are taught that there are several theories of what causes homosexuality and disagreement on which is correct.
- Are taught that homosexual behavior puts them "at high risk" for contracting the AIDS virus and may jeopardize some social relationships.
- Are taught that under Virginia law, homosexual acts are considered crimes.

In 12th grade, students:

- Take a course about government and the family that includes information about types of sexual behavior that are against the law in Virginia, including homosexual acts.

The Washington Times

ly biased toward homosexuality and portrayed those who don't agree with homosexual behavior as bigots.

"One gets the feeling from the county that teachers must be indoctrinated, perhaps even brainwashed, with the overabundance of pro-homosexual arguments," said Rebecca Lotane, a ninth-grade Family Life Education teacher at Annandale High School.

The issue has been simmering in Fairfax County since January 1994, when the School Board, on the motion of Chairman Gary L. Jones, asked a citizens committee to study how the county teaches about homosexuality, abstinence and sexually transmitted diseases, including AIDS.

The 35-member Family Life Education Curriculum Advisory Committee (FLECAC) of parents, teachers, clergy and students advises the School Board on sex education issues. Last month, members submitted two reports to the board, one endorsed by 23 members, another by seven. The remaining members either did not vote on the reports or chose not to endorse either one.

Mr. Jones, Springfield Republican, says a look at these lessons was long overdue. Between 1990, when a citizens committee that worked on the county's original sex education curriculum was disbanded, and 1993, when the new committee was formed, "there was no community input, no community oversight," Mr. Jones says.

"That's why this whole process has been necessary," he says. "Now the board is wrestling with how much information is appropriate."

■ The 35-member Family Life Education Curriculum Advisory Committee advises the School Board on sex education issues.

The report signed by a majority of the committee members recommends making only slight changes to the curriculum. The report signed by fewer members recommends a major overhaul and says removal of the homosexuality lessons would be the "optimum" choice.

Both sides say they represent the "mainstream views" of Fairfax County parents. Those committee members in the majority say they are reflective of the county as a whole.

But authors of the second report say they are in the minority on the committee only because it is filled with appointees from school administration. They advocate disbanding the current committee and setting up a new one that includes only appointees of the School Board.

"This committee is so stacked that the issues don't get adequate airing. Any problem that anyone wants to bring up is voted down," says Mychele Brickner, a committee member from Springfield. "There has to be a better system for parents to raise issues."

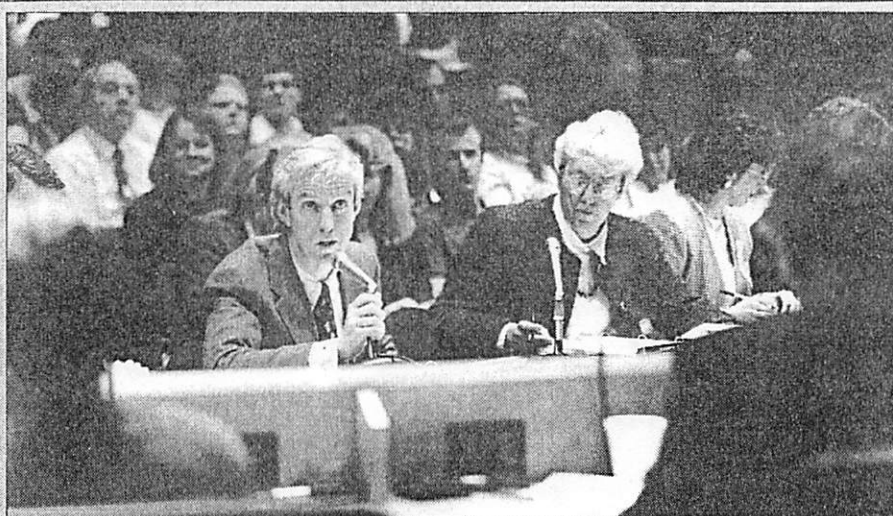


Photo by Kevin T. Gilbert/The Washington Times

Jerald Newberry, coordinator of the Family Life Education program, testifies on Tuesday to the Fairfax County School Board as Nancy Sprague, assistant superintendent of schools, listens.

Program coordinator under fire

Parents hit 'pro-gay agenda'

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Some parents critical of the lessons about homosexuality included in Fairfax County's sex education program have raised questions about whether the program's coordinator should keep his job.

The parents say Jerald Newberry, coordinator of what the schools call family life education, has a "pro-gay agenda." They worry that he unfairly influenced the sex-education curriculum to reflect that bias.

These critics point to Mr. Newberry's award last summer from the National Education Association. He received the award, for which the NEA's Gay and Lesbian Caucus nominated him, for developing several NEA workshops about homosexual teachers and how to teach homosexual students.

In a newsletter describing Mr. Newberry's award, the Gay and Lesbian Caucus praised him for creating "one of the most accurate and engaging sexuality education programs in the country, which deals honestly with many difficult and controversial topics, including homosexuality."

"Professionally, I feel it's very relevant because he's in a position to influence the curriculum," says Rebecca Bocchino, a Burke parent. "It's not a personal attack on him."

But other parents say Mr. Newberry's award and the workshops he developed are not relevant.

"I think it's very unfortunate some people are spending time and energy on this," says Vicki Long, an Annandale parent who supports the curriculum as it is.

Parents on both sides have written hundreds of letters to the School Board, either supporting Mr. Newberry or saying he should go.

Mr. Newberry says the charge of bias is "ridiculous."

"There were persons who were focused on getting rid of parts of the curriculum," Mr. Newberry says. "When they get worried they might not be successful, they go after a person instead of sticking to the issue. I am hoping that will stop."

Mr. Newberry says he's also a member of the NEA's black caucus and its Hispanic caucus and has developed programs about racial and ethnic minorities as well as sexual minorities. He says he is not nearly as influential over the curriculum as some parents make him out to be, although as coordinator he oversees its development.

A citizens committee reviews the curriculum and the School Board has final say, so "no one person could ever have the ability to have undue influence on the curriculum," he says.

"I am not the issue here; the issue here is the curriculum."

— Marla Koklanaris

Teachers' reading raises parents' fears

THE WASHINGTON TIMES

One of the most contentious parts of the sex-education debate in Fairfax County concerns materials that only teachers are supposed to see.

The materials — collections of articles from newspapers, magazines and medical journals — are optional reading for sex-education teachers. They may be read on their own for reference but are separate from the curriculum guide that lays out lesson plans. Students are not to have access to the materials.

Many parents and some School Board members say most of the articles in the reference guide promote homosexuality and fail to stress teen abstinence from sexual intercourse. Far fewer articles present the other side of those issues, they say.

And they contend that regardless of whether students see the articles, teachers who read them will be influenced and could pass that

perspective along to children.

"There are parts that are offensive to me," says School Board Vice Chairman Stuart Mendelsohn, Dranesville Republican. "It needs to be more balanced."

But board member Letty Fleetwood, Providence Democrat, disagrees.

"I think the teachers in our system are well-equipped to read and digest material" without being indoctrinated by it, she says.

The debate over the articles has become so intense that top school administrators say they think the system should stop giving them to teachers and instead ask them to do reference reading on their own, if they wish.

"Dr. Spillane and I are intending to make [those materials] history," says Nancy Sprague, assistant superintendent for instruction, speaking for Superintendent Robert R. Spillane. "I don't think we could ever satisfy the issue of balance."

— Maria Koklanaris