

# local news

**S**ome sexual minority youth advocates are questioning the Oregon Department of Education's failure to include sexual identity questions in a statewide survey of Oregon youth which is designed to pinpoint suicide risk factors among that population. That omission, they say, could place the well-being of sexual minority youth in jeopardy.

"Studies have repeatedly shown that gay and lesbian youth are at risk for suicide for a variety of reasons: unaccepting family, societal condemnation, a lack of support," says Jay Roberts, a licensed clinical social worker with the Portland-based Mental Health Services-West, a nonprofit social services organization. "Yet here we have this study that doesn't even mention this as a risk. It's very disturbing."

Roberts is referring to the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which state officials say is conducted every other year as part of a cooperative agreement between the state Department of Education and the federal Centers for Disease Control. Oregon and other states that sign on to the agreement receive federal funds and in return are asked to comply with certain CDC requests, such as conducting the risk survey.

In Oregon, ODE contracted with the Oregon Health Division to assist with the survey, which asks questions about everything from students' nutritional habits to their sexual histories to whether they smoke or drink alcohol.

No questions, however, sought to determine the sexual orientation of the respondents, despite other findings that show that sexual minority youth are vulnerable to harassment and violence, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness and suicide.

A 1986 study by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Task Force on Youth Suicide, in fact, placed suicide as a leading cause of death among gay and lesbian youth, estimating that as many as 30 percent of completed youth suicides were sexual minority youth.

Prior to sending out the statewide survey, OHD set up a committee to review questions and submit to ODE any recommendations for changes. According to state health and education officials, ODE makes the final determination of which questions will be asked.

"We tried to get a question in about sexual orientation," says Tammy P. Alexander, OHD's adolescent health coordinator. "It wasn't a blatant question. We simply wanted to ask in the survey's 'sexual activities' section what the sex of the student's last sexual partner was. That was it. Unfortunately, [OHD] didn't have the last say."

Preliminary 1995 data from nearly 14,000 middle and high school students in 50 schools statewide found that an estimated 3,000 teens say they have been treated for a suicide attempt. The survey found the following to be risk factors associated with youth who say they have at-

## Risky survey

*State omits sexual orientation from school questionnaire, leaving sexual minority youth vulnerable*

by Inga Sorensen

tempted suicide: a history of physical or sexual abuse; drug, alcohol or tobacco abuse; harassment and violence in school; and weight problems.

"It's a pretty standardized survey," says Paul Kabarec, an education specialist with ODE. "The survey is used in schools across the country. That way the CDC can get a sense of any national trend." Kabarec concedes, however, that ODE has the authority to make changes to the survey if it believes those adjustments could be beneficial.

"I believe that Oregon is on the cutting edge in terms of the questions it asks [in this survey]," says Alexander. "We ask some very personal questions

Oregonians between the ages of 15 and 19 committed suicide. From 1991 to 1993, the rate was 16 per 100,000—more than a fivefold increase. (According to federal data, Oregon has the 10th highest suicide rate in the nation.)

The latter timetable coincides with the onslaught of anti-gay-rights ballot initiatives launched by the Oregon Citizens Alliance. Some believe the campaigns have created a climate of intolerance that has contributed to the climb in the teen suicide rate.

"There is no doubt about that in my mind," says Steve Fulmer, director of information resources



PHOTO BY LINDA KLIEWER

about things like sexual abuse, about whether the student has had sexual intercourse, and what they know about HIV." And the survey asks about more mundane behaviors, such as whether a teen wears a seat belt.

Yet the line appears to be drawn on questions relating to sexual orientation. Alexander asks: "How can we assist this population if we can't even identify them?"

From 1959 to 1961, three in every 100,000

for Portland Public Schools. "We may think it's easier for young gay people today, but it's not. Many years ago we didn't talk about this issue, but today young gays and lesbians are hearing their parents discuss homosexuality at the dinner table. If the parents are disapproving, it can be very painful."

He continues, "In the old days we could hide in the closet. That was certainly hard, but these kids today are under enormous pressure. They're hear-

ing the terrible messages of the OCA, and oftentimes they don't know where to turn.... To say that smoking leads to suicide is absurd. Being gay in a disapproving environment can lead to suicide."

Alexander adds: "I would imagine an unfriendly atmosphere can make some kids less likely to seek support."

Anne Bliss, president of the Portland chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays says, "This needs to be part of the study. We tend to want to ignore gay and lesbian youth, but I think society has a responsibility to these kids."

Portland PFLAG has distributed informational packets to Oregon schools statewide. The packets, which contain research materials that indicate gay and lesbian youth are at risk for suicide, are designed to inform and assist educators who will undoubtedly be working with sexual minority youth.

"I don't think the general public realizes the statistics on these kids," says Bliss. "We have to talk about this, and parents who support human sexuality education in schools have to speak up."

Speaking in ODE's defense, Kabarec says: "There are certain special interest groups in Oregon that are looking for any avenue to attack the schools. We're trying to move ahead in terms of getting teachers educated and trained about HIV and AIDS. We'll lose support for things we are doing if we move too quickly. This is a very conservative agency."

When asked whether he believes the needs of sexual minority youth have been compromised by ODE's tentative approach, Kabarec responds: "That's a very good question, but I believe in the long run this will be a more effective way to get things done."

"What is he doing, running for public office or trying to lower the teen suicide rate in Oregon?" asks Fulmer.

Some have questioned whether Norma Paulus, the state schools superintendent who is currently running for the GOP nomination for the U.S. Senate seat left vacant by Bob Packwood, has urged her agency to lay low on gay issues for political reasons. (A side note: Unlike many states, Oregon elects its state schools superintendent rather than appointing one.)

"That's ridiculous," says Paulus campaign spokeswoman K.C. Cowan. "The issue has never even come up. We've never been told to lay low on any gay issues."

Cowan says if Paulus were nervous about addressing gay and lesbian rights issues she never would have spoken out in favor of gay and lesbian rights legislation or other gay-positive issues.

According to Kabarec, ODE will use the data from the Youth Risk Behavior Survey to formulate programming to meet the needs of those considered at risk. He says he is unaware of any plans by the Oregon Department of Education to create programs specifically addressing the needs of sexual minority youth.



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