

Colorado PTA plan on gay counseling hit

It has no place in schools, foes say

By Valerie Richardson
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DENVER — The Colorado Parent Teacher Association has touched off an emotional state-wide debate over a proposal that would urge schools to provide "age-appropriate" information to students about homosexuality.

The resolution, drafted and released earlier this year by the state PTA's Response to Tolerance Committee, would recommend that Colorado schools promote awareness about alternative lifestyles and condemn discrimination against homosexuals, bisexuals and transsexuals.

Delegates will consider the resolution at the state PTA's convention April 28-30 in Denver. If approved, the proposal would be submitted for consideration at the national PTA convention.

Its passage is by no means assured. Since the proposal was released, the state organization has come under fire from conservative groups and parents who argue that educating students about homosexuality should be left to families.

The Colorado PTA office has been so flooded with calls that its answering-machine message now states: "Our position on youth sexuality is abstinence." Parents blasted the proposal at a March 29 meeting of the Jefferson County PTA held to discuss the proposal.

"Our concern is that it substitutes the PTA's judgment for the parents' judgment," said Tom McMillen, executive director of the Rocky Mountain Family Council, which opposes the measure.

PTA leaders argue that the resolution is aimed at combating violence against homosexual students and providing information to those who are unsure of their sexuality. Such information, they say, will help stem the suicide rate and risk of sexually transmitted diseases among homosexual teens.

"We're advocating our opposition to discrimination and harassment against homosexual, bisexual and transsexual students and saying they should have a place

they can go to obtain information," said Valerie Williams, president of the Jefferson County Council of PTAs.

That place would probably be the school counselor's office, she said, although there is nothing in the resolution to prevent such information from being introduced into the curriculum. PTA leaders also emphasized that the resolution encourages "prior parental notice and consent."

The resolution's foes, including Focus on the Family and Colorado for Family Values, both in Colorado Springs, argue that the proposal is fraught with problems.

Although it calls for parental notice, the resolution also opposes "censorship of such information," leading to worries that parents who refuse to give notice would be overridden by the censorship prohibition.

Opponents also challenge the figures on teen suicide among homosexuals, which the committee drew from a 1989 report by San Francisco researcher Paul Gibson titled "Gay Male and Lesbian Suicide."

The paper, which was included in and later dropped from a special federal task force report on youth suicide, concluded that homosexuals account for one-third of all teen suicides and are two to three times more likely to kill themselves than other teen-agers.

Mr. Gibson's research has since been challenged by, among others, David Shaffer, a Columbia University psychiatrist and teen suicide authority, who called the report "more hocus-pocus than math," according to a report by the Family Research Council.

Foes also worry that the schools, unable to find experts on alternative lifestyles on their own faculties, would end up bringing in homosexual activists to provide the information.

The resolution calls for amending national, state and local school-board and PTA nondiscrimination clauses to include "gender or sexuality" along with race, ethnic background and religion.