

Would change on gays allow Boy Scouts to recapture role in society? (+video)

The Boy Scouts has signaled it may remove a ban on gays that caused a rift within the movement. This could help improve both Boy Scout enrollment and fundraising.

By Gloria Goodale, Staff writer / January 29, 2013



A statue of a Boy Scout stands in front of the National Scouting Museum in Irving, Texas. The Boy Scouts of America announced it is considering a dramatic retreat from its controversial policy of excluding gays as leaders and youth members.

LM Otero / AP

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The Boy Scouts of America is in the process of removing its national antigay policy. The Texas-based youth group announced Tuesday that it will vote next week on whether to allow decisions about gay members to be made at the local level.



In Pictures: Scouts honor!

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Boy Scouts of America reconsidering policy on gay members

But as this group that was once nearly synonymous with American youth has begun dismantling a policy that some of its chapters have dubbed "repugnant," the question arises, can this century-old institution ever be as dominant as it once was in American family life?

Families simply have so many other choices, as well as demands on their time, that it's unlikely a single group will ever have that central a role in the life of American youngsters again, says Susan Shapiro Barash, who teaches gender studies at Marymount Manhattan College.

"It certainly evokes a gentler time in our country's history," she says. "The sheer fun, the boyishness of it, now is not so much front and center in our culture," she adds, noting that parents are more deliberate in their after-school choices. "There is so much more competition to get ahead from an earlier age that being a Boy Scout now is probably not as expedient."

This is a parenting reality that April Masini, an online advice columnist based in Naples, Fla.,

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says she regularly encounters in questions from parents about the right choices to make for their children’s activities.

“The generation of helicopter parents who usher their children through childhood like white on rice have found myriad options of after-school activities, many of which are considered pre-college application favorites – and yes, I’m talking about activities for kids of all ages, including pre-school,” she notes via e-mail.

Parents seek out chess and debate teams for kindergartners, as well as museum-hosted enrichment and other programs such as the Center for Talented Youth at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore that include families and elementary school kids who are gifted, she points out. “The Boy Scouts have competition, and families have options,” she adds.

This week’s announcement about its policy on gays could be critical to the Boy Scouts halting the losses to its ranks. The Boy Scouts of America did not return calls for comment, but a 2010 Boston Globe article about the group’s centennial celebration noted that between 1998 and 2009, national BSA enrollment shrank from roughly 3.3 million to some 2.7 million. A 2010 Gallup poll showed that while some 45 percent of men 50 and older had been Boy Scouts, that figure shrank to 27 percent of men aged 18 to 24.

Many observers say the group’s latest move to back away from an organization-wide ban on gays may be decisive in stopping further shrinkage. “This is huge, real progress,” says Andrew Koppelman, a law professor at Northwestern University near Chicago and co-author of “A Right to Discriminate? How the Case of Boy Scouts of America v. James Dale Warped the Law of Free Association.”

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