

PRE-EMPTIVE STRIKE

Portland Public Schools board members brace for another battle over military recruiters by Jonathan Kipp

In the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling allowing legal discrimination against gay Boy Scouts of America leaders, the debate over military recruiters in Portland's public schools is resurfacing.

In 1995, the school board adopted two resolutions to deal with the controversy. One motion banned from campuses any employer with discriminatory practices, and the other declared the military such an employer. Military recruitment on school property was banned as a result.

Although other issues were raised at the time that were critical of recruiters, including alleged coercive practices, the ban was based solely on the military's discriminatory practices. Some think the military still practices discrimination against minorities and women, but at issue was the overt bias against sexual minorities—outlined in the "don't ask, don't tell" policy.

Since then, the military has continued to lobby the school district and twice has attempted to regain access to public schools in the City of Roses through the Oregon Legislature. Although unsuccessful thus far, the military continues to apply pressure to board members. Now, some school board members might want to reconsider the district's policy, sources say.

Board member Marc Abrams, who spearheaded the ban, says to overturn it, one of two things would have to happen: a reversal of the overall policy would have to be made, or the military would have to prove it no longer discriminates. The latter is not a possibility, Abrams says.

All indications point to a strict enforcement of "don't ask, don't tell" and continued discrimination against homosexuals by the U.S. military. Since 1994, when the new policy went into effect, discharges of gay military personnel have increased significantly—from 617 in 1994 to 1,145 in 1998.

According to Defense Department documents, "Congress expressly found that service by those who have a propensity to engage in homosexual conduct creates an unacceptable risk to moral, good order and discipline, and unit cohesion." But the military also says sexual orientation is a personal and private matter that is not a bar to service "unless manifested by homosexual conduct," according to Abrams. Effectively, homosexuals who remain abstinent during their service would be in compliance with the policy.

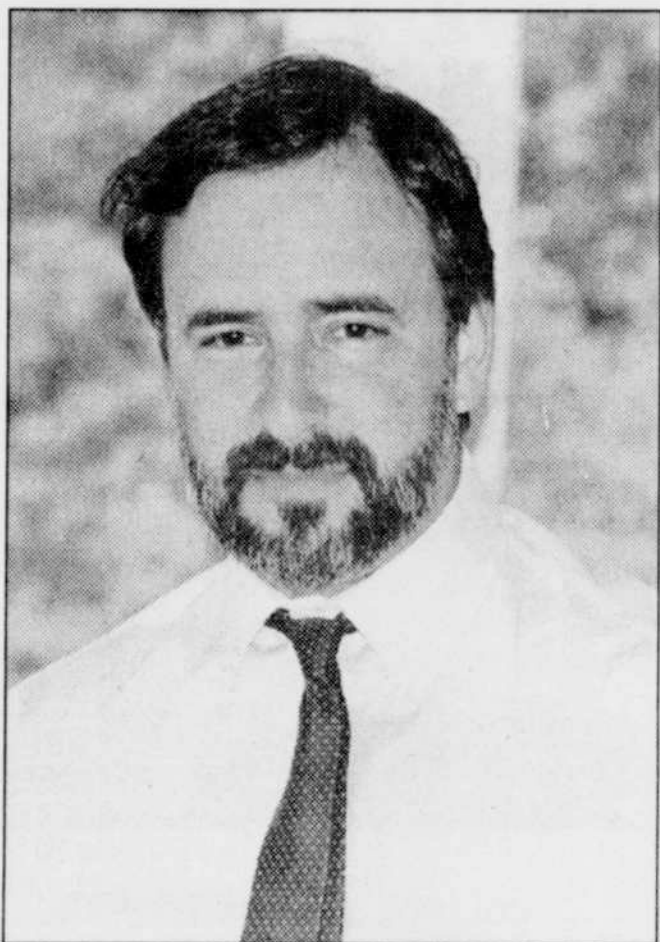
But according to military statistics from the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marines, an overwhelming majority of discharges are based on statements rather than on homosexual acts. In 1998, only 154 of the 1,145 discharges were based on homosexual acts.

Board member Susan Hagmeier says she will support the ban if it comes to a vote because the military is not an equal-opportunity employer. "Allowing recruiters access to the captive audience in the schools implies endorsement of discrimination," she says.

Patricia Hollingsworth, who was one of the primary petitioners for the ban in 1995, says some new board members aren't aware of all the issues surrounding the controversy because they didn't hear the original testimony that led to the decision. She objects to recruitment for many reasons—most related to discrimination.

She says the military has no business being in schools. "It's just unthinkable to me."

Hollingsworth thought a ban would be impossible, she says, until she met Abrams in 1995. She and others now intend to lobby new



Marc Abrams

board members about the entire issue.

The Oregonian called July 24 for the Portland Public Schools board to stop banning military recruiters. The editorial claimed the policy has kept students from hearing about opportunities for jobs, training and money and has been an "unnecessary distraction for the board."

Abrams disagrees and says *The Oregonian* doesn't know what it is talking about. Virtually no time has been spent on the subject in the past five years, he says.

Abrams says the issue was raised in August 1999 during a review of the Oregon National Guard. He says the Guard ignores "don't ask, don't tell," so the board amended the policy and let the Guard back into Portland's schools.

"Two to three hours—tops," Abrams says about the time spent by the board. "At no time has it distracted the school board from its duties."

The Oregonian also called the board hypocritical because it spent more than \$55,000 to keep the Boy Scouts in schools despite alleged discriminatory practices. Why eliminate the military but fight for the Scouts, they asked.

Despite what Abrams' stance was then, he is not mincing words now. "I do not support the Boy Scouts remaining," he told *Just Out*.

But Abrams doesn't expect the Scouts issue to be brought up. "Frankly, with the uncertainty with the military, I don't think the current board is ready to move on that," he says.

The board would need four votes to overturn the ban on military recruiters. At least two members are said to be in favor of a repeal. Others either are undecided and open to public debate or do not want to address the issue any time soon.

School board member Derry Jackson doesn't want the board to revisit the controversy at this point. He wants to focus on other issues and wants time to gather public comment about the ban. "I have encouraged the board to delay considering the question at this time so as to allow the district to remain focused on a couple of key and, in my humble opinion, more pressing matters," Jackson says.

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