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Center for School Safety, School Climate, and Classroom Management

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School Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth: An Overview of the Literature

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Evidence exists suggesting that students who either identify as or are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (LGBT) experience a negative school climate (e.g., bullying, harassment, sexual harassment, discrimination, teasing) (D'Augelli, Pilkington, & Hershberger, 2002; Kosciw, Diaz, & Greytak, 2008). Kosciw and colleagues (2008) surveyed over 6,000 self-identified LGBT youth ages 13-21 and found:

- Almost three-fourths of youth heard homophobic remarks often or frequently at school;
- Close to 90% of youth reported experiencing verbal harassment at school because of their sexual identity; and
- Nearly half of the youth experienced physical harassment because of their sexual orientation.

Some studies of LGBT youth have not included comparative samples of heterosexual youth (Anhalt & Morris, 1998; Pape, 2008); however, studies that do include comparative samples suggest that LGBT youth experienced bullying and harassment more often than their heterosexual peers (e.g., Williams, Connolly, Pepler, & Craig, 2005; Harris Interactive & the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network [GLSEN], 2005). In a matched sample of 97 heterosexual, and 97 LGBT and questioning youth aged 14-19, Williams et al. (2005) reported

that LGBT youth were significantly more likely to have reported bullying and sexual harassment than heterosexual youth. In a nationally representative sample of students aged 13-18, LGBT students were three times more likely to have felt unsafe at school than heterosexual students (Harris Interactive & GLSEN). Additionally, 90% of LGBT students versus 62% of heterosexual students reported verbal and/or physical harassment based upon some discriminatory factor (e.g., appearance, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation) (Harris Interactive & GLSEN).

Consequences of a Negative School Climate

Students who experienced orientation-based bullying were more likely than students who reported other types of bullying to report negative perceptions of their school (Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). A negative school climate related to LGBT bullying has been linked to poor attendance (Rivers, 2000), lower academic achievement (Murdock & Bolch, 2005), increased substance use (Faulkner & Cranston, 1998; Garofalo et al.; Rivers & Noret, 2008; Marshal et al., 2008), and increased mental health difficulties (D'Augelli et al., 2002; Friedman, Koeske, Silvestre, Korr, & Sites, 2006; Rivers & Noret) among youth who identify as LGBT. Additionally, Murdock and Bolch's (2005) analysis of 101 LGB high-school aged youth suggested that those youth who reported both a negative school climate and being victimized demonstrated lower levels of achievement. These findings were consistent with other surveys and research studies supporting the relationship of increased victimization with lower emotional functioning (D'Augelli et al.; Friedman et al.) and/or academic functioning (Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005).

School-Based Strategies

School personnel have increasingly advocated for LGBT youth through school-based strategies (Bauman & Sachs-Kapp, 1998; Gevelinger & Zimmerman, 1997; Peters, 2003). In the

LGBT school climate literature, there are common suggestions for school-based advocacy (Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993; Jeltova & Fish, 2005; McFarland, 2001; Peters; Woodiel, Angermeier-Howard, & Hobson, 2003). One recommendation is to include LGBT issues in the curriculum to increase the visibility and awareness of accomplishments of this population (McFarland; Woodiel et al.; Varjas et al., 2007). Another recommendation is to provide staff development related to LGBT issues and the ethical obligations of the faculty and staff to make schools a safe place for all students (Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth; Jeltova & Fish; McFarland; Peters; Woodiel at al.). Another important recommendation is to support the organization of a gay/straight alliance (GSA), or an afterschool student club, to provide a safe space for LGBT students and their heterosexual allies (Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth; Jeltova & Fish; McFarland; Peters; Woodiel et al.). An additional strategy is to include sexual orientation in existing anti-discrimination policies (Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth; McFarland; Woodiel et al.). A final suggestion is to increase the visibility of LGBT populations by displaying supportive posters and resource fliers around school, in addition to including LGBT-related media in school libraries (Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth; Jeltova & Fish; McFarland).

Efficacy Data. Research about the efficacy of the school-based strategies previously recommended is in its infancy. Some evidence based on survey data exists to suggest that the presence of GSAs and/or supportive staff within schools has been related to a positive school climate for LGBT youth (Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westheimer, 2006; Harris Interactive & GLSEN, 2005; Murdock & Bolch, 2005; Russell, Seif, & Truong, 2001; Szalacha, 2003). Both survey data and student testimonials have suggested that involvement in GSAs has been related

to improved school attendance and performance (Lee, 2002), increased feelings of safety (Friedman-Nimz et al., 2006; Reid, 2003; Szalacha, 2003), and enhanced relationships with teachers and other adults in their lives (Lee). Kosciw et al. (2008) noted that students in schools with GSAs reported the following:

- Less orientation-based harassment;
- Increased willingness to report harassment and assault;
- Less absenteeism due to safety concerns; and
- A greater sense of belonging with their schools.

Furthermore, LGBT students who identified at least six supportive educators reported greater academic functioning than LGBT students who were unable to do this (Kosciw et al., 2008). For example, LGBT students who identified at least six supportive educators in their schools had better attendance, higher grade point averages, and a greater sense of belonging to their school.

Barriers and Facilitators to Advocating

While the importance of advocating for LGBT youth in schools has been supported (Kosciw et al., 2008), many barriers exist for adults who desire to advocate. For example, adults who advocate for LGBT youth in schools may experience alienation from coworkers, the loss of a job, and the loss of administrative support (Adams & Carson, 2006) due to the controversial nature of the topic. An additional barrier to advocating for LGBT youth in schools may be a lack of knowledge related to LGBT issues among those who desire to advocate and/or a concept referred to as the "nice counselor syndrome" in which educators avoid advocating for a disenfranchised group for fear of being excluded or considered a "troublemaker" (Bemak & Chi-Ying Chung, 2008).

Conversely, facilitators that school personnel encounter when advocating for LGBT youth may include the following: regularly enforced anti-discrimination policies that specifically protect LGBT students (Kosciw, 2004; Macgillivray, 2004); incorporating sexual identity issues into the curriculum and in professional development (Varjas et al., 2007); and school safety programs that promote a safe school climate for all students, including those who identify as LGBT (Szalacha, 2003; Woodiel et al., 2003). These facilitators are consistent with the literature outlining the recommended strategies for improving school climate for LGBT youth (Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993; Jeltova & Fish, 2005; McFarland, 2001; Peters; Woodiel et al., 2003).

Ethical Obligation

School personnel are ethically obligated to provide a safe learning environment for all students regardless of sexual orientation (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2004; National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2000; National Education Association [NEA], 1975; School Social Work Association of America, 2001). To assist educators seeking effective change for LGBT youth, a range of position statements have been created by professional organizations. Some highlight the importance of advocating on behalf of LGBT youth (e.g., APA, 1993; NASP, 2006; NEA, 2008) and others highlight the competencies that are needed for effective advocacy (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2003; Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007). While the position statements and advocacy competencies provide guidance for educators who work with LGBT youth, more training, support, and research are needed at the school-level for educators who aspire to implement the school-based advocacy strategies mentioned above.

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