

Schools 'coming out' to address gay students

By GREG KOWALSKI
STAFF WRITER

Growing up is tough enough, but when you're an adolescent not sure about your own sexuality it can be devastating.

He'll use the knowledge he gained at the workshop to help the gay and lesbian students he encounters when the new school year begins in September.

Innovative approach

Goal of the NEA workshop was to teach teachers, counselors and administrators about misunderstanding, homophobia, violence directed at homosexuals, stereotyping and inappropriate teaching and counseling.

"It's definitely an innovative approach," said Colasanti. "I thought it was a very balanced presentation. They gave a perspective of students at risk."

Students often have a feeling of alienation. "Society often views them as evil. Lesbians and gay are a part of society. They should be recognized the same rights (as other people)," said Colasanti, who is gay.

"Gays and lesbians embrace the concepts of values, such as respect, pride in the country and a belief in God," he said.

For the past two years the Birmingham school system has included discussions on homosexuality in its human sexuality curriculum, which is a part of its health courses. The program brings in a panel of

■ In this presidential campaign where "family values" are emphasized but not defined, many gay men and lesbians are worried they will be pushed back into the closet.

speakers, including gays and their parents, to discuss the issue. Parents and students don't have to attend if they don't want to.

According to Shirley Bryant, school spokeswoman, "We're trying to respond to what students find in real life."

Teaching immorals?

Not all parents see it that way.

Pat Kendro of Bloomfield Township sent five kids through the Birmingham school system; four attended Seaholm.

"They (schools) should stay out of it. This should be private," Kendro said.

"You're not allowed to teach morals in the schools for fear religion might color the subject — but you are teaching immorals and apparently feel that's perfectly in line with a good (Birmingham Public School System) education. Not so," Kendro wrote to the school board.

Kendro said she is from "the old school," where emphasis was placed on the reading, writing and arithmetic. Courses on homosexuality "are not what schools should be about," she said. "It's a matter of conscience," she added.

Bloomfield Hills Schools don't have a specific program on homosexuality, but the matter is covered in its regular school health curriculum.

Andover High School principal John Toma said cases of student homosexuality have been "few and far between."

"We've had some instances, but not very often," Toma said. Counselors at Andover have taken seminars on the subject and guest speakers have come in to speak to them so they can assist students. But he said there have been so few inquiries that the issue has not generated a lot of attention.

No further seminars are planned, but he added, "Obviously, if we had a need for it, we would do it (have more seminars) again."

Backlash on 'values'

Julie Enzser, program director of Affirmations Lesbian and Gay Community Center in Ferndale, as support group, said she has gotten calls from gay and lesbian students in almost all the local school districts.

"It's very traumatic," Enzser said of student's coming to the realization that they are gay.

"If a student thinks they are gay, we are someone they can feel comfortable to talk to," said Enzser. Affirmations has a hotline number (398-GAYS), which operates from 6 to 11 p.m. weekdays.

It is non-judgmental, Enzser said, and simply offers a voice that a troubled teen can talk to.

Enzser said that the recent emphasis on "family values" has caused a backlash against gays and lesbians.

Boyd Bosma, senior professional associate of the NEA agreed.

"There has been an increase (in anti-gay feeling)," said Bosma.

NEA sponsored the seminar Colasanti attended.

"The issue is so polarized," Bosma said. "It's a tricky issue. Teachers tend to represent the values of their communities." And the NEA has come under fire from such conservative national figures as Pat

Robertson for sponsoring gay and lesbian training workshops for teachers.

The NEA is the largest union in the country with about 2.1 million members including teachers and support staff.

Students unsure

The workshops cover three main topics: protecting the rights of gay students and staff, providing information about homophobia, and dealing with violence and gay bashing.

"Participants have loved it," said Bosma. Teachers and staff from all 50 states have attended the annual workshops.

How do students view the issue?

They don't seem to be sure.

"I don't know how I'd react," said Senbalm junior Brad Tweeter, when asked if he knew a fellow student was gay or lesbian.

"I'm not really sure," said freshman Susan Lockman.

"I haven't had any contact personally with gays," said junior Neal Sweeney.

But a former Seaholm student, who asked not to be named, said, "I have known some gays, but not in high school. I don't have any problem with them."

Arthritis Foundation offers course

The Arthritis Foundation, Metro Detroit Branch is offering a six-week course to give people with arthritis the knowledge and skills needed to take a more active part in their arthritis care.

The class will begin Thursday, Sept. 10, and will be 5:30-7:30 p.m. each Thursday for six consecutive weeks at Beaumont Medical Office Bldg., 6700 N. Rochester Road, Ro-

chester Hills.

The \$20 course fee covers textbooks and printed materials. Pre-registration is necessary. Please call the Arthritis Foundation at 350-3030. Scholarships are available.

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