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local news

Dated issue

A flyer posted on Marshall High School grounds forbids same-sex couples at dances

by Inga Sorensen



PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

Officials at Marshall High School, a public school in Southeast Portland, vow to change the wording of the school's dance guidelines which state that a student's date "must be of the opposite sex."

"We never meant to imply that same-sex couples could not attend a dance together—really," says Marshall High School Vice Principal Paul Cook, when asked to comment about "dance regulations" that have been posted on school grounds.

The flier outlining the criteria for students planning to attend school dances says, in part: "Only Marshall students and dates may attend the dances! Dates MUST be the opposite sex." Both Cook and Marshall High School Principal Colin Karr-Morse say they are fully aware of the posted guidelines, though when we initially contacted Karr-Morse about this he told us he "didn't know if it was a districtwide or schoolwide policy."

According to Cook, the rules have been posted for many years, but he says it doesn't mean that same-sex couples are prohibited from attending a school dance together.

"We've had trouble in the past with friends bringing [same gender] friends to a dance," says Cook, citing an example of a female Marshall student who brought a female friend [who was not a student there] to a dance. This friend, says Cook, had previously broken up with a boy at the school "and there was a confrontation between them at the dance."

"That's what we're trying to avoid," he says, adding that a same-sex couple attended a Marshall High School prom at the end of the last school year.

Many, however, would read "Dates MUST be the opposite sex" to mean that one's romantic companion to the dance must be of the opposite sex.

"I don't read it that way at all," contends Cook. "I take 'date' to mean 'friend.'" Some may find

that reasoning as believable as the perennial excuse "The dog ate my homework."

"So does that mean they're moving from sexual orientation discrimination to sex discrimination?" questions Marc Abrams, a Portland attorney and a Portland Board of Education member. "Either way, it concerns me," he says.

Abrams, you may recall, led the successful charge several weeks ago to remove military recruiters from Portland public schools due to the Department of Defense's discriminatory ban on openly gay, lesbian and bisexual servicemembers. When we contacted Abrams about the Marshall High School posting, he immediately fired off a letter to Jack Bierwirth, the superintendent of Portland Public Schools.

"This is the first time in my three years as superintendent that I've heard anything like this," says Bierwirth. "Either this was a case of somebody being very overt in expressing their biases or it's a case of somebody putting their foot in their mouth. I'd like to think it's the latter."

He adds, "I know they've had trouble with groups of boys coming in and interfering with dances at Marshall. Perhaps that's what the rules were supposed to address or perhaps they changed their story when they spoke with our office. I hope that isn't the case."

Bierwirth says when his office contacted Marshall High School about the questionable wording he was told "it would be omitted."

As for whether there are official guidelines stipulating what the gender of a student's date must be, Bierwirth says: "It's definitely not a districtwide policy. We've worked very hard to sensitize administrators and educators at all of our schools about sexual orientation issues. We've been running workshops around this, and at the very least all of the principals have been exposed to this. It's imperative we not overlook the needs and concerns of our students, including gay, bisexual and lesbian young people."

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