Center for School Safety, School Climate, and Classroom Management

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Strategies for School Personnel to Support and Protect Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and

Transgendered Students

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Over 1.6 million public school students are bullied because of either actual or perceived sexual orientation (Rivers, Duncan, & Besag, 2007). Research has shown that bullying based on sexual orientation is targeted toward confirmed LGBT students, students who are perceived to be members of a sexual minority group (Little, 2001; Van Wormer & Mckinney, 2003; Varjas et al., 2006), and toward students who sympathize or ally themselves with LGBT students (Varjas et al). Identified LGBT youth regularly face victimization and stigmatization when they experience shunning by peers, physical harassment, and high levels of verbal harassment like name-calling, hate speech and gossip due to their sexual orientation and transgendered identity (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Grossman et al., 2009). In addition to verbal and physical bullying, sexual minority students were significantly more likely to report threat of injury with a weapon on school property as opposed to their heterosexual counterparts (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006).

Homophobia and heterosexism have appeared as important contributors to the bullying of LGBT youth in schools and society (van Wormer & Mckinney, 2003). Marginalization has led

some LGBT youth to attempt to mask their sexual orientation and pass as heterosexual, as "out" students were perceived as easier bullying targets (Varjas et al., 2008). According to Grossman et al. (2009), students who experienced heterosexism, homophobia, biphobia, and transphobia in their schools felt as though they had to be constantly on guard in order to protect themselves. Teachers and school support staff have the power to lessen these consequences by preventing LGBT bullying from becoming a reality in schools (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Graybill, Varjas, Meyers, & Watson, 2009). The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network found that when teachers and schools provide services to LGBT students and enact policies to defend those students, the efforts serve as protective factors which shield them from bullying and change the school's climate (Poland, 2010). The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network also reported that teachers have the power to become visible allies to LGBT students, which is a crucial factor in their feelings of safety and academic success (Kilman, 2009).

Going one step further, if teachers and educational staff band together, they have the ability to form a support group for LGBT students, demonstrating tangible evidence of a school's commitment to, or at least acceptance of, sexual minority youth (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer). The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (2008) found that LGBT students who identified at least six supportive educators reported better academic functioning than LGBT students who were unable to do this. In consideration of this power of teachers and support staff to protect sexual minority youth, the following eight strategies are suggestions for how to ensure the safety and sense of belonging of LGBT students.

Strategies Related to Sexual Orientation-Based Bullying

Become a visible ally. Teachers can put a stop to discriminatory words and phrases (i.e. "faggot", "dyke", "That is so gay!") when they are used in halls and classrooms. This would

prevent the spread of homophobic attitudes and identify the teacher as an understanding ally for LGBT students (Kilman). Additionally, evidence has shown that LGBT youth were reluctant to report victimization based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity due to fear of homophobic reactions and awareness that teachers and school staff are often silent, refuse to intervene, or blame the victims (Grossman et al.). Establishing oneself as an ally, urging LGBT students to report victimization, and supporting students after they make such reports are all important since lack of reporting is one of the strongest predictors of school disengagement for gay, lesbian, bisexual, or questioning youth (Murdock & Bolch, 2005).

Provide resources. The majority of students have no access to LGBT supportive websites in their school libraries due to filters put on by the school. Importantly, there is also a lack of literature with gay characters or themes available to students in most school libraries. Inclusion of LGBT literature provides LGBT youth with characters they can identify with while also providing exposure to non-LGBT youth, which could possibly decrease teasing and bullying as students learn tolerance (Whelan, 2006).

Suggestions for literature with gay and lesbian characters appropriate for middle and high school students include:

- *Debbie Harry Sings in French* by Megan Brothers (Henry Holt, 2008)

- *My Heartbeat* by Garrett Freymann-Weyr (Houghton Mifflin, 2002)

- *Annie on My Mind* by Nancy Garden (Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1982)

- *My Most Excellent Year: A Novel of Love, Mary Poppins & Fenway Park* by Steve Kluger (Dial, 2008)

- *Boy Meets Boy* by David Levithan (Alfred A. Knopf, 2003)

- *Empress of the World* by Sara Ryan (Viking, 2001)

- The Rainbow Series by Alex Sanchez (Simon and Schuster, 2003-2007)

- *Freak Show* by James St. James (Dutton, 2007)

- *Parrotfish* by Ellen Wittlinger (Simon and Schuster, 2007)

Website resources for students include:

- Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (www.glsen.org)

- Amplify Your Voice (www.amplifyyourvoice.org)

- The Gay Youth Corner (www.thegyc.com)

- Oasis Magazine (www.oasisjournals.com)

- Youth Resource (www.youthresource.com)

Create and support gay-straight alliances. Gay-straight alliances (GSAs) are extracurricular clubs that provide sexual minority students a safe environment in which to interact with their peers, form a community, and receive support (Hansen, 2007; Varjas et al, 2007). Varjas et al. found that GSAs provided assistance to sexual minority youth who were trying to cope with bullying. Hansen's previous research has shown that GSAs not only empower sexual minority youth, but may also result in related conversations being brought into classrooms. These organizations may be the most powerful instrument for bringing about school-wide safety and change that incorporates a positive school climate.

Promote curriculum inclusion. Exclusion is one of the most damaging factors in creating an unsafe school environment (Hanlon, 2009). An LGBT-inclusive curriculum is perhaps even more important than anti-bullying legislation as it would work to destroy homophobia, the cause of the problem, rather than simply punishing the homophobic offenders, which may not have lasting effects. As it stands now, most schools not only avoid an LGBT-inclusive curriculum, but

instead uphold a hidden curriculum which reinforces traditional gender roles and heterosexuality (Hanlon; Mishna et al., 2007).

Organize awareness and action training for school personnel. Educators often avoid including dialogue about LGBT people and issues in the classroom due to a fear of a negative response from students, parents, other teachers and even administrators. Many worry that their inclusive teaching will translate as promotion of an LGBT lifestyle. They also avoid addressing homophobic remarks toward LGBT students out of concern that they will be seen as promoting LGBT issues (Hanlon). Previous research has shown that this can happen on a daily basis, and it has been proposed that staff training could increase action taken on behalf of victimized students (Hansen). Hanlon claimed that giving training to elementary school teachers also helped develop the understanding of why LGBT themes are relevant and important, and how to include them in the mainstream curricula. Furthermore, by giving training to teachers, the message is sent that there is administrative support for the inclusion of LGBT issues in the school.

Enforce zero-tolerance of harassment. Hansen (2007) found that the majority of the existing literature has established that the most important step to prevent sexual-orientation-based bullying is to establish a well-publicized anti-harassment policy that specifically includes sexual orientation. School policies that do not include sexual orientation or that do not demand accountability from student or teacher perpetrators have proven to be one of the greatest barriers to creating safe and supportive environments for sexual minority youth (Mishna et al., 2008).

Encourage school-wide change. As stated above, GSAs are powerful in supporting sexual minority students. However, GSAs are often confronted with obstacles such as no faculty sponsor, low attendance, no attendance by straight allies, and policies which require parental permission to participate in the group (Robinson, 2008). Mayberry (2006) also pointed out

controversy around the establishment of "safe spaces" within schools. Safe spaces can be divisive and can perpetuate the dominance of heteronormative practices by implying that LGBT youth need separate spaces rather than incorporating LGBT issues into the mainstream (Mayberry). Although safe spaces and GSA clubs do offer support for LGBT students, they are not enough, as they ignore the marginalizing effects of systemic mechanisms (Mayberry). Therefore, it is of great importance to generate change in the entire school to create a tolerant whole-school environment rather than to only put effort into creating divisive structures like GSAs within the schools.

Become an advocate for systemic change. The Human Rights Watch declared that the United States has failed to protect LGBT students in the nation's public schools at a systemic level (Bochenek & Brown, 2001). There are still very few federal laws and policies which protect LGBT youth, and most that can be applied do not specifically mention sexual orientation, such as Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 and Equal Access Act (EAA) of 1984 (Hanlon, 2009). According to the National Association of School Psychologists, violence and intimidation violate the rights of GLBT students to receive equal educational opportunities, regardless of whether the violence takes the form of direct harassment of individual students or is directed at the entire group through hostile statements or biases (NASP, 2006). Therefore, an ultimate goal for teachers and educational support staff is to go beyond the school building to promote and advocate for policies and laws at local, state, and national levels to protect LGBT students.

Conclusion

Weiler (2004) suggested that schools should legally and morally provide for gay students. The following interventions have proven effective in creating an affirmative whole school

environment: improve school safety with a zero tolerance for anti-gay harassment; dispel misinformation and affirm diversity through an inclusive curriculum; provide a support network for sexual minority students by training staff members; prevent discrimination through a school-wide non-discrimination policy that includes sexual orientation; ensure sexual minority students equal access to all school-related activities; train all staff to understand sexual minority students and use effective interventions; and be prepared to address controversy (Weiler). To minimize sexual-orientation-based bullying and to promote a safe environment for all students, emphasis must be put on school-wide change and awareness.

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