

## Broward Celebrates Diversity Day

More than 170 students and advisors in Broward County took part in the fourth annual Broward Diversity Day celebrating the rights of all individuals to be accepted regardless of their orientation. Students attending Diversity Day identify as straight, gay, lesbian, bi-sexual and transgender. These Broward high school students were proud to have a forum where they could promote all of the hard work they are doing in their school organizations and encouraged each other to continue their efforts despite some of the negative feedback they receive from their peers.

“It is critical for youth today to be part of a small caring community, said Teri Williams, Project Bridge-Prevention Specialist for the Office of Prevention Programs at Broward County Schools. “Students who are marginalized because of their sexual orientation are often most at risk.”

Williams said that most of the important work has been done through the school’s Gay, Straight Alliance Clubs (GSA) to build safe places for all youth and should be celebrated.

“Students and their sponsors, through the GSA Clubs and events like Diversity Day, are responsible for laying a foundation for peace in their schools and communities,” Williams said. “This is a human rights issue that we should all be proud to be part of.”

The students participated in socio dramas, various ice-breaker activities, and small group break-out sessions to share specific interests. Broward County Mayor Ken Keechl encouraged the students to continue with their effort and was so impressed with how far they have come in such a short period of time. Speakers from SunServe, The Pride Center at Equality Park and Alternative Prom also addressed the group.

Cheri Cummings, the GSA Advisor at Coconut Creek High School, said programs like this empower and educate the youth so they can take the messages back to their schools.

“These programs help to prevent bullying and suicide and support the rights of every human being,” Cummings said.

“As a child, I was shy and embarrassed about myself, but today, I feel great,” said Sophomore Taina Diaz.

The students who took part in the day said they were appreciative that Broward County Public Schools would support this effort.

“I am so grateful that the school board accepts our community and is trying to help us feel safe and comfortable in our school,” said Stefan Hansen, a senior at Taravella High School and the Vice President of his GSA.

"As sponsor of this annual event, Safe Schools South Florida was thrilled to see the primary goals of our terrific Broward agency collaborative/planning team were met," said Robert Loupo, Co-founder and Executive Director of Safe Schools South Florida. "We were able to help reduce the isolation of LGBTQ students and connect them with other LGBTQ students and allies in other Broward schools; and through these connections empower them as individuals and student groups to go back into their schools and communities to be the change they want to see in the world."

Loupo credited Teri Williams with the success of the conference and said it would not have happened without her support and hard work.

“She has inspired so many educators and students to get involved and to make their schools safer for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth and all youth in their schools. Attendance at the conference was up 400 per cent this year, and this was a direct result of Teri and her work," Luopo said.

Social worker and career counselor Keachia Bowers brought five students with her who she said were struggling with their sexual identity. She said that “being gay or lesbian” is taboo in the black community. However, she said this forum was a place for them to feel safe and normal. The students and advisors felt a strong sense of community and were encouraged to go back to their schools and educate the faculty and administrators about acceptance of everyone.

“Power is something you take...nobody is going to give it to you,” said Dolly Asmar, the GSA Advisor at Deerfield Beach High School. “Everyone needs to be treated equally and with respect and we were give the knowledge to help others learn how to treat us fairly.”

Williams said she hopes to see support and school engagement grow each year during this annual event.