

# Sex-ed debate focuses on gays

■ The Fairfax County School Board is divided on how much to teach.

By Maria Koklanaris  
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

Fairfax County schools are preparing to tackle the divisive topic of what teachers in sex-education classes should tell students about homosexuality.

In interviews with The Washington Times, some parents and school board members said they favor the county's current lesson plan — two class periods where students learn that "sexuality encompasses all types of feelings, attractions and sexual expressions," including same-sex ones.

But others said such an approach is sympathetic to, rather than just tolerant of, homosexuality. They argued that the schools have no business giving students such a message.

"What really bothers me is that I feel we don't need to be teaching about homosexuality per se in the classroom. We need to be teaching it's wrong to discriminate [against] somebody for whatever reason," said Mychele Brickner, 43, a registered nurse and mother of three.

Mrs. Brickner noted that while sex education is a state mandate, including the topic of homosexuality in a sex-education curriculum is not part of that mandate.

"Fairfax County has gone above and beyond the mandate," she said.

But Nancy Scott, a county teacher and parent of an eighth-grader, said she felt "very strongly that there's no question that the topic [of homosexuality] does belong."

"I also feel very strongly that our curriculum in no way promotes homosexuality," she said.

The Fairfax debate coincides with Virginia Gov. George F. Allen's recommendation that the General Assembly repeal the mandate for sex education. Mr. Allen said each locality should design its own curriculum, if it chooses to have one at all.

In Fairfax, the current debate is expected to culminate in a vote by the School Board in February or March.

A 35-member committee of parents, teachers, students and

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clergy advises the School Board on sex education, which the state calls family-life education.

Nearly a year ago, the Republican-controlled board voted to ask the panel to review several parts of the curriculum, including lessons about homosexuality, AIDS and abstinence from sexual intercourse.

That motion came from board Chairman Gary L. Jones, a Springfield District Republican. Constituents who believed the lessons about homosexuality went too far struck a chord with him, Mr. Jones said.

"I tend to agree that while students should have an awareness of homosexuality, I don't think we need to emphasize it," he said.

The advisory panel, on which both Mrs. Brickner and Mrs. Scott sit, already has reviewed lessons on AIDS and HIV, the virus that causes the deadly disease.

The advisory panel is now reviewing lessons about homosexuality and is expected to take up lessons about abstinence, teen-age pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases other than AIDS at a meeting next month.

The subject of sex education has divided the School Board, mostly along party lines. The board's eight Republicans, led by Mr. Jones and Gary A. Reese of the Sully District, generally have supported restricting the curriculum. The four Democrats generally want to leave the program alone.

The current deliberations about homosexuality have attracted national attention, including a CBS News program about sex education that has yet to air.

Homosexuality "is such a sensitive, emotional issue," said Rosemary Lynch, who sits on the advisory panel and is the parent of both a high school freshman and a recent graduate of the Fairfax County schools. "We've all been bracing for this."

"We ought to look at the issue of homosexuality, understanding the following: It is not a viable alternative lifestyle, but we will be tolerant of our fellow human beings," Mr. Reese said. "We will not discriminate, but our curriculum must inform students of dangerous lifestyles. I do not want our students to go out and begin experimenting with a lifestyle that carries with it certain dangerous implications."

Last week, members of the advisory panel received a copy of a

new manual that teachers may use as background for lessons. The school system abolished a previous manual earlier this fall and developed the new one after Mrs. Brickner and her allies complained formally to the School Board.

The critics called the first manual "biased, slanted and highly politicized," with an "enormous amount of material pertaining to homosexuality" — including explicit descriptions of sexual acts. The new manual "has a greatly diminished area on sexual orientation," Mrs. Brickner said.

Currently, teachers broach the topic of homosexuality in the ninth grade. That discussion lasts for two class periods and includes the film "What If I'm Gay?" about a high school sports star who is presented as confused about his sexuality.

The boy, Todd, is taunted by all his classmates except one girl and another boy. Students write slurs on Todd's locker. He becomes depressed. To prove to himself he is not homosexual, he pressures a girl he had dated to have sexual relations with him, but she refuses. At the end of the film, Todd confides in a teacher, who tells him to talk with his parents.

Students also discuss homosexuality within a separate lesson about discrimination. In it, students get a hypothetical example about a man who lost an election after his opponent leaked to the media that he is homosexual. Students are asked whether they think voters discriminated against him.

Both the new manual and the one it replaced are collections of articles from newspapers, magazines and medical journals. The manuals are separate from the curriculum guide that lays out teacher lesson plans.

The guide, which will be the main subject of review by the advisory panel and School Board, tells teachers what to say and what questions to ask. Teachers can be disciplined — as an Oakton High School teacher was last year — for introducing topics or materials not in the guide.

Jon Almquist, who teaches sex education at Marshall High School near Tysons Corner, said the lessons on homosexuality are "very good information and appropriate."

But Mr. Almquist said he is not surprised the School Board asked the advisory panel, on which he also sits, to review content.

"You should always have somebody looking over your shoulder," he said.