

N.C. Senate passes anti-bullying bill

Marks first time Senate has ever passed protections for gays

by Matt Comer . Q-Notes staff

RALEIGH — An anti-bullying bill that would protect students on the basis of sexual orientation and gender-identity, among others, passed the North Carolina Senate May 7.

On its third and final reading, senators passed the bill 26-22 with no debate. According to Ian Palmquist, executive director of EqualityNC, the vote happened so quickly that some Republican legislators had to ask for their mistaken "yes" votes to be changed to "no."

The bill's passage marks the first time in state history that the Senate has approved statewide protections for LGBT people. The bill now heads to the House, where it is likely to pass as is.

Opposed by Republicans in both the Senate and House, the bill has created controversy due to its inclusion of enumerated categories protecting students on the basis of sexual orientation and gender-identity, among others.

During debate on the bill on May 6, Sen. James Forrester (R-Gaston), sponsor of an anti-gay marriage amendment, raised questions about the bill concerned that it would

require schools to teach students about "homosexuality, cross-dressing and other alternative sexual behaviors."

School Violence Prevention Act sponsor Sen. Julia Boseman (D-New Hanover) defended the bill, telling Forrester he had simply misinterpreted it. Boseman is the state's only openly gay or lesbian state legislator.

The Senate twice voted down amendments that would have weakened the bill and the enumerated categories.

Sen. Floyd McKissick (D-Durham) said the enumerated categories were about



Boseman

providing concrete examples and designed to provide guidance and clarity to those school administrators who must comply with the law.

Sen. Eddie Goodall (R-Mecklenburg, Union) said he knew anti-gay bullying was a problem, but declined to vote for the bill.



Goodall

"I agree, that bullying gays and lesbians in high school is a serious problem," Goodall said, "but the issue of the marriage amendment in our state constitution and the failure to even get it passed or heard has muddled your bill, Sen. Boseman."

Goodall said that there is a perception that the failure to hear the marriage amendment has something to do with the push for protecting LGBT students.

"I can't vote for the bill," Goodall said. "I wish we could do something other than identify groups, but I think we have some work to go in North Carolina and that does include looking at putting marriage before voters in our state and I feel like this would clear up a lot of issues like this."

In a telephone conversation with Q-Notes following the May 6 debate on the bill, Goodall said he doesn't think a person has to be opposed to protecting gay and lesbian students to also be in favor of the marriage amendment.

"I think we can have a marriage referendum in North Carolina and also we can acknowledge that bullying gays is not going to be tolerated," he said. "I was just trying to point out that these positions have been so polarized so much in the last two years, that the bill we probably had before us today is not what a large portion of the population thinks it was."

Goodall said he believes it is possible to protect students by enforcing existing policies.

"We need to educate children about coming forth with these complaints. We need to tell them they don't have to be bullied, that they have a right not to be."

Goodall said he voted against the anti-bullying bill solely due to public perception. He reiterated his support for an anti-gay marriage amendment, but also said he was "very much in favor of stopping bullying of gays and lesbians."

Q-Notes contacted Gov. Beverly Perdue's office, seeking comment on her position on the bill and whether she'd sign it if it reached her desk. By press time, spokespeople with the governor's office had yet to return our calls.

In the House, the bill will likely face little, if any, serious challenges. The bill originated in the House and passed twice in a previous session.

The School Violence Prevention Act is one of two highly controversial bills impacting LGBT students. The other, the Healthy Youth Act, would change the state's abstinence-until-marriage sex ed curriculum. The sex ed bill was also scheduled for the Senate's May 7 calendar, but was pushed back into committee. ▀

— At press time, the School Violence Prevention Act had yet to be heard in the House and the Healthy Youth Act had yet to be heard in the Senate. Visit www.q-notes.com for breaking news on these bills and other federal, state and local politics.



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