

Abortion data may be tracked

By Jim Vertuno
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

AUSTIN — Four years ago, legislators wrote into state law that an unmarried, minor girl had to notify a parent before she could get an abortion, or she could get a judge to allow her to bypass that requirement.

On Wednesday, the Senate gave preliminary approval to tracking how many of those cases get to court and how often the girls are denied or allowed to avoid telling their parents before getting the abortion.

Anti-abortion groups hailed the bill as a step in tracking a super-secret process in which not only the girls' names are protected, but the judges presiding over the cases are, too.

Joe Kral, legislative director of Texas Right to Life, which supports the bill, said the data would be the public's only way to gauge what is happening in the secret process.

"People want to know, Texans want to know, how their judicial bypass is being implemented," Kral said.

Abortion rights groups, however, warned the move could make judges the targets of anti-abortion campaigns, disrupting a process they say should be devoid of politics.

"This Legislature is a petri dish of anti-choice," said Kae McLaughlin, executive director of the Texas Abortion and Reproductive Rights Action League. "(The judges) will have to choose between politics and the young woman's story who's sitting in front of them."

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— Kae McLaughlin
pro-choice lobbyist

The bill's sponsor, Sen. Kim Brimer, R-Fort Worth, said the state has almost no way to track comprehensive data on how often these cases go to court or whether some judges are routinely granting or refusing bypasses.

"We're missing the boat on courts who may be roadblocking," Brimer said, "or which may be rubber stamping." He said the data could also help track trends in teen pregnancy.

Under the bill, the Texas

Supreme Court would set the rules for gathering and releasing the information to the public. Brimer said the names of the girls and the judges would remain confidential and that the information that is released must not be able to identify a particular judge.

He said the data could be released in geographic areas such as appeals courts districts or even larger. The information could not be released on a county-by-county basis, he said.

Several senators questioned Brimer's motives and whether it was an attempt to curtail the judicial bypass. Sen. Jeff Wentworth, R-San Antonio, tried but failed to amend the bill to make any release of data on a statewide basis instead of regional.

"I've heard from judges who are concerned this will be used in political campaigns," Wentworth said. "I don't think that's appropriate."

Kral, however, said the confidentiality provisions would make that all but impossible.

"You'd be hard-pressed to find a judge under these conditions," he said.

The Senate agreed to consider the bill on a 21-9 vote before giving preliminary approval on a voice vote. A final vote of approval is expected on Thursday.

NEWS IN BRIEF

Texas Teacher tapes mouths shut

SOUTHLAND, Texas — At least two parents in the Garza County community of Southland want the school district to fire a sixth-grade teacher they say taped shut the mouths of several students who wouldn't stop talking in class.

"From what I gathered from my son, he and some other boys were talking and they had been talking all class period, and the teacher got upset and began taping students' mouths," Mary Lea, mother of an 11-year-old boy, said in a story in Wednesday's online edition of the Lubbock Avalanche-Journal.

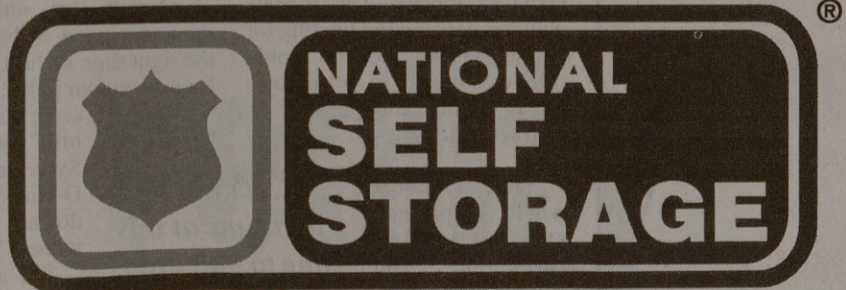
"With my son and another child, she wrapped masking tape completely around their head," Lea said.

Pam Phillips said the teacher also taped her son's mouth shut.

Both women said their children have asthma. "My child can't breathe through his nose," Phillips said. "Whenever he has his asthma attacks, he definitely can't."

Upset parents went to the Southland school on Tuesday and spoke with the teacher, Lea said.

"She said to us, 'I'm sorry. This will never happen again. I made a mistake,'" Lea said. "She's in that classroom with my child, and I want her gone."



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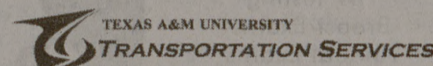
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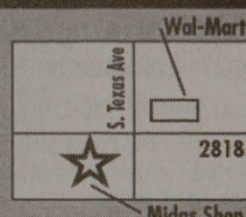
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