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City Ed

Panel aims to help gay teens

Requests schools adopt anti-harassment policies

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BOSTON — Hoping to prevent suicide among gay teenagers, Gov. William Weld's commission today called on all Massachusetts high schools to adopt anti-harassment policies and form support groups for gay teens.

The Commission on Gay Youth wants public school teachers trained to start support groups and to incorporate lessons on gay rights and individuals into regular classroom curriculum.

"If a famous figure in literature is gay, teachers should mention that," said chairman David LaFontaine of Canton. "If a teacher is talking about current events in social studies, gay rights could be part of that. We want it integrated naturally and where it's appropriate."

While the commission has made some of its recommendations public over the past few months, members today issued their final report.

Weld appointed the 27-member commission last spring, after a federal study revealed that suicide is the leading cause of death among gay teens. A state study found that nearly one-third of the 85 people younger than 24 who killed themselves in 1990 were gay.

But it was unclear how Weld will respond to the commission's requests. LaFontaine said Lt. Gov. Paul Cellucci complimented the report during a meeting Monday, but apparently some of Weld's advisors are skittish about adopting the plan at a time when gay rights are under attack.

"I am very fearful about some kind of backlash among the right wing of the Republican party," LaFontaine said. "My sense is that a number of the governor's advisers are trying to dissuade him from doing these things. They say it will harm him."

The firing of New York City School Chancellor Joseph Fernandez — who wanted to teach school children about gay couples — "is confusing the situation in Massachusetts," LaFontaine said.

"The timing for us is not so good," he said. "But what we're doing is very different from what was done in New York City. We are not try to mandate a curriculum. We're focusing more on training school personnel and getting policies into schools that will change the school atmosphere."

Weld administration officials could not be reached for comment this morning.

The commission will also ask the Department of Education to conduct a comprehensive statewide study on gay students, including violence, harassment and dropout rates.

A 1989 federal study found that 28 percent of gay students drop out of high school, LaFontaine said.

In writing their report, the commission heard testimony from gay teens and teachers and conducted spot surveys at different schools. While they found little physical violence against gay students, verbal abuse was rampant.

Of 398 students surveyed at Lincoln-Sudbury Regional High School, for example, 97 percent had heard anti-gay remarks in school. In a survey of 218 teens who attend gay support groups, 53 percent said they heard such remarks from teachers.