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Massachusetts helps shield gay students

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BOSTON—For as long as anyone can remember, gay and lesbian youths have been shunned and ridiculed by classmates, often as teachers and school administrators looked the other way.

With the passage of legislation banning discrimination against gay and lesbian students in its public schools, however, those who look the other way in Massachusetts might also be looking at a lawsuit. As of mid-March, when the law took effect, students who are verbally or physically abused because of their sexual orientation, or who are in any way denied access to the same education heterosexual students receive, can take a school district to court.

"Gay students now have legal redress when they suffer name calling, threats of violence and unfair treatment in school," said David LaFontaine, who chairs the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, which lobbied for the bill. "Gay students now have the legal right to full participation in all school courses, clubs and activities."

The question now among some of the bill's advocates is whether students understand the extent of these legal protections and whether a single law can counteract decades of homophobia.

Change is clearly evident but sometimes slow, observers say. Karen Harbeck, a Malden, Mass., attorney, educator and commission member, said one example is the matter of support services for students who come out of the closet, services that have not expanded to meet an increased demand generated by the legislation.

"Many parents feel that for kids who are unsure of their sexual orientation, having a gay and lesbian group in might tip the scales," said Principal Gerald Buckley, whose plan for a forum on gay and lesbian issues at her school in Whitman met with opposition. "The upshot has been we haven't been able to have a group in."

Despite such difficulties, this is apparently a bill with teeth, LaFontaine said.

"This has already had a dramatic impact on Massachusetts schools and deals very directly with the issues of harassment and name calling," he said. "School superintendents are very aware that this law is now on the books, and schools are extremely sensitive to the possibility of adverse publicity."

Part of the legislation's success stems from the vigor with which advocates have urged implementation, and the allocation of funds, \$450,000 for the last fiscal year. Approximately one-fifth of this has been available to individual schools and student groups to finance student projects addressing gay rights issues, while the remaining money has been earmarked for state-sponsored teacher training.

Teacher training, which typically consists of day-long seminars, includes presentations by gay and lesbian students and their parents, films and general discussion of gay and lesbian student concerns.

Participants also are provided with some sobering statistics from the commission and a 5-year-old report from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Gay and lesbian youths are two to three times more likely to attempt suicide than their peers and account for 30 percent of completed youth suicides annually.



Photo for the Tribune by Paula A. Scully

David LaFontaine with Sarah Lonberg-Lew and Christopher Hannon, two students who worked for passage of the gay-protection law.

They are also more likely to become homeless after being rejected by families and run a higher-than-average risk of substance abuse.

And 28 percent of gay and lesbian students drop out of school, primarily because of discomfort in the school setting, and for those who do not drop out, academic performance is frequently poor.

"Students who are in an environment where they feel unsafe are unable to focus on their studies and get a proper education," said Sterling Stowell, director of the Boston Alliance of Gay and Lesbian Youth. "We assume if they don't drop out, everything's OK, but it's often a daily, fearful struggle."

Until they attend the seminars, however, many teachers and administrators are evidently unaware of this and often deny there are any concerns.

"This is one of the issues: Many will say they don't have any gay or lesbian students," said Bob Parlin, a history teacher at Newton South High School who trains teachers throughout the state.

Some opposition to the legislation and school training programs does exist. The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights has come out against it, charging that the state is affirming a homosexual lifestyle at the taxpayers' expense, and other conservative groups also have protested.

"Public education is being exploited by a very aggressive special-interest group with an extremist agenda," said C.J. Doyle, the league's director of operations. "It [the law] places limits on free speech ... and promotes discrimination against those who hold traditional values and silences and intimidates anyone who dissents from homosexual ideology."

There is also a serious threat to the law in the form of federal legislation. The U.S. Senate recently passed a proposal similar to one already approved by the House that would cut federal funds to school districts that "carry out a program or activity that has either the purpose or effect of encouraging or supporting homosexuality as a positive lifestyle alternative." That would include counseling and referring students to gay organizations.

But the measure, introduced as part of legislation funding schools, may not make it into the final version of the bill, said Rep. Martin Meehan (D-Mass.).

"Many senators who voted for the amendment probably think it will be removed in the conference committee because a lot of these things often get taken out," said Meehan, who is seeking to establish a national commission on gay and lesbian youth suicide prevention. "There's also no way the Senate can tell schools they can't reach out to students."

Even if the provision were signed into law, the Massachusetts program is unlikely to be jeopardized, said Alan Safran, spokesman for the state Department of Education.

"The Massachusetts program, run by the Department of Education, does not teach acceptance of homosexuality as a lifestyle. What our program does is focus on supporting schools in preventing violence and discrimination against any students and promoting the health and safety of all students," Safran said.

Advocates of the law claim opponents are a vocal minority and a "tremendous amount" has been accomplished on behalf of homosexual students.

"There are over 300 high schools in Massachusetts, and over 130 have already sent teams of teachers, administrators and students to trainings," Harbeck said. "I would say we've now trained over half the high schools in the state."

But it is still too early to gauge the long-term effects, mainly a decrease in the teen suicide and school dropout rates. These will become apparent as attitudes and behaviors change, Harbeck maintained, because homosexual youths no longer will feel so isolated from their peers.

"What's important to understand is that none of these problems is the innate consequence of being gay or lesbian, but the innate consequence of being in an educational system and having no one to talk to."