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## Student religious expressions get shield

By Howard Fischer, Capitol Media Services

PHOENIX — State senators voted Wednesday to protect the religious liberties of students, a measure foes said will let them harass others who don't share their beliefs — especially gays.

House Bill 2713 would prohibit public schools from discriminating against students or their parents on the basis of their religious beliefs.

The measure, given preliminary approval, also would preclude schools from barring students from wearing T-shirts, jewelry and other accessories that include religious messages if similar items with secular messages are permitted.

Sen. Linda Gray, R-Glendale, said the measure is necessary because some school officials are not following federal constitutional requirements.

There have been several high-profile incidents in Arizona.

A Higley High School student's personal biography in the yearbook was altered to remove a reference to God. And students at Deer Valley High School were forbidden to use the public-address system generally available to all clubs to invite students to a prayer meeting after school.

Students are entitled to express their beliefs, said Sen. Debbie McCune Davis, D-Phoenix. But she said school administrators must have some ability to set limits.

She sought to amend the measure to let school officials enforce policies that prohibit bullying, harassment and discrimination based on factors ranging from race and religion to sexual orientation, gender identity "or any other distinguishing characteristics."

But Sen. Jack Harper, R-Surprise, said that would allow the very type of discrimination the legislation is trying to preclude.

He used the example of the annual national Day of Silence "where the gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender community tries to encourage students to flaunt their alternative lifestyle." Harper said students are allowed to wear clothing that identifies them as supporters of gay rights.

In response, Harper said, some Christian groups have promoted a national Day of Truth on the preceding day where students would "encourage a traditional lifestyle." He said the proposal by McCune Davis would make those shirts illegal.

"But the propaganda passed out in the Day of Silence would not (be)," Harper said.

Sen. Ken Chevront, D-Phoenix — describing himself as, using Harper's expression, an "alternative lifestyle person" — said there are differences.

"We all believe that people should be able to say what they want, without hurting other people," he said.

Chevront asked his colleagues if a shirt containing a slur against gays would be permissible. He said the ability to express beliefs must be tempered by the ability of school administrators to ensure that students are not bullied or harassed.

Harper, however, said permitting school officials to censor certain beliefs because someone else might be offended would forbid a student from wearing a T-shirt saying "It's time for an honest conversation about homosexuality."

But he said a student could wear a shirt celebrating his or her homosexuality.

"I believe that's patently unfair to limit one person's constitutional rights but not another's," Harper said.

The bill, which already gained House approval, needs a final Senate vote before going to the governor.

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