

The SUNDAY *Times*

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 13, 1996

The Washington Times

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Colorado battle over parents' rights heats up with amendment on ballot

■ **The statewide vote is a first and may influence federal legislation.**

By Valerie Richardson
THE WASHINGTON TIMES

DENVER — As Cindy Pospahala describes it, her decision to support Colorado's Parental Rights Amendment can be traced to the day last year when she tried to excuse her young son from a self-esteem test.

Mrs. Pospahala was familiar with the test, the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale, and thought it sounded "bizarre." The survey asked students to answer "yes" or "no" to a litany of personal questions such as "I think bad thoughts" and "I cause trouble to my family."

"I wrote a letter requesting that he not be involved," she said. Mrs. Pospahala then told her son, Ste-

phen, a third-grade student at Vineland Elementary School in Pueblo, that he had permission to leave the classroom if the counselor came to administer the survey.

"I didn't think it would be a big deal," she said. She was wrong.

When the counselor began distributing the surveys shortly thereafter, her son got up to leave. "He said, 'I don't think my mom wants me to do this,'" Mrs. Pospahala said. "She told him, 'Sit down.' And he had to take the test."

Mrs. Pospahala was flabbergasted. "I couldn't believe it," she said. "To have your wishes ignored like that — we'd done a lot for the school, and they just ignored us." Her four children now attend a private Lutheran school.

It would be impossible to ignore Mrs. Pospahala now. Stories like hers are the driving force behind a revolutionary ballot measure that proponents say would restore

the balance of power between government and families by giving greater weight to the rights of parents.

Amendment 17, known as the Parental Rights Amendment, would add language to the Colorado constitution giving parents the "inalienable right" to "direct and control the upbringing, education, values and discipline of their children." The proposal goes before voters Nov. 5.

Similar proposals have been debated in Congress and in 28 state legislatures, but this year marks the first time the parental-rights question has appeared on a statewide ballot, and the stakes are high.

If the Colorado measure passes, analysts predict a rash of similar initiatives in other states. If it loses, supporters worry it could

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deflate congressional efforts to pass a national parental-rights bill.

"A lot of people are watching Colorado right now," said Mike Norton, chairman of the Coalition for Parental Rights here, which gathered 83,000 signatures to place the proposal on the ballot.

In a poll released by the Rocky Mountain News last month, 76 percent of those surveyed favored the amendment. But most analysts agree that support has eroded somewhat, thanks to a vigorous campaign to defeat the measure being waged by the state's education establishment and scores of left-leaning health and human-rights organizations, including the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League, Planned Parenthood, the AFL-CIO and the Colorado AIDS Project.

At forums and press conferences, officials at Protect Our Children, the campaign to defeat Amendment 17, have raised the specter of increases in child abuse and censorship. Under the proposal, they say a minority of parents would be able to control the curriculum, even dictate hiring and firing of teachers.

Supporters of Amendment 17 deny such claims, but the campaign has put them on the defensive. At a recent debate sponsored by the League of Women Voters — which opposes the measure — the audience repeatedly questioned the speakers about whether the amendment would protect abusive parents.



Photo by Valerie Richardson/The Washington Times

Coalition for Parental Rights leader Kristine Woolley says the proposal "won't water down child-abuse laws."

"The Parental Rights Amendment won't water down child-abuse laws. If it did, I wouldn't be here," Kristine Woolley, executive director of the Coalition for Parental Rights, assured the crowd gathered at Douglas County High

School in Castle Rock. "Abuse is abuse and assault is assault, and that won't change."

Mrs. Woolley, whose job as a pediatric physician's assistant requires her to report suspected child abuse, struck a chord with

some listeners when she cited examples of parents whose children were placed in foster homes after Mom or Dad had swatted them in the supermarket.

The proposal would give parents stronger legal grounds when

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confronted by state agencies, she said.

"We have social services workers pressing charges for a spanking, we have parents who say they can no longer discipline their children," Mrs. Woolley said.

Opponents say such horror stories are rare.

"There may be some cases where social services [workers] have overstepped their authority, but clearly that's a very small percentage," said Lisa Maass, a spokeswoman for Protect Our Children.

The amendment's impact on adoption has also raised concerns. Brent and Marion Neiser of Greenwood Village, the parents of three adopted children, said they plan to vote against Amendment 17 because they fear it would assist birth parents who try to challenge adoptions.

"Even in cases where everything is done correctly, if this is an inalienable right, you could have some [birth parents] show up years later and demand their rights to the child," said Mr. Neiser. "This is going to delay a lot of kids from being adopted."

On the contrary, supporters say the amendment would help adoptive parents. "In adoption, once the birth parents have given up their

rights, the adoptive parents are the ones protected by the law," said Mr. Norton. "This actually strengthens their hand."

The coalition also has come under attack recently for its reliance on Of the People, an Arlington, Va.-based group promoting parental rights. Campaign-finance reports show that 97 percent of the roughly \$150,000 raised on behalf of Amendment 17 has come from Of the People, leaving the coalition vulnerable to charges that "outsiders" are trying to influence the Colorado vote.

The opposition actually has surpassed that figure in fund-raising, but its money comes from a wider variety of sources.

Other groups supporting Amendment 17 include a slew of Christian conservatives, including the Family Research Council, the Christian Coalition and Focus on the Family, prompting opponents to charge that "religious extremists" are behind the measure.

That's what some people called Mrs. Pospahala after she challenged the Pueblo school district, but many of her critics have since come around. Shortly after the incident with her son, the school district dropped the self-esteem test, said acting Superintendent Leonard Bartel.

Even if Amendment 17 fails, he said, the days of schools operating without regard for parental input are over.

"At one time, I think we used to push them off to the side and say 'That won't work,' he said. "Now, if you get 15 or 20 people who say they're not happy with something, then you have to work with them. That has to be the direction we in education have to go."