

## Safe and Affirmative Schools for Sexual Minority Youth



### INFORMATION FOR FAMILIES AND EDUCATORS

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*Schools have a legal, ethical and moral obligation to provide equal access to education and equal protection under the law for all students. For many sexual minority youth, schools are unsafe and survival, not education, is the priority. An estimated 10% of students are exclusively homosexual (Kinsey, 1948 as cited in Uribe & Harbeck, 1991). Due to prejudice, harassment, and discrimination in schools, sexual minority and gender nonconforming youth are denied basic rights such as a free and appropriate public education.*

### School Climate for Sexual Minority Youth

School climate is a significant determinant of whether an environment is healthy and conducive to learning. A study conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) examined 42 of the largest school districts in the country and found that almost half received a failing grade in climate for sexual minority youth (GLSEN, 1999). Most students are taught that overt behavior, such as the use of religious, racial or ethnic slurs, is intolerable. However, homophobic name-calling and anti-gay taunts such as “fag” or “you’re so gay” are rampant in most schools and are dreaded by students. A climate survey found that 69% of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered (LGBT) youth experienced verbal, physical or sexual harassment and/or assault at school (GLSEN, 1999), which is significantly higher than for heterosexual youth. Specific acts of school violence included LGBT youth being urinated and/or ejaculated upon, attacked with weapons, receiving death threats, having their clothes pulled off, and gang rape. In one-third of incidents of anti-gay harassment, adult witnesses did not help. ☀

### Implications of Risk Factors

Adolescence can be a stressful period for youth due to the tremendous physical, psychological and cognitive changes that occur. The process of coming out to oneself, or developing a LGBT identity and coming out to others or disclosure, increases stressors and isolation. Additionally, stressors related to violence, harassment, prejudice, discrimination and stigmatization place sexual minority youth at-risk for mental health, physical and educational problems. Rates of suicidal ideation, attempts and suicide by sexual minority youth are estimated to be two to three times higher than for heterosexual youth. Sexual minority youth are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse to cope with depression and feeling marginalized. Their homes are not always havens from school since they are also more likely to experience

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physical and verbal abuse in this environment. Due to conflicts related to their sexual orientation, they are frequently kicked out or forced to leave home.

Since homeless sexual minority youth have few marketable skills, many engage in prostitution to support themselves, which greatly increases the risk of HIV infection and drug abuse. Many experience academic and learning problems, since school survival is the priority. Sexual minority youth are less involved in school activities and more likely to be truant. They drop out of school because of harassment at a rate about 3 times the national average (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1989). ☀

## Legal Requirements of Schools

Many schools fail to recognize sexual minority youth, assume that heterosexuality is the norm and do not address stressors that impact their safety and education. These practices have a negative impact on students and significant legal and financial implications for school districts. Any educational program or activity that receives federal financial assistance cannot discriminate on the basis of sex or choose which students will be safe. According to the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution, students are entitled to equal protection under the law. This protection was evident in *Nabozny v. Podlesny*, 92 F. 3d 446 (7th Cir. 1996). Jamie Nabozny was beaten to the point of requiring surgery, urinated on, called anti-gay epithets and made to suffer repeated assaults, which had a significant impact on his mental health, and he dropped out of school. In spite of frequent meetings with school officials, intervention of his parents, and identification of his attackers, the school took no meaningful disciplinary action against the perpetrators. The three administrators were found guilty of discrimination because they failed to protect Jamie but responded to harassment directed at others. They were personally liable for a settlement of nearly one million dollars. The legal mandate of equality applies to all decisions that a public school official might make that would treat sexual minority youth differently. ☀

## School-Based Interventions

Schools typically do not have the information, interest or comfort to address the needs of sexual minority youth. However, school personnel are responsible for all students, including sexual minorities. School personnel may be their only support system and, with effective intervention, have a positive impact on their lives. An affirmative environment is more likely when personnel are knowledgeable about protective factors and their needs, provide support and understanding, and become advocates and allies for sexual minority youth.

The most basic intervention to improve school climate is to increase school safety. Anti-gay epithets create a negative school climate and enforce the message that hate speech is permitted. A school-wide policy of zero tolerance for anti-gay harassment, hate epithets and slurs must be developed and consistently enforced. This policy should apply to students and staff and include incidents from name-calling to physical/sexual assault. The creation of a non-discrimination school policy for sexual minority students and staff extends additional protections. Including staff in the policy demonstrates to youth that their role models will not be discriminated against, which may increase the likelihood of staff being "out" and willing to serve as resources.



To increase the affirmation of diversity in schools, diversity must be equally represented, respected and celebrated. To eliminate misinformation and bias, accurate information regarding sexuality, sexuality minority issues and famous GLBT individuals must be infused into different subjects in the curriculum. Setting a positive environment includes displaying posters about sexual minority youth, literature by sexual minorities and providing library resources. The use of gender neutral and inclusive language indicates that sexual orientation is not assumed. To assist school personnel to understand sexual minority youth and use effective interventions, ongoing in-services, anti-bias training, and education regarding the legal responsibility to protect and treat all youth respectfully is needed. An effective way to improve school climate is to establish a school-based Gay-Straight Alliance, which provides support and companionship, improves self-esteem, and promotes positive school change. ☀

## Conclusion

Creating safe and affirmative schools for all students, including sexual minority and gender nonconforming youth, is essential to increase equal access to education. When school personnel do not intervene in anti-gay abuse, they deny the existence and unique needs of this population and place their mental health and education at risk. Conversely, school personnel may improve the physical, social and psychological functioning of sexual minority youth through their support and advocacy. ☀

## References

- Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (1999). *National School Climate Survey*. New York, NY: Author
- Nabozny v. Podlesny, 92 F.3d 446 (7th Cir. 1996)
- Uribe, V., & Harbeck, K. (1991). Addressing the needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth: The origins of PROJECT 10 and school-based intervention. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 22(3/4), 9-28.
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (1989). *Prevention '89/90: Federal programs and progress*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office.

## Online Resources

- Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN)  
<http://www.glsen.org/templates/index.html>
- The NASP Work Group on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues  
<http://www.nasponline.org/advocacy/glb.html>

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