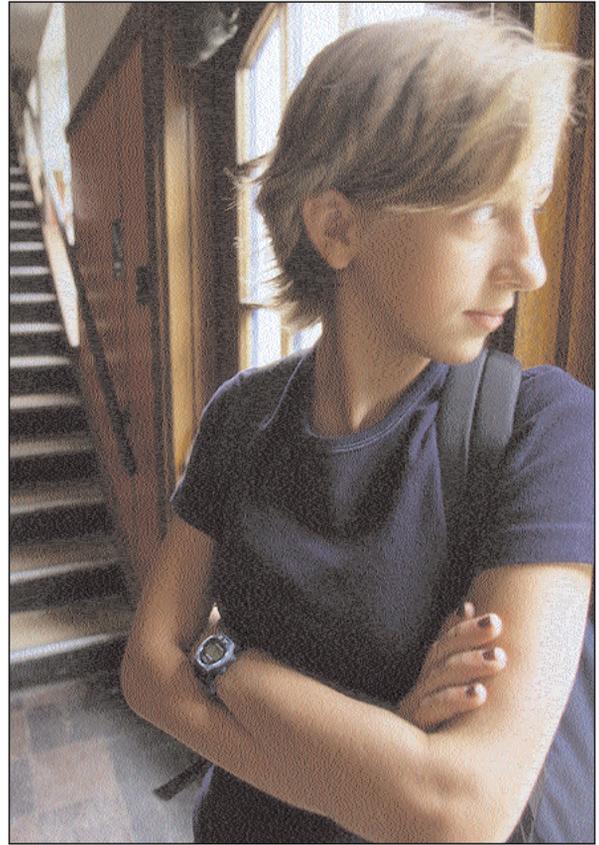


Making School Safe for Sexual Minority Students

Through school-based interventions and educational training for school staff members, schools can create a safe, supportive, and nondiscriminatory environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students.

BY ERICA M. WEILER



STOCK PHOTO IMAGE

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 students, however, schools are unsafe and survival, not education, is the priority. Indeed, these students are among the most vulnerable students in middle level and high schools. They face the same social and developmental challenges as their peers but often do so with the added burden of extreme social isolation, self-doubt, and fear. An estimated 10% of students are exclusively homosexual (Kinsey, 1948, as cited in Uribe & Harbeck, 1991), but many schools

fail to provide adequate safeguards or promote factual awareness about the nature of sexual orientation in human development. This neglect helps to fuel levels of prejudice, harassment, and discrimination that deny sexual minority and gender nonconforming students their basic rights—such as a free and appropriate public education.

Some educators are uncomfortable addressing issues of sexuality in school because of the potential controversy that may be created. Although principals should be sensitive to differing perspectives within their school community, they must provide the leadership to ensure a

safe and affirming educational environment for *all* students. It is important to develop policies based on science and research that dispel misinformation and help students, staff members, and parents work together to create a school climate in which the rights and dignity of all individuals are upheld.

School Climate

A school's 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 when it came to creating a positive climate for sexual minority students (GLSEN, 1999). Many school districts omit sexual orientation from anti-bullying

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programs or schoolwide codes of conduct. Others fail to enforce existing codes. Although students today are taught that hate speech—such as the use of religious, racial, or ethnic slurs—is intolerable, homophobic name-calling and anti-gay taunts, such as “fag” or “you’re so gay,” are rampant in most schools and are often tolerated by adults.

A climate survey by GLSEN (2001) found that 83% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students experienced verbal, physical, or sexual harassment and assault at school, which is a significantly higher rate than for heterosexual students. Specific acts of school violence included LGBT students being urinated and ejaculated on, being attacked with weapons, receiving death threats, having their clothes pulled off, and being gang raped. More than 68% of LGBT students reported feeling unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation (GLSEN, 2001). Disturbingly, in one-third of the incidents of anti-gay harassment, adult witnesses did not help. Principals should examine their school climate and ensure that students are taught positive, nonbiased behavior and that all staff members are trained to model and reinforce such behavior and stop harassment immediately.

Sexual Identity

Adolescence can be a stressful period for any youth because of tremendous physical, psychological, and cognitive changes. Discovering one’s sexual identity is an important and sometimes confusing part of this development. LGBT youth can begin to feel different from their same gender peers as early as kindergarten although there is no sexual connotation to those feelings. By the time they reach middle school, most sexual minority students realize that they are physically

and emotionally attracted to people of the same gender. This awareness may not yet be a fully formed sexual identity but an array of feelings accompanied by uncertainty about self-concept.

Full assumption of one’s sexual identity usually occurs around the age of 15 or 16, but this varies by individual and does not necessarily equate to sexual behavior (Lassinger & Tharinger, 1997). Many youth who recognize that they are gay or lesbian do not engage in sex, and questioning or heterosexual youth may have sex with a person of the same gender without becoming a sexual minority adult. Deciding whether to come out, and whom to come out to first, can be an extremely painful process. Schools can help by providing a support system that includes staff members trained to offer acceptance and guidance to students who are wrestling with their sexual orientation.

Risk Factors

Adolescents need acceptance and support from peers and significant adults. LGBT students, however, are often denied such support because they are afraid of being misunderstood or rejected by their family, friends, and teachers. The instinct for many is to hide their identity, which deepens their sense of confusion, isolation, and self-doubt. On the other hand, LGBT youth who do come out face the very real risk of violence, harassment, prejudice, discrimination, and stigmatization.

The stressors related to either hiding or revealing one’s sexual identity place sexual minority students at a higher risk for developing mental health, physical, and educational problems. Because survival at school is the priority, many LGBT students experience academic and learning problems. They may be less involved in school activities and

are three times more likely than their heterosexual peers to miss school because they feel unsafe (Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior Survey, 1999). They also drop out of school because of harassment at a rate that is approximately three times the national average (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1989).

Rates of suicidal ideation, attempts, and suicide by sexual minority youth are estimated to be *two to three times higher* than for heterosexual youth. To cope with feelings of being depressed and marginalized, LGBT teens are more likely to engage in high-risk behaviors such as drug and alcohol abuse and are also more likely to experience physical and verbal abuse in their home environment. LGBT students are frequently forced to leave home, and because they have few marketable skills, many engage in prostitution to support themselves, which greatly increases the risk of HIV infection and drug abuse.

Legal Requirements

Many schools—even those that have safe school programs in place—fail to recognize sexual minority students—assume that heterosexuality is the norm, and do not address stressors that affect the safety and education of LGBT students. These practices have a negative effect 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, all students are entitled to equal protection under the law. The following interventions will help ensure that all students are able to receive the education they deserve.

School-Based Interventions

Schools typically do not have the information, interest, or comfort level to address the needs of sexual minority students. However, school principals 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 LGBT students. An affirmative environment is more likely when school personnel are knowledgeable about protective factors and the needs of sexual minority students, provide them with support and understanding, and become their advocates and allies.

Improve school safety. Anti-gay epithets and aggression create a negative school climate and reinforce the message that hate speech and violence are permitted. A school-wide policy of zero tolerance for anti-gay harassment, hate epithets, and slurs must be developed either separately or incorporated into an overall school safety effort. The policy should apply to students and staff members and include incidents from name-calling and property damage to physical and sexual assault. Most important, the policy must be consistently enforced by *all* staff members.

Dispel misinformation and affirm diversity. In addition to preventing anti-gay behavior, it is important to represent and celebrate diversity throughout the school. Accurate information regarding sexual identity development, sexuality minority issues, and famous LGBT individuals must be infused into the curriculum. There are many examples in history, literature, and science—such as Alice Walker, Walt Whitman, Henry David Thoreau, Richard the Lion Hearted, Alexander the Great, and Margaret Mead—as well as in politics and current events. Setting a positive environment also includes displaying posters about

sexual minority students, reading literature by sexual minorities, and providing library resources. The use of gender neutral and inclusive language indicates that sexual orientation is not assumed.

Provide a support network for sexual minority students. Identify at least one trained staff member to serve as a resource for LGBT students. In many cases this would be the school psychologist or counselor, but a teacher or other staff member may be a more effective resource. Having a nonmental health professional act as a resource for LGBT

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students can help normalize sexual minority issues and prevent them from being viewed as a “mental health issue.”

The staff member should be trained to be knowledgeable about effective strategies for working with LGBT students; familiar with the best practices for implementing anti-bias programs in schools; and knowledgeable about the resources available in the community. (The National Association of School Psychologists and GLSEN are among a number of organizations offering training to educators.) Students should know which personnel they can turn to; hanging rainbow posters or placing “safe

zone” stickers on doors are good ways to help identify where staff members are located. Another effective way to improve the school climate is to establish a school-based Gay-Straight Alliance, which provides support and companionship, improves self-esteem, and promotes positive school change.

Prevent discrimination. Creation of a nondiscrimination school policy for sexual minority students and staff members extends additional protections. Including staff members in the nondiscrimination policy demonstrates to LGBT students that their role models will not be discriminated against, which may increase the likelihood of staff members being “out” and willing to serve as resources.

Ensure sexual minority students equal access to all school-related activities. Cocurricular activities, such as after-school clubs, sports teams, and social events, need to be explicitly open to all students. Proms and other “couple” events can be particularly uncomfortable for sexual minority students. LGBT students at some schools prefer to organize their own dances, but this should be a student choice and not a result of being unwelcome at the main prom.

Train all staff members to understand sexual minority students and use effective interventions. Provide staff members with ongoing, anti-bias training and education regarding the legal responsibility to protect and treat all LGBT students respectfully. Such training should provide a protocol for responding to students who reach out for help and should include teachers, bus drivers and other Education Support Professionals, coaches, and after-school personnel. Guest speakers who are willing to share their school experiences—such as LGBT graduates from the school or representatives from Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gay (PFLAG), which is a national

organization with local chapters—are also effective at raising awareness.

Be aware—and wary—of interventions to change an individual's sexual orientation. There has been a recent increase in efforts to promote “reparative therapy” and “transformation ministry” in schools. Both movements view homosexuality as pathological and attempt to eliminate an individual's sexual desire for people of the same gender by using psychotherapy or a religious ministry. These approaches contradict science and research; have no support among health or mental health professional organizations; and have the potential to do serious harm to LGBT students.

Be prepared to address controversy. Issues of sexuality can raise strong emotions. Be sure to engage students, staff members, and parents in developing codes of conduct and diversity programming. Understand cultural viewpoints within the community. Know the facts about sexual orientation and communicate them to all groups. Talk to principals in other schools who have successfully created safe and supportive school cultures for sexual minority students. Reiterate that your school welcomes all students for who they are, affirms diversity, and ensures a safe, healthy learning environment for everyone.

Conclusion

Creating safe and affirmative schools for all students, including sexual minority and gender non-conforming students, is an essential role of principals. When principals do not intervene in anti-gay abuse, they deny the existence and unique needs of the LGBT student population and place their mental health and education at risk. Conversely, school principals can improve the physical, social, and psychological functioning of sexual minority students through support and advocacy. PL

Resources

Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE):
www.colage.org

Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN):
www.glsen.org

Gay-Straight Alliance Network:
www.gsanetwork.org

Health Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual Student Project:
www.apa.org/ed/hlgb

Just the Facts: Sexual Orientation & Youth, A Primer for Principals, Educators & School Personnel (1999):
<http://ericass.uncg.edu/virtuallib/diversity/1073.html>

NASP Work Group on Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues:
www.nasponline.org/advocacy/glb.html

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

Safe School Coalition of Washington:
www.safeschools-wa.org

Stopping Anti-Gay Abuse of Students in Public Schools:
A Legal Perspective:
www.lambdalegal.org/cgi-bin/iowa/documents/record?record=124

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