
SAFE AND AFFIRMATIVE SCHOOLS FOR SEXUAL MINORITY YOUTH

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PSYCHOLOGISTS

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. According to Kinsey (as cited in Uribe & Harbeck, 1991; see “Resources”), an estimated 10% of students are exclusively homosexual. Sexual minority and gender nonconforming youth are denied basic rights such as a free and appropriate public education owing to prejudice, harassment, and discrimination in schools.

School Climate for Sexual Minority Youth

School climate is a significant determinant of whether an environment is healthy and conducive to learning. A 1999 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 providing a positive climate for sexual minority youth.

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 by GLSEN (2001) found that 83% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered youth experienced verbal, physical, or sexual harassment and assault at school, which is significantly higher than for heterosexual youth. Specific acts of school violence included sexual minority youth being urinated and/or ejaculated upon, attacked with weapons, receiving death threats, having their clothes pulled off, and being gang raped. More than 68% of sexual minority students reported feeling unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation. However, 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 all youth owing to the tremendous physical, psychological, and cognitive changes that occur. The process of coming out to oneself, or developing a sexual minority 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 physical and verbal abuse at home. They are frequently kicked out or forced to leave home owing to conflicts related to their sexual orientation.

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. School survival is the priority and many experience academic and learning problems. Sexual minority youth may be less involved in school activities and more likely to be truant. They drop out of school because of harassment at a rate about four times the national average (data from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services in 1989).

Legal Requirements and Consequences for Schools

Legal mandates. Many schools fail to recognize sexual minority youth, assume that heterosexuality is the norm, and do not address stressors that affect the safety and education of sexual minority

students. 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 sexual orientation 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.

Nabozny ruling. 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 upon, called anti-gay epithets, and made to suffer repeated assaults. This abuse had a significant impact on Jamie’s mental health and he dropped out of school. Despite frequent meetings with school officials, intervention by Jamie’s 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 \$1 million. 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, can have a positive impact on the lives of these students. An affirmative environment is more likely when personnel are knowledgeable about protective factors and the needs of sexual minority youth, provide support and understanding, and become advocates and allies.

Increase safety. 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.

Affirmation of diversity. 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, sexual orientation issues, and famous sexual minority 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 in understanding sexual minority youth and use effective interventions, ongoing inservices, 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 this population’s 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.

Resources

- Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (1999). *National School Climate Survey*. New York: Author. Available: www.glsen.org
- 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, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. Available: www.gpoaccess.gov

Websites

- Advocates for Youth—www.advocatesforyouth.org
- Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)—www.glsen.org
- Healthy Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Student Project—www.apa.org/ed/hlgb

Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund—
www.lambdalegal.org
NASP Work Group on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual
Issues—www.nasponline.org/advocacy/glb.html
National Youth Advocacy Coalition (NYAC)—
www.nyacyouth.org
!Outproud! The National Coalition for GLBT Youth—
www.outproud.org
Parents and Families of Gays and Lesbians (PFLAG)—
www.pflag.org
Project 10: On-Site Educational Support Services for
GLBTQ Youth—www.project10.org
The Safe School Coalition of Washington—
www.safeschools-wa.org
Youth Resource—www.youthresource.com

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The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) offers a wide variety of free or low cost online resources to parents, teachers, and others working with children and youth through the NASP website www.nasponline.org

and the NASP Center for Children & Families website www.naspcenter.org. Or use the direct links below to access information that can help you improve outcomes for the children and youth in your care.

About School Psychology—Downloadable brochures, FAQs, and facts about training, practice, and career choices for the profession.

www.nasponline.org/about_nasp/spsych.html

Crisis Resources—Handouts, fact sheets, and links regarding crisis prevention/intervention, coping with trauma, suicide prevention, and school safety.

www.nasponline.org/crisisresources

Culturally Competent Practice—Materials and resources promoting culturally competent assessment and intervention, minority recruitment, and issues related to cultural diversity and tolerance.

www.nasponline.org/culturalcompetence

En Español—Parent handouts and materials translated into Spanish. www.naspcenter.org/espanol/

IDEA Information—Information, resources, and advocacy tools regarding IDEA policy and practical implementation.

www.nasponline.org/advocacy/IDEAinformation.html

Information for Educators—Handouts, articles, and other resources on a variety of topics.

www.naspcenter.org/teachers/teachers.html

Information for Parents—Handouts and other resources a variety of topics.

www.naspcenter.org/parents/parents.html

Links to State Associations—Easy access to state association websites.

www.nasponline.org/information/links_state_orgs.html

NASP Books & Publications Store—Review tables of contents and chapters of NASP bestsellers.

www.nasponline.org/bestsellers

Order online. www.nasponline.org/store

Position Papers—Official NASP policy positions on key issues.

www.nasponline.org/information/position_paper.html

Success in School/Skills for Life—Parent handouts that can be posted on your school's website.

www.naspcenter.org/resourcekit