

ACLU wants schools to accept gay rights groups

ASHLAND, Ky. (AP) — The American Civil Liberties Union is asking federal judges in Kentucky and Texas to force two school districts to allow students to form Gay-Straight Alliances on campus.

The ACLU claims in lawsuits filed Wednesday that Boyd County High School in Cannonsburg and Klein High School in Klein, Texas, violated students' rights under the federal Equal Access Act and the First Amendment.

"With these lawsuits we hope to put school officials on notice that we will no longer tolerate their dirty tactics and bureaucratic excuses to keep students from forming Gay-Straight Alliances," said James Esseks, litigation director for the ACLU's Lesbian and Gay Rights Project. "As these two cases so clearly show, there is a tremendous need for students to have a club where they can discuss how to deal with the anti-gay harassment they face."

The school board in Boyd County suspended all clubs in December in an effort, the ACLU contends, to prevent a group of approximately 30 students from forming a Gay-Straight Alliance. Seven students are listed as plaintiffs in the lawsuit filed against the school board in Lexington.

The measure would affect four other nonacademic clubs — the Human Rights Club, Pep Club, Bible Club and Fellowship of Christian Athletes. School Superintendent Bill Capehart said the thought nonacademic clubs were leading to "educational disruption."

Kim McCann, an Ashland attorney representing the school board, said board members felt the decision to suspend the clubs was correct and that it would help the high school to concentrate on educating students.

"I know the school district is disappointed that the ACLU and the Gay-Straight Alliance have taken this avenue," McCann said. "Now this lawsuit will just continue the debate over clubs rather than education, which is the primary purpose of schools."

Dewhurst: spending reductions to start now

AUSTIN (AP) — The cuts are coming. And maybe sooner than state agency heads previously thought.

Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst said Wednesday that given a predicted \$1.8 billion shortfall in the current state budget, officials must start cutting back now. Combined with a projected \$8.1 billion shortfall for the 2004-05 budget, lawmakers are staring at a potential \$9.9 billion hole.

"We will balance fiscal year 2003 and part of that is going to be by having reductions in spending by some of the state agencies," Dewhurst said without identifying what agencies should cut spending and by how much.

"In order to balance in '03 we're going to have reductions in spending during this year," he said.

Dewhurst, who presides over the state Senate, said a letter from himself, Gov. Rick Perry and House Speaker Craddick, all Republicans, will soon be sent to state agencies with that message.

He would not discuss specifics of what the letter would say.

"We've made big progress on the budget crisis," Dewhurst said. "I'm optimistic that we'll be able to balance our budget without new taxes and without eliminating essential services."

Also, the Texas State Teachers Association is asking the Legislature to be careful not to allow too many corporate tax breaks that could take money away from public schools.

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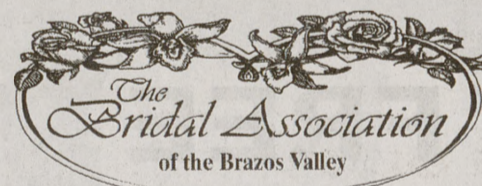
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