

DON'T ASK, DON'T RECRUIT

Grumbling over the Portland Public Schools' military recruiting ban prompts response but no capitulation yet; the policy may become an issue in upcoming school board elections by Inga Sorensen

Three years have gone by and Marc Abrams has not been converted. "It was wrong then and it's wrong now," says Abrams, an attorney who serves on the Portland School District Board of Education and chairs the state Democratic Party.

In late August 1995, Abrams, who was then just seven weeks into his first term on the school board, took on a potentially explosive issue: removing military recruiters from school grounds due to the federal government's "don't ask, don't tell" policy, which prohibits openly gay men and lesbians from serving in the military.

An estimated 150 people—mostly supporters of Abrams' position—turned out for the

Some also speculate the issue has been resuscitated because a school board election is slated for March 9. Abrams and other board members who supported the recruiting ban are battling for re-election.

"The real threat is that this is going to be made into an election issue," says Bonnie Tinker, a member of the Sexual Minority Parents Advisory Group, a gathering of sexual minority parents who advise the district on ways to make the schools safe and fair for sexual minority youth.

"This is a very important election," says Tinker, adding that SMPAG representatives are among those planning to ask board members to continue supporting the ban during a Jan. 11 school board meeting.

who are disproportionately disadvantaged and in need of opportunities."

Abrams counters that position, saying, "You hear the argument that by removing the military from the schools, we're limiting important career opportunities for young people, particularly those who are at risk. Well, I say to them, 'What about gay and lesbian young people? Are they not at risk?'"

In a recent missive to Abrams, outgoing openly gay state Rep. George Eighmey thanks the school board member for his "championing the cause of protecting the rights of all minorities."

In the letter Eighmey notes an important distinction: "The policy does not ban the military from recruiting high school students, be they minorities or otherwise, it merely prohibits the military from doing so on school property."

He says, "There are numerous other opportunities for military recruiters to promote the jobs available in the armed services. They may mail information to high school students, advertise on television and radio stations, locate recruitment offices near schools or attend off campus activities frequented by high school students. Our students are not denied the opportunity to interview for jobs in the military.... As long as the political leaders of our nation enforce the

"As long as the political leaders of our nation enforce the 'don't ask, don't tell' policy, which blatantly discriminates against openly gay and lesbian persons, we must not allow military recruitment on local government property."

—outgoing state Rep. George Eighmey, in a letter to Portland school board member Marc Abrams

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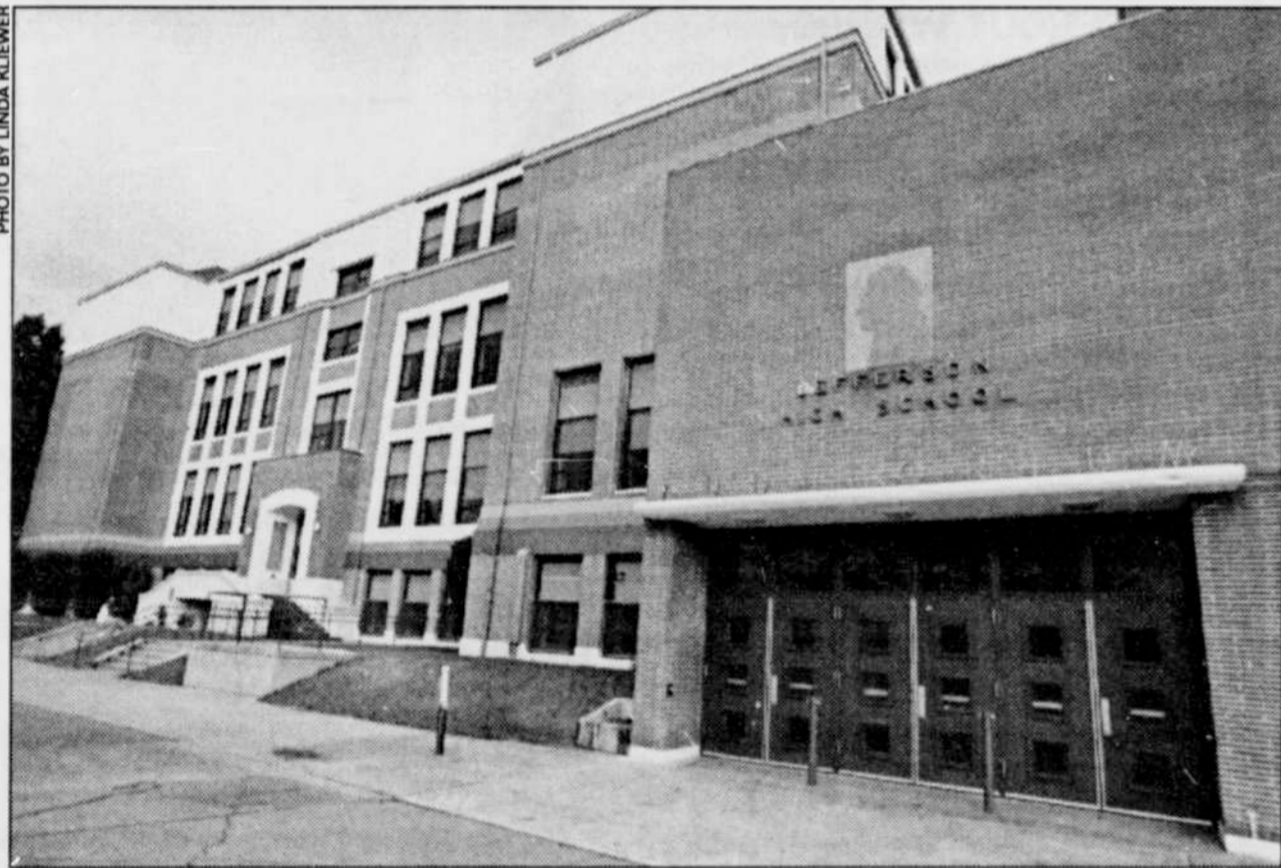
Eighmey then urges: "Let us continue our pioneering ways by insisting our military treat all of Oregon's children with dignity and respect. We cannot say to our gay and lesbian youth that they are not acceptable to serve our nation simply because they are willing to be open and honest about their sexual orientation."

Abrams says he's not out to punish anyone, meaning those who have defied or ignored the ban; he simply wants district personnel to adhere to policy.

He adds he won't shift his position unless there is a change of circumstances, like the military ending its discriminatory policy.

During the last legislative session, state lawmakers passed a bill to lift the recruiting ban, but Gov. John Kitzhaber vetoed it, saying the decision should be left up to local school boards.

■ The SEXUAL MINORITY PARENTS ADVISORY GROUP is encouraging the public to attend the Jan. 11 school board meeting, set for 6:30 p.m. at the district offices at 501 N. Dixon in Portland. For more information about SMPAG or the meeting, call 228-3892.



Despite a districtwide ban, military recruiters recently visited Jefferson High School

Aug. 31, 1995, meeting at which the board passed two nondiscrimination measures.

One resolution, adopted by a 6-1 vote, stipulated any employer who discriminated on the basis of ethnicity, gender, race, sexual orientation or other factors should be prohibited from recruiting in public schools. The second resolution, which passed by a 5-2 vote, specifically proclaimed the military to be an employer that discriminates, and barred it from schools.

"I'm exhausted and exhilarated," Abrams told *Just Out* the morning after the vote, which made the district the second in the country to bar military recruiters. (A Rochester, N.Y., school district did so in 1991.)

Since the Portland prohibition was implemented, all has appeared peaceful. However, bubbles of trouble have surfaced recently with reports that military recruiters have been on two North Portland high school campuses—Jefferson and Roosevelt—during the past few weeks, which is a clear violation of the board's policy.

"Things have been relatively quiet," admits Lew Frederick, a district spokesman. "There has been little discord.... I'm not sure what's prompting this now."

Some surmise the installation of new Superintendent Ben Canada has motivated recruiting advocates to act. While it would take a board action to reverse the policy, Frederick says Canada has asked to review the policy, and, according to some media reports, will urge the board to do the same.

"It's vital people show up," she says. "It makes the statement that people care about sexual minority kids as much as they do other kids."

Frederick confirms that Jefferson's principal, Lela Roberts, was aware that recruiters were recently on school grounds, but it is still unclear whether Roosevelt's principal, Bonnie Hobson, had any idea.

Some opponents of the board policy, meanwhile, argue the recruiting ban limits students' career opportunities.

The state's largest daily newspaper is one of those critics. After the vote three years ago, *The Oregonian* blasted the school board.

When the issue re-emerged, the paper was back on the attack, running a Dec. 24 editorial that knocks the policy as "misguided."

It also applauds Roberts and like-minded folks, saying they should "have the blessing of the entire district, administration and board. Why? Because the no-recruiting policy hurts students—particularly less fortunate students who don't have the luxury of helping some distant adults advance their own political agendas."

The editorial continues: "The military recruiting ban denies these kids the opportunity to learn about a range of career, college and training opportunities available to them. These benefits include jobs, college scholarships, free medical and dental care, housing and job skills for a post-military career. The sad fact is that this ban particularly hurts minority students,



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