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NORTHWEST news

OUT AT SCHOOL

Does Portland Public Schools provide a safe and comfortable climate for queer educators?

by Jaymee R. Cuti

It's a decision most queer people face: whether to come out at work. Many factors influence this decision, including the social climate at the workplace, anti-discrimination measures in place and whether personal integrity would be compromised if the secret was kept.

The same is true for educators at Portland Public Schools, in deciding to be out to their colleagues, administration and students.

A union leader advises teachers to look for protective language in their contracts when deciding whether to come out at school.

"They need to check their collective bargaining agreement for protective language," said Trisha Parks, Beaverton Education Association president. "Look at school board policy for language about hiring and firing but also what the definition of family is, nondiscrimination based on marital status and the right to privacy. Also look at school board policy about the ability to talk about subjects in your classroom."

While teachers insist personal lives should be kept out of the classroom, others notice an inequity between straights and gays in sharing life's milestones such as births, home buying or weddings.

"The comfort level is not applied fairly," said Parks, a lesbian teaching eighth grade at Cedar Park Middle School. "A teacher might talk about being engaged and getting married and I say that's not appropriate, but they get away with it whereas an LGBT person would not be able to be effervescent about buying a house with their partner or a civil union."

Many educators and administrators say they feel protected by the safeguards in place at Portland Public Schools.

"Their civil rights are protected. We have had domestic partnership benefits in our contract since before it was in state contracts," said Ann Nice, president of the Portland Association of Teachers. "To my knowledge, there hasn't been an issue brought to us regarding discrimination of one of our teachers because of their sexual orientation."

The Oregon Education Association has a Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Caucus, which represented the state last month at a national education conference in Los Angeles.

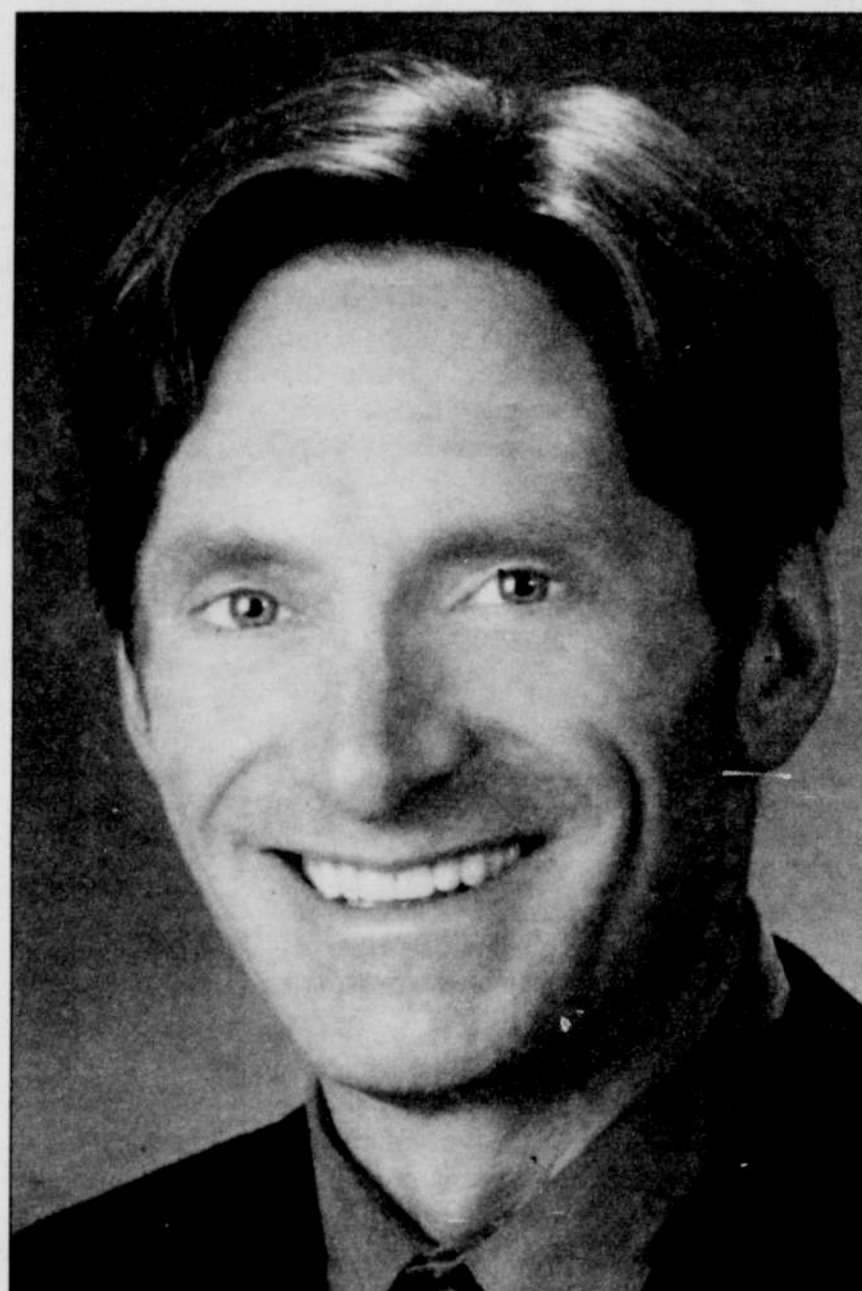
Portland Public Schools Superintendent Vicki Phillips declined repeated requests to make a statement regarding the safety and comfort of sexual minority educators in her district.

"The superintendent didn't see her personal views as relevant to her job as superintendent," said district spokesman Bob Lawrence.

When asked about Phillips' demonstrated support for sexual minority educators, Lawrence said, "She's an ally of the kids."

Support can be found on the school board, says a newly elected gay board member.

"As far as I know, the policies are strong and favorable for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender employees, and I feel comfortable and confident that other board members are just as strong on this issue," said Dan Ryan. "You



Dan Ryan, a gay school board member, says Portland Public Schools is an accepting place for sexual minority educators.

want it to be safe for those that choose to be out, meaning you don't lie when asked and you can talk about family when necessary and appropriate."

A lesbian middle school teacher in Portland, who asked that her first name remain anonymous, is hesitant to come out at school, yet she is confident in district policy.

"I feel supported because I know there are protections at Portland Public Schools," said Ms. King. "I've never felt I had to worry about my job."

King says she is intensely intolerant of homophobia among her students but resists coming out because she doesn't want to jeopardize her relationships with parents.

"Part of it is relationships with the families. I work with a lot of parents, and I don't want to alienate them," said King. "I think kids are a lot more flexible than their family structures."

Many agree that coming out at school can have immeasurable benefits to the individual and students.

"We have students in our school who are going to be part of the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender community, and they need positive, powerful, proud role models," said Parks. "It's not only appropriate to be who you are. It could be lifesaving for somebody else." □