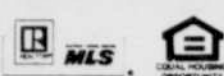


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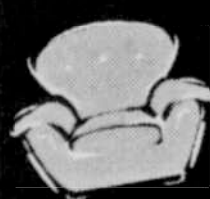
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NORTHWEST news

OCA RETURNS WITH ANOTHER MEASURE 9

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If passed, the Student Protection Act would prohibit any presentation of homosexuality or bisexuality in public schools—including community colleges—"in a manner which encourages, promotes or sanctions such behaviors." It likely would ban HIV and AIDS health lessons, censor sex education, prohibit counseling and referral for gay youths, remove library books

Reports also indicate homosexual youths skip classes at four times the rate of their heterosexual peers because they feel unsafe. Smith says the act would make it impossible for questioning or gay students to get support from teachers, school counselors or even administrators.

Some of those kids will be suicidal. Sexual minority youths are two to six times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers, according to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The agency also says 30 percent of all suicides can be attributed to issues surrounding sexual orientation.

The Oregon Health Division reports suicide was the second-leading cause of death among 10- to 19-year-old Oregonians between 1994 and 1996. It also reports youths who had no caring adults to talk to were three times more likely to attempt suicide.

For some students, school is where they hope to find that support. Smith, a middle school teacher in the Beaverton School District, says all indicators of success go up when students have connections with staff members.

He says when kids feel safe and connected with someone, they have better attitudes, attendance and performance. The OCA's act, Smith says, would make it impossible for staff to connect with students at a crucial time in their lives.

Some opponents say the law would make the situation even



PHOTO BY MARTY DAVIS

Here we go again: Campaign signs like this one from 1992 will be popping up all over town in the coming months

around the state and prevent teachers from identifying themselves as sexual minorities.

Basic Rights Oregon estimates its statewide effort to defeat the measure will cost more than \$1 million.

Although BRO will be at the helm of the effort, others also are busy getting organized and even raising money. The Oregon chapter of the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network is one such group.

It is the largest national organization that works to bring together gay and straight teachers, parents, youths and concerned citizens from all walks of life. The group's main mission is to ensure students and staff in every school are valued and respected regardless of their sexual orientation.

GLSEN-Oregon co-chair Larry Smith says his organization already has played host to the first of what he

hopes will be many house parties—small gatherings of concerned citizens in a private home with the purpose of educating voters and raising money. The gathering, attended by almost 50 people, raised more than \$200 and convinced several volunteers to step forward.

Although Smith is concerned about the ramifications the act's passage could bring to schools, he now sees the campaign as an opportunity as well. He says it can be used to help the public understand what gay students go through and the far-reaching effects discrimination has on everyone.

Smith and others say sexual minority youths are hurting. The Student Protection Act, they say, would make an already hostile environment even worse.

More than 90 percent of sexual minority youths regularly hear anti-gay comments at school. One Iowa study estimated students hear an anti-gay slur 25 times daily.

worse for children who need help dealing with being gay—or even those who are perceived to be gay but aren't. The measure would be bad for schools and all kids because a message of intolerance couldn't be avoided, they say. Others indicate the environment is already bad for many children because of a lack of information.

GLSEN says 75 percent of teachers in this country never have received training about the needs of sexual minority youths. Not only that, the network reports more than one-third of the gay students surveyed hear homophobic comments from school personnel.

Despite the sobering statistics, not everyone is completely upset. At least one Oregonian is feeling great after clearing the first hurdle toward victory.

It is a race Mabon has been running in Oregon since 1992, when he first pitted the Christian right against the gay community and its supporters. "We are elated,"

he said in the press release.

This time, though, Mabon is trying something different: On the OCA's Internet site, he encourages every Oregonian on both sides of the issue to show respect and courtesy. "We can disagree sharply, even passionately, but all within the bounds of human kindness," Mabon said.

■ To become a member, to volunteer or to make a donation, contact GLSEN-OREGON at (503) 973-8489; P.O. Box 20565, Portland, OR 97294-0565; or glsenor@aol.com.

Contact BASIC RIGHTS OREGON at (503) 232-7176; P.O. Box 40625, Portland, OR 97240; or www.basicrights.org.

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