LGBT Students Need Our Support
By Peter DeWitt

Many students in our public school system adjust to school culture without an issue. These students go through their school experiences unscathed—they are popular and good-looking; gifted athletes or academic stars. They look forward to attending school, where they know they will feel engaged and safe. They grow up, attend college or enter the workforce, and do well in life just as they did in high school. They attend their 10th, 20th, and 25th high school reunions, where they talk about the "good old days" when they scored the winning touchdown or pulled a great class prank. Most likely, they remember their high school days as one of the best periods of their lives, and they see their high school experience as the solid foundation that led them to who they became as adults. Quite simply, they don't know what it is like not to fit in because they lack the battle scars that others have endured who have not had it so easy.

One segment of our K-12 population that does not fit in so easily is our lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. Often, they feel they have to hide who they are in order to escape the torment they have witnessed other LGBT students face. Depending on whether they fit into heterosexual norms, they may escape another day unscarred or enter a world of constant hurt. These students will not remember school fondly.

Most of them cannot wait to graduate, and typically vow never to visit their high school hallways again because of the pain they suffered at the hands of their peers. Their memories often include being called names and being taunted. LGBT students are more likely than most other groups of students to be bullied and harassed, and the adults around them often do very little to protect them.

With any luck, LGBT students will attend a college where they meet like-minded people, find a niche, and become successful. Unfortunately, for many of these students, this will not be their experience. As early as elementary school, educators can already see which children will suffer the most. And, as educators, we do not always do enough about it. This must change.

We all know that parents play an important role in the growth and development of children. Sometimes, however, as educators, we underestimate the role we play in their development, or we choose to duck this responsibility so that we can feel better about the fact that we downplay how
some of our students are ostracized. We find ourselves saying, “Yeah, kids can be tough on one another;” or “I just wish he would act differently so he doesn't make himself a target."

The reality is that there are adults who do not want to hear about "gay" issues because it makes them uncomfortable, or they see it as a "lifestyle" or "choice" that they don't agree with. There are many adults who whisper when they say the word "gay," and that, in turn, makes LGBT students feel self-conscious.

What if we could do things differently? What if we could have an impact on these students? What if we found ways to engage them through curriculum or after-school activities, or helped them feel welcome in our schools by providing a safe space?

Many LGBT students feel threatened, unloved, and alone. Some very fortunate LGBT students grow up in supportive households where they are loved and accepted for who they are. These young people go to supportive high schools that educate the whole child, that encourage them to mature into successful members of society. My guess is that this is not typical. There are far too many schools that lack the proper supports for LGBT students, and far too few adults who are comfortable entering into a discussion of how to help them.

Over the past few years, there has been a slew of suicides among LGBT youths. Those who have died by suicide range from children who never reached their teen years to others who cut their lives short before they finished college. It is clear that we have a societal issue that must be addressed, and those of us who are fortunate enough to be educators are in a position to propel the action.

The harsh reality is that we do not see all the teasing and torment that goes on in our schools. Statistically, the LGBT student population is the most marginalized group in our schools. Every time we turn the other cheek, we have lost another student and prevented him or her from finding himself or herself. When we ignore opportunities to help these students, we give them a reason to distrust and hate the school system that is supposed to educate them.

Teenage years are hard enough with the storm and stress of schoolwork, family relationships, friendships, and the inevitable physical changes. Having the extra pressure of needing to hide who you are because you fear that others will not like or love you anymore, including your family, is
painful. LGBT students walk in our doors every day attempting to be people they are not, just to find acceptance. What are we doing to make it easier for them to accept themselves?

Our LGBT students are dropping out of school at an alarming rate. They experiment with drugs and alcohol at a higher percentage than their straight peers, and are more likely to suffer from depression. When students are that desperate, they will turn to whatever means seem necessary to feel accepted, even if it's just a temporary fix.

A supportive and inclusive environment can drastically alter the school experience for our LGBT students and our heterosexual students. Through the use of thoughtful curriculum, smarter school board policies, protective school codes of conduct, and school-based gay-straight alliances, our students can learn from each other. They will be better prepared for the future in which they will have to work with people of all backgrounds.

The mission of the public school system is to educate all students, and that must include LGBT students. Educators and administrators have the power to ensure that school truly does get better for each and every child, every day. And we owe it to our students to meet this challenge.
