

School Policy Regarding LGBTQ Students

School Policy Regarding LGBTQ Students

Scott Sutherland

University of South Carolina

2020

School Policy Regarding LGBTQ Students

Although there are federal laws, such as title IX, that are meant to protect LGBTQ students in schools, the reality is that many are still discriminated against on a daily basis. “Over 85% report being harassed because of their sexual or gender identity, and over 20% report being physically attacked.” (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010, p. 1). For national educational policies to be effective, local school districts and individual schools themselves should include and reinforce nondiscrimination policies that include LGBTQ students and provide consistent professional development in their incorporation.

While most schools have general nondiscrimination policies, many do not go far enough to specifically include and adequately enforce these protects for LGBTQ youth. Enumerated policies are those that “specifically include actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity or expression.” (Saewyc, 2010, p. 7). These more specific policies that can be adopted by states are more inclusive and better help to protect LGBTQ students through a more comprehensive approach.

Inclusive, enumerated nondiscrimination and anti-bullying policies at the school level may provide more immediate or direct protection for students and provide the basis for other forms of school safety policy, practice, or programs. Such policies create a context in which pro-active efforts to support LGBTQ students can be enacted and provide the institutional backing for school personnel (administrators, staff, and teachers) to create and enforce these nondiscrimination and anti-bullying measures (Saewyc, 2010, p. 7).

These types of enumerated nondiscrimination policies should be written in clear and consistent language for the state, school districts, and individual schools to create an educational

School Policy Regarding LGBTQ Students

environment that promotes accountability and clarity. Macgillivray (2004) recommends using a top down approach that includes “clear mandates from the administration making certain individuals accountable for resolving complaints of discrimination.” (p. 64).

Targeted professional development for teachers and staff is critical for consistent implementation and enforcement of enumerated nondiscrimination policies that include specific protections for LGBTQ students. Biegel and Kuehl (2010) discuss the comprehensive nature of this professional developing by stating that “organizational change should include teacher education and administrator training in credentialing programs, professional development within individual districts, school family-community partnerships, and collaborative leadership by educators.” (p. 9). Educators should be given practical strategies and guidelines to addressing issues of discrimination and harassment of LGBTQ youth in schools, along with being given additional opportunities to engage in discussions related to issues involving sexual orientation and gender identify. Macgillivray (2004) states that “study groups, as opposed to one day in-services.” (p. 63.) can be utilized to better stimulate discussion and change.

In order to create school environments that are supportive to the needs of LGBTQ students, professional development related to bullying and harassment must include specific trainings geared toward these issues. “In a national survey of school principals, although the majority reported professional development for their school staff about bullying and harassment, less than 5% reported that the trainings specifically addressed LGBTQ student issues.” (Saewyc, 2010, p. 11). In order to provide comprehensible professional development to all educators and staff, both focus groups and mandatory trainings can be used. However, the key aspect to ensuring the effectiveness of these approaches is through the consistency of their inclusion. While incorporating these policies in a more comprehensible manner helps to build an

School Policy Regarding LGBTQ Students

environment of support, tolerance, and inclusion, resistance to their use will undoubtedly be involved.

When implementing these policy strategies, school administrators often face a common form of resistance: the argument that these practices promote homosexuality as an acceptable “lifestyle” and thus force students who believe otherwise to change their beliefs or values. It is argued that this infringes on students’ rights to adhere to cultural or religious beliefs that homosexuality is wrong or sinful. However, there is good evidence to suggest that students distinguish between their personal values and a shared ethic of tolerance and inclusion. (Saewyc, 2010, p. 12).

“Young people bring to the table diverse backgrounds and unique personal perspectives, including those associated with LGBT status. Policy and practice should be responsive to and inclusive of that diversity.” (Biegel & Kuehl, 2010, p. 11). Supporting a positive climate within our schools for all learners should always be a key focus in developing and enforcing policies that support the needs of LGBTQ students. These policies should include specific protections for LGBTQ students, incorporate a top down approach that uses clear and consistent language and mandates, and involves multiple types of professional development to support the needs of educators in implementing and enforcing them. Removing barriers that impede their equitable implementation by methods such as raising awareness, including targeted support, and providing specific resources will help to ensure that our schools are conducive for LGBTQ youth.

School Policy Regarding LGBTQ Students

References

Biegel, S & Kuehl, S. (2010). Safe at School: Addressing the School Environment and LGBT Safety through Policy and Legislation. Great Lakes Center for Education Research and Practice.

Macgillivray, I. K. (2004). *Sexual orientation and school policy: A practical guide for teachers, administrators, and community activists*. Lanham, MA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Saewyc, E. (2010). Safe schools policy for LGBTQ students. Social policy report / Society for Research in Child Development. 24.