

Homosexual rights group makes inroads in U.S. schools

Parents unaware of GLSEN's work

By Jennifer Kabbany
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Hovering in the shadows of the homosexual-rights movement is a little-known organization that has concentrated on public schools. The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network does not appear on many parents' radar, but those who know about GLSEN say the group has been successful.

"The only people who know about GLSEN are the ones fighting in hand-to-hand combat with them, or the 20 to 25 percent of Christians who receive mail from groups like Focus on the Family," said Lon Mabon, president of the Oregon Citizens Alliance.

Mr. Mabon's group sponsored Oregon's Measure 9, which aimed to prevent educators from encouraging, promoting or sanctioning homosexual behavior in class. During the election season, GLSEN activists pushed to defeat the measure.

GLSEN, which boasts 85 chapters in 35 states, aims to "end the cycle of bigotry in K-12 schools," according to its Web site. Its communications director, Jim Anderson, did not respond to numerous requests for an interview.

Kevin Jennings, founder of GLSEN, defined the group's agenda during an interview with CNN.

"What GLSEN does is teach young children they should not call each other names; that they should not beat each other up," he said. "Being gay doesn't kill people, but homophobia does kill people."

GLSEN (pronounced 'glsten') showed its muscle at its annual conference Oct. 6-8 in Chicago, with some 800 students and educators in attendance. One workshop, titled "Make It Real: Student Activism in Schools," encouraged students to foster homosexual-straight alliances in school because they have a better record of being accepted than homosexual-only groups.



Ron Mabon (right), head of the Oregon Citizens Alliance, says, "The only people who know about GLSEN are the ones fighting" the group.

The 800 participants were instructed to use words such as "identity" and "orientation" instead of "behavior" and "lifestyle," the latter being words that suggest homosexuality is a choice.

GLSEN advocate Barbara Miner warned attendees that the voucher and private-school movement jeopardizes the gains homosexual groups have made in public schools. The reason: Students who attend private religious schools may not be exposed to homosexual-tolerance materials.

In another workshop, GLSEN representatives claimed the "religious right" was gaining sympathy from centrists by avoiding harsh anti-homosexual statements, according to one attendee who asked to remain anonymous.

"They accused the 'right' of turning the homosexual rhetoric of being harassed around," she said. "Now it's the 'right' who are the victims, who are being harassed for their beliefs."

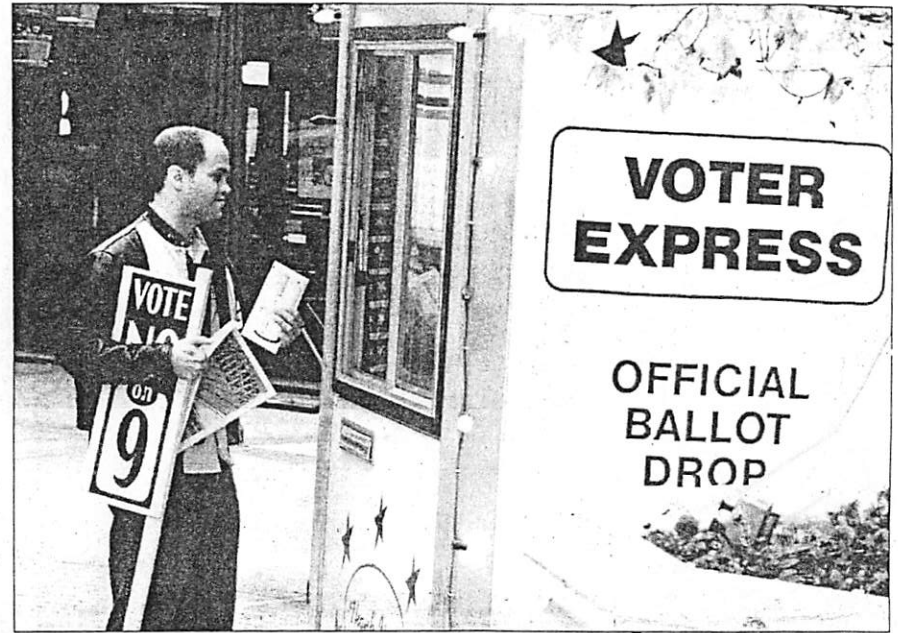
The 10-year-old organization's biggest coup to date was getting

Robert Chase, president of the National Education Association, to address the Chicago meeting. In his speech, Mr. Chase quoted letters he had received chastising his attendance, and cited the authors' "attitudes, fears and misconceptions" as reasons that he came.

"It is our job to educate all children to live harmoniously in a diverse society," Mr. Chase said. That can be accomplished through "anti-gay harassment" training programs for teachers and mandating "inclusive language," he said.

Not everyone agreed with the convention's objectives. Peter LaBarbera, the director of Americans for Truth who led about 20 protesters outside the conference, said GLSEN's welcome literature illustrated its real agenda.

The handout, which was given to high school students, advertised "two sadistic-oriented gay bars and a sex club called Man's Country ... private adult lockers and rooms ... fantasy suites ... nude stage shows," he said.



Jeff Hawthorne's sign urges defeat of an Oregon proposal stopping educators from sanctioning homosexuality.

GLSEN supports teaching in the classroom about homosexuality but does not produce educational materials. Its Web site (www.glsen.org) recommends school books with titles such as "One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dads, Blue Dads" and "The Duke Who Outlawed Jelly Beans," about a nasty character who opposes diversity.

It includes many different ways to respond to young students who may ask about homosexuality. One suggested phrase: "It's important not to judge people without knowing them."

GLSEN's work is not an attempt to indoctrinate, say some educators, but about helping students learn to accept each other.

Chris Elder, director of the private New Roads Middle School in Los Angeles, had a GLSEN repre-

sentative speak at her school as one part of a larger workshop designed to educate students about groups that face discrimination.

"We wanted to help students develop empathy and acceptance, to break down the fears that have been created through stereotypes, to understand that human beings are sometimes more than what has been taught by the media, churches and textbooks," Ms. Elder says.

"These are human beings with dignity, jobs, goals, who just have a sexual difference. You don't have to be afraid of them or run away, and you don't have to choose their lifestyle, either."

The influence of groups like GLSEN on public schools can be seen in the San Francisco Unified School District, which is considering several lesson plans in which homosexuality and tolerance are the subjects.

One lesson plan, titled "Jesse's Dream Skirt," is designed for grade school students and centers on a "boy who likes to do things differently than most other boys." Questions following the story include: "What do you think about Jesse wanting to wear a skirt even though his mother warns him that the other kids might not like the dream skirt as much as Jesse?" and "Do you think Jesse wants to be a girl?"

This lesson plan "does not belong at school," says Karen Holgate of the California-based con-

servative watchdog group Capitol Research Institute. Mrs. Holgate says these lesson plans teach children that if their parents disagree with homosexuality, they're "homophobes."

"This curriculum makes parents look like they're the bad guys," she says.

But Simon LeVay, a neuroscientist in Los Angeles who has published many articles on homosexuality and the brain, says groups like GLSEN help homosexual students deal with the name-calling and physical assaults that are rampant in schools.

"High school kids feel free to be nasty about homosexuality," says Dr. LeVay, "and many times homosexual students have no support from teachers or peers."

GLSEN met with heated debate in March, when it hosted a conference attended by Massachusetts Department of Education officials as well as students. During a "youth-only, ages 14-21," workshop titled "What They Didn't Tell You About Queer Sex and Sexuality in Health Class," students were taught sexually explicit techniques.

After two members of the Massachusetts Parents Rights Coalition secretly taped the session, GLSEN filed a lawsuit to keep the tapes from being distributed. It lost after months of legal wrangling.

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