

# Wake board votes 5-4 to expand sex education

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**RALEIGH** - A divided Wake County school board voted Tuesday to update and expand the sex-education curriculum beyond the abstinence message that has been mandated since 1995.

In a 5-4 vote, the board agreed to give students in grades seven through nine more lessons about contraceptives, sexually transmitted diseases, tolerance for gays

and lesbians, the effects of teen pregnancy and building healthy relationships.

Sexual abstinence until marriage would still be the primary focus, but some board members complained that the changes went further than parents wanted.

"The inclusion of tolerance is a thinly veiled attempt to equate the homosexual lifestyle with the heterosexual lifestyle," board member Bill Fletcher said.

Board member Jeff York said he supported the changes because he stood by the judgment of school administrators who had recommended them. He added that the tolerance lessons will be discussed in one class period a year.

"I find it hard to believe it would lead to the moral decline that some feel it will," York said.

Supporters of the existing curriculum also failed 5-4 to block new health elective courses in

grades 10 to 12 that will offer a more comprehensive discussion of sex education.

Topics that may be covered include what makes for healthy relationships, resources for dealing with unhealthy relationships, gender issues, sexual harassment, prevention of sexually transmitted diseases and unintended pregnancies.

The new electives are expected to begin in the 2003-04 school

year. Associate Superintendent Jo Baker said administrators don't think they need the board's permission to proceed.

The changes sparked heated debate, leading 600 people to attend a public hearing. No public comment was allowed Tuesday.

Administrators also announced Tuesday that they're abandoning a proposed policy change that

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### How they voted

The Wake school board agreed by a 5-4 vote to "enhance the school system's implementation of the state Abstinence Until Marriage curriculum for grades seven through nine with updated scientific information and additional units on healthy decision-making and refusal skills; healthy relationships; and the impact of values, personal goals and family expectations on teenage behaviors." By the same 5-4 split, the board declined to block the introduction of high school electives that will offer more comprehensive discussion of sex-ed topics.



Clark

Gill

Parry

Quigg

York

Fletcher

Head

Oxholm

White

### SEX ED

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would have permitted school employees to give students information about where they can obtain contraceptives. Baker said there were too many legal problems with changing the policy.

The major focus Tuesday was the revised abstinence-until-marriage curriculum, which may be taught as soon as next spring.

Most school districts have opted to use the abstinence-until-marriage curriculum since the General Assembly made it the standard in 1995. About a dozen school districts offer comprehensive sex education, an option allowing for full discussion of sexual orientation and condom use; two are in the Triangle — Durham

and Chapel Hill-Carrboro.

The issue had been brought to the forefront in March when the Wake County School Health Advisory Council, a group appointed by the school system, recommended expanding the curriculum to comprehensive sex education.

Supporters of comprehensive sex education had argued for sweeping changes, while supporters of the abstinence-only program lobbied to keep the curriculum largely unchanged. Administrators compromised by recommending revisions that fall short of comprehensive sex education but offer more detailed information than is now taught.

"This is a good staff that has thoughtfully thought about this issue and has come up with a good compromise that addresses issues

on both sides," said board Chairwoman Kathryn Watson Quigg, who cast the tie-breaking votes.

The new curriculum will increase the time spent on sex education in grades seven through nine from four class periods a year to up to 12 periods. Parents will retain the right to keep their children out of sex-education classes.

### Tolerance debated

Much of the debate centered on the inclusion of diversity and tolerance lessons. While the current curriculum has been all but silent on sexual orientation, the revised curriculum will encourage students to show tolerance for people of different groups, including those of different sexual orientations.

Administrators said the lessons

were added because of complaints students raised about being bullied and harassed by classmates.

Fletcher said the new curriculum promotes permissiveness. According to Fletcher, homosexuality is a behavior, not a trait people are born with, such as eye color.

Fletcher said the school system's character education task force specifically rejected tolerance as a character trait to be taught. He said teaching it would limit the ability of teachers to question values in situations such as a seventh-grade girl touting in class that she had slept with 12 boys.

"This will undermine parental support for our entire character-education effort," Fletcher said.

Fletcher unsuccessfully tried to introduce resolutions to exclude the tolerance lessons from the

sex-ed curriculum and to assert that homosexuality is chosen behavior rather than an intrinsic human characteristic.

Board member Beverley Clark called it "manufactured hogwash" to think that including tolerance was meant to promote homosexuality. She said you can be tolerant of someone without accepting their beliefs.

### Questions of focus

Fletcher also complained that the curriculum veered too far from stressing abstinence by focusing more on the effectiveness of contraceptives.

In addition, the new curriculum will focus on abstinence from sexual intercourse rather than from sexual activity, which the current curriculum generally does.

Fletcher objected to the change, saying the new focus excludes oral sex.

Board member Amy White said the focus should be on providing better training to health teachers on the existing curriculum.

"Our current curriculum has been comprehensive enough, but our training hasn't been adequate," White said.

Clark added that what has been lost in the rhetoric is that Wake isn't switching to comprehensive sex education.

"The No. 1 message that children in Wake County will still be taught is that abstinence is the best way for avoiding pregnancy and STDs," she said.

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