

local news

A tough assignment

Despite objections, Northwest school systems want to make schools safe for all students—including queer youth

by Inga Sorensen

If a student walks down the hallway and is called a 'nigger,' one would expect teachers and administrators to do something about it. That should also be the expectation if a student is harassed and called a 'faggot.' There's no difference—schools must be safe environments for *everyone*," says Jack Bierwirth, superintendent of Portland Public Schools, a school system serving an estimated 57,000 students.

The district recently came under fire from critics following a front-page article and subsequent editorial in the state's leading daily newspaper, *The Oregonian*, which said that educators at Grant High and Lane Middle schools were receiving skills-building training that could sensitize—if not actually introduce—teachers to issues involving sexual minority youth.

The pilot program placed an emphasis on providing instruction to adults about how to properly counter harassment of that highly vulnerable population.

The Feb. 27 editorial, however, urged the district to revamp the training, claiming that it strayed "dangerously and inappropriately into moral judgment." Additionally, *The Oregonian* complained that the training guidelines "are themselves insensitive to the concerns of people whose religious or moral beliefs regard homosexuality as wrong, or those with more traditional views of marriage and sexuality. The district should strive for common sense and neutrality in this discussion."

"We are being neutral in that we want schools to be a safe and positive experience for all students," says Bierwirth. "I guess a person who wants us to actively condemn homosexuality would think we were not being neutral. Well, we're not going to do that, and we are going to require that all educators, counselors and administrators go through this training when we get it honed."

According to Bierwirth, the training guidelines were "not quite completed," when *The Oregonian* caught wind of the story. "We had received specific requests from [Grant and Lane school officials] to do some training around this issue. We went ahead with it, even though we were not fully ready with the materials," says Bierwirth, who speculates that a disgruntled educator who attended the Grant or Lane pilot training griped about it to the newspaper. "Because this is a sensitive matter, everything needed to be perfect—and it wasn't," he says. "That's where we made our mistake...but we are going ahead with our plans that all educators receive this training. Before that happens, though, we're going to make sure we go over every bit of information with a fine-tooth comb."

Judy Chambers is a licensed clinical social worker who worked in the district's drug prevention office from 1987 to 1994. Chambers, who helped develop the training using a private grant from the Peace and Development Fund in Massachusetts, maintains that a "peripheral" brochure included in a pilot program packet became the primary focus of controversy.

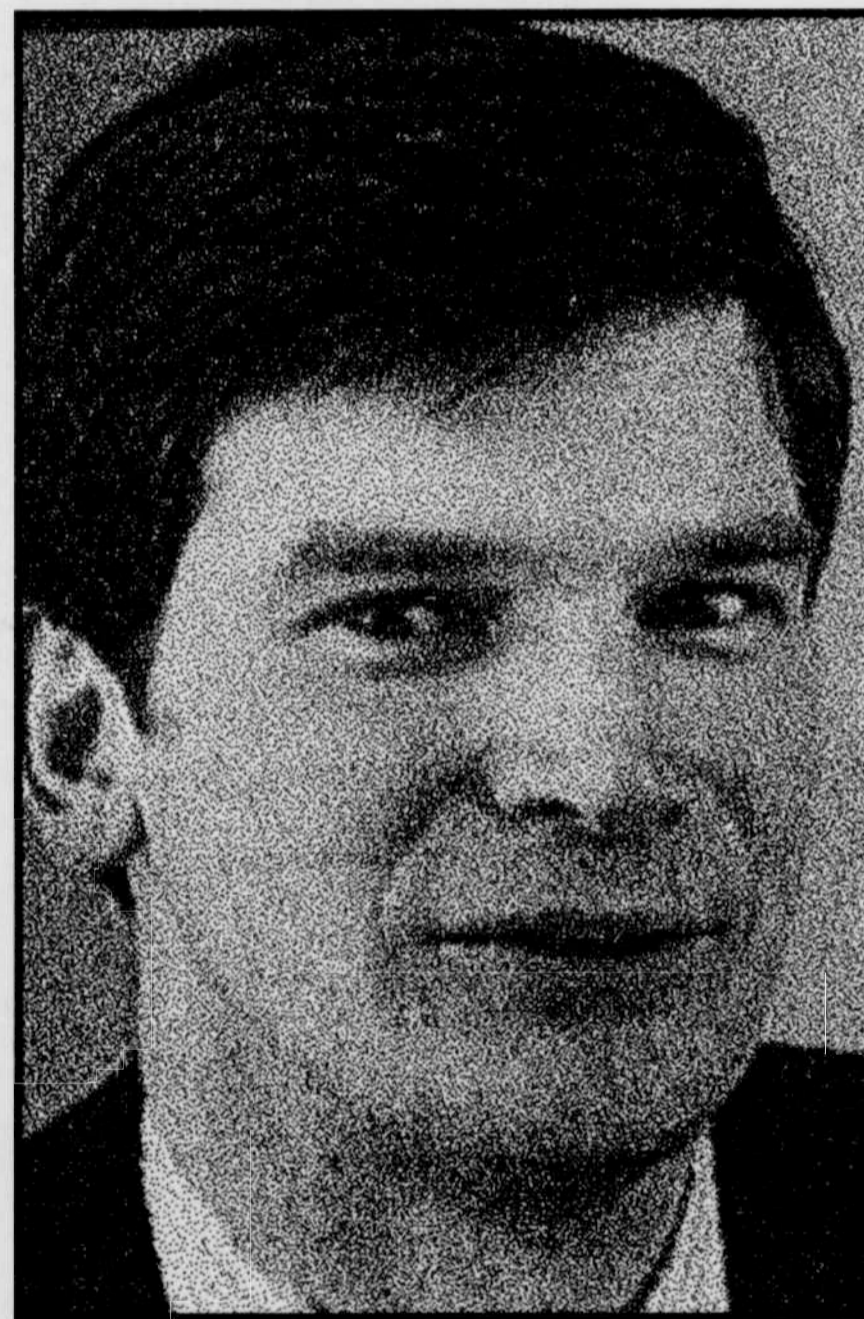
"It talked about using inclusive language," says Chambers, who was part of a 1991 task force that detailed widespread harassment of sexual minority youth in Oregon schools. "It basically says that people shouldn't assume that everyone is married and heterosexual, and urges people to be a bit more thoughtful about their choice of words so as not to offend others. All it was was an

incidental piece of literature."

Chambers says the pilot trainings, which lasted about two hours, primarily consisted of two half-hour videos and related exercises. One video introduces educators to basic concepts such as gender and sexual orientation; the other features a discussion among a panel whose members include a child of lesbian parents, a retired gay school teacher, and a lesbian parent.

"That video is designed to build an appreciation [among training participants] of what it's like to be a gay person or the child of a gay person," says Chambers. "Unfortunately, *The Oregonian* never bothered to ask us about the trainings. They only focused on that brochure."

According to Bierwirth, the trainings, which currently are not mandated, will "be required by



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all district educators, counselors and administrators after all the materials are fully reviewed by district officials."

He says the training is part of the district's overall goal to create a safe school environment for students.

He acknowledges that abuse of youth who are gay or lesbian—or simply perceived as such—is a widespread problem. Numerous studies indicate that queer youth are at greater risk of harassment than their heterosexual peers, and a study released in 1989 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Task Force on Youth Suicide 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 by sexual minority youth.

From 1959 to 1961, three in every 100,000 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. Ac-

ording to federal data, Oregon has the 10th highest overall 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.

"I don't think the general public realizes the statistics on these kids," Anne Bliss, president of the Portland-metropolitan chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays told *Just Out* during an interview late last year.

PFLAG was so concerned that the needs of sexual minority students were not being met that it distributed informational packets to Oregon schools statewide. The packets, which contained research materials detailing the risks associated with being a sexual minority youth in a largely unsupportive society, were designed to inform and assist educators who would undoubtedly be working with sexual minority youth.

"We tend to want to ignore gay and lesbian youth, but I think society has a responsibility to these kids. We have to talk about this, and parents who support human sexuality education in schools have to speak up," she said.

standing that schools have a responsibility to provide a safe learning environment for all students."

"If a student is called a faggot or a nigger not enough for a teacher to be well-intentioned," says Bierwirth. "It's imperative they actually have the skills to handle that type of difficult situation in a professional manner. As well-intentioned as many of our staffpeople may be, the vast majority don't have the professional training to cope with such volatile scenarios."

In neighboring Washington state, concerned citizens are also lobbying school officials to create safer school environments for sexual minority youth.

This past fall, the Safe Schools Coalition, a coalition of 34 public agencies and private organizations, released its second annual report, which documented 27 incidents of harassment and violence—ranging from name-calling to two lacerations to six rapes—against gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender youth in Washington public schools.

According to the report, in some cases aggressors spit on targeted youth, threw things at them or tried to pull their clothes off. The report says that although some of the incidents were witnessed by adults, they went unchallenged.

The incidents took place in 12 high schools, three middle schools, and three elementary schools and are considered to be the tip of the iceberg. In many cases, young people said they felt they should not turn to their parents or guardians for support.

In response to the findings, the coalition called for school boards, teachers and parents to take steps to protect sexual minority youth. School nurses and counselors were urged to display informational posters to alert sexual minority students they were safe to talk to. The coalition also urged supportive adults to teach young people how to protect themselves and how to stand up to harassment they may witness. Educators were encouraged to teach accurate information and responsible messages about gay men and lesbians.

"I think once people learn how unsafe schools really are, it will begin to change attitudes around school support for sexual minority youth," says Beth Reis, a coalition member who works for the Seattle-King County Health Department. "I would love to see Judith Billock [Washington state superintendent of public instruction] office sponsor a training specific around this issue, and I think what Portland Public Schools is doing is absolutely fantastic."

"I guess it would be fair to say that we aren't doing enough around sexual minority youth," admits Chris Thompson, a Billings spokesman. "Staff aren't equipped to handle harassment of gay students and there is a need for further training. We at the state level are not capable of handling that—local school boards and school districts really need to take that on—but we will certainly try to provide what support we can."

Thompson adds: "I don't know if any of our [coalition's] findings surprised the superintendent, but she was certainly horrified by the magnitude of the problem as it was detailed in the report."

The issue of sexual minority students gained national prominence in February when the Lake City Board of Education voted to ban nonacademic clubs rather than allow gay, lesbian and bisexual high school students to form a school club.

The action sparked student walk-outs. It led to the formation of a Utah group called Gay, Lesbian and Straight Teachers' Alliance and a local high school teacher came out as gay: both precedent-setting actions in Utah.

As for Portland, Superintendent Bierwirth says the recent brouhaha proves why sensitivity training is so vital.

"There's still so much misinformation and misinformation out there," he says. "If anything, this reinforces why we must do this."