

Students unite against harassment of gays

By GREG JONSSON
Of the Post-Dispatch

It's not uncommon for gay and lesbian students at Amanda Rhodes' high school to hear everything from whispered name-calling to verbal slaps as they walk through halls.

But the harassment doesn't stop there.

She's heard of some who have been physically attacked, and others who have dropped out of school to avoid the abuse.

"Give me a minute to walk down the hallway and I could hear three or four ignorant remarks against gay people," said Rhodes, a sophomore at Francis Howell North.

Rhodes and fellow students are forming a gay-straight alliance club at the school — following a trend at other high schools in the area and across the country. Their objective is simple: fight discrimination and harassment.

Schools that don't already have such clubs may have them soon.

Alliance clubs are "growing like wildfire," said Dennis



Ladue High School sophomore Liz Ricks listens on Wednesday to a former Kirkwood High School student discuss prejudices he endured.

Nicely, co-chairman of the St. Louis area's Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

Rhodes and students from more than a dozen other high schools in the area met Wednesday afternoon at a conference hosted by Kirkwood High School's gay-straight alliance.

"I'm molding a better community, I feel," said Stephen Laux, a sophomore and member of Clayton High School's gay-straight al-

liance. "I'm promoting understanding and tolerance. Our school is pretty supportive, but other (gay-straight alliance clubs) don't have the support we have."

Students came from schools across the area, from Soldan and St. Louis University high schools in St. Louis to Lindbergh and Parkway high schools in St. Louis County and Francis Howell and Fort Zumwalt

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North high schools in St. Charles County, among others.

Some already have gay-straight alliances and came to talk about the challenges they have faced and learn more about what they could do to keep their clubs going.

Others came with the hope of starting up clubs soon.

Kirkwood students led one session describing the obstacles they faced in starting one of the first alliances in the area in 2001. They warned that students at most schools will face strong opposition. The session noted that some Kirkwood residents and parents were outraged when the club formed.

Other clubs have started similar controversy. The gay-straight alliance at University City High School was the subject of a meeting of parents this year called by a school board candidate who opposes the club.

Some opponents believe the clubs might encourage students to become gay. Others think clubs related to sex don't belong in the schools.

But the clubs are about safety and recognizing gay and lesbian students as human, supporters say.

"We're not talking about how to have sex," said Phil McFarland, the gay-straight alliance's faculty adviser at Kirkwood High School. "It has nothing to do with sex. It's about tolerance."

McFarland said the school is safer and more open to gay and lesbian students since the club started.

Nicely said the clubs can help make other schools safer, too. He said he doesn't want to hear from more students like one from Kirkwood who said he'd contemplated suicide.

"I've heard that story more than once, and I've heard it in a lot of different places," Nicely said. "I want to see the students from this generation not have to experience what my generation experienced."

The conference also featured a session on lobbying, led by representatives from Promo, a statewide lesbian, gay, bisexual and

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transgender advocacy group. McFarland said students from several high schools plan to journey to Jefferson City on April 9 to convince the Legislature to pass anti-discrimination legislation.

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