



Bullying Bias:

Making schools safe for gay students

Students on campuses with Gay Straight Alliances are more likely to report feeling safe at school, and less likely to be exposed to bias-related harassment.

“**T**hree years ago, I walked my friend to second period every day. Every single day, he was bullied. He was called names and harassed; sometimes he was pushed and tripped. Every day it was a new challenge to get him to class without getting hurt. I don’t see it happening as much today. If it is happening, we want that kid to have a place to go.” – Jason, grade 11.

Jason shared his memories at a recent Gay Straight Alliance meeting. Club meetings are a safe space for students to discuss their lives and get informed. The GSA at Mayfair Middle/High School, in concert with other clubs on campus, is steadily shifting school culture toward one of inclusion. Some of the leading groups on campus include Young Black Scholars, Spanish club, Leo club, Pacific Islanders club, Friends of Rachael, ROCK and Learning Acceptance through Friendship and Fun Club. Together with the GSA, this network of clubs on cam-

pus is striving to create a safe and supportive environment for all students.

Teachers and students alike are noticing a change. Teachers believe that students are altering the language they use in class to better accommodate diverse students. The hard work of socially minded clubs is paying off for those students who are still looking for a connection with their school.

“Its about visibility,” says Amanda McAndrew, campus activities director. “Just like the other clubs, [the GSA] creates a safe space for a student that may not otherwise get involved.” She has seen the effects of bias-based harassment firsthand. Over the years, she has mentored several students who didn’t feel like they “fit in.” She is delighted that another group has formed on campus to provide support to vulnerable students.

McAndrew’s observations align with the

By James Fleming

findings of the 2009 National School Climate Survey (GLSEN). Students on campuses with GSAs are more likely to report feeling safe on campus, and are less likely to be exposed to bias-related harassment. Nationwide, LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) teens deal with issues of school safety every day. The School Climate Survey states that 85 percent of students report being verbally harassed, and 62 percent of students do not report these harassments to school staff, fearing that reporting the harassment would make the problem worse. LGBT teens are four times more likely to report having skipped at least one day of school in the previous month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

The School Climate Survey makes four recommendations to combat harassment. Gay Straight Alliances, inclusive curriculum, supportive educators, and comprehensive bullying/harassment policies are strong contributing factors to keeping students safe and engaged in school.

GSA members are serious about making new members feel welcome. An existing member always introduces new students to everybody in the room. “We never ask about a student’s sexuality,” explains the club president, Anna. “The only question we’ll ask is ‘Why did you decide to come today?’”

After that, they’re welcome to participate as much or as little as they like. Club meetings are much like any high school club meeting – lots of talk about schoolwork, planning fundraisers, and ideas to promote the club. The difference is that no matter why the student decided to join, they’re treated like they belong there.

Our GSA attracts a diverse group of students. Some join because they’re sorting out their own identity. Others join to show support. Kate, grade 11, reports: “I joined the club ... as a way to show support to my gay cousins living in the Philippines.” Another senior proudly shares that she grew up with same-sex parents, and wants to show her support to the LGBT community. Others report that they see LGBT issues as another civil rights issue that deserves their attention.

While everyone has his or her own reasons for joining, one thing is clear. The

Playgrounds prove perilous for some students

A recent survey of elementary students found many teachers are uncomfortable handling student concerns about sexual identity. The study, conducted by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network, is based on national surveys of 1,065 elementary school students in third to sixth grade and 1,099 elementary school teachers in kindergarten-sixth grade. Key findings include:

- Less than half of teachers (48%) indicate that they feel comfortable responding to questions from their students about gay, lesbian or bisexual people.
- A majority of teachers (85%) have received professional development on diversity or multicultural issues, but less than half of teachers have received specific professional development on gender issues (37%) or on families with LGBT parents (23%).
- Students are most commonly made fun of or bullied because of their looks or body size (67%), not being good at sports (37%), how well they do at schoolwork (26%), not conforming to traditional gender norms/roles (23%) or because other people think they’re gay (21%).
- The most common forms of biased language in elementary schools, heard regularly by both students and teachers, are the use of the word “gay” in a negative way, such as “that’s so gay,” (students: 45%, teachers: 49%) and comments like “spaz” or “retard” (51% of students, 45% of teachers). Many also report regularly hearing students make homophobic remarks, such as “fag” or “lesbo” (students: 26%, teachers: 26%) and negative comments about race/ethnicity (students: 26%, teachers: 21%).
- Seven in 10 students (72%) say they have been taught that there are many different kinds of families. However, less than two in 10 (18%) have learned about families with gay or lesbian parents (families that have two dads or two moms).

The full report, titled “Playgrounds and Prejudice: Elementary School Climate in the United States,” (2012) is available at www.glsen.org.

Resources to help LGBT students thrive in school

Schools & Youth Program of the ACLU’s LGBT Project

Strives to make public schools safe and bias-free; helps students establish Gay Straight Alliances and understand their legal rights.

■ www.aclu.org/lgbt/youth

Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE)

Seeks to engage, connect and empower people to make the world a better place for children of lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender parents and families.

■ www.colage.org

Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) Network

Supports young people in starting, strengthening and sustaining GSAs.

■ www.gsanetwork.org

From Our House to the Schoolhouse: A National Campaign of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG)

Uses its national network in more than 500 communities to help make schools safer.

■ www.pflag.org/From_Our_House_to_the_Schoolhouse.schools.0.html

students keep coming back for the sense of community and acceptance. Daniella, grade 12, reports, “The GSA makes me happy to be involved in a school club because it allows me to have a positive impact in someone’s life.” She feels she is getting as much out of the club as she is putting in. She also reported that her teachers are starting to talk about LGBT issues more. She describes several of her teachers as “supportive, without being preachy.”

A shift in mainstream culture

In its third year, the GSA has impacted the school’s mainstream culture. Teachers detect a shift toward awareness of LGBT issues. For example, Mr. Falk reports the phrase “That’s so gay!” has been notably absent this year. He is happy to see that having gay friends is no longer a social liability for students.

Mrs. Clinton made a big impression when she and some of her students participated in GLSEN’s National Day of Silence in 2011. The annual event is intended to draw

attention to anti-LGBT name-calling and harassment. The activity made a huge impact on one of her students, who said, “I felt safer in her class after that. It also allowed me to open up in my writing.”

Mr. Phinizy is also happy with the rise in acceptance among his students. He has



noticed that more students are open about being gay, lesbian or bisexual. Additionally, he celebrates the rising cultural acceptance of male students who express something other than hyper-masculinity. He appreciates that the presence of the GSA on cam-

pus adds legitimacy to class discussions. “Of course, any teacher who claims that the issue of gender or sexuality does not come up has been keeping their head in the sand,” he said.

Some club members are still waiting to feel support from the staff, however. Students report that derogatory jokes and slurs are still happening in the classroom. Jason explains his feelings: “Somebody says something offensive, and I wait for the teacher to say something. Most of the time, they act like they didn’t hear it, and they move on.”

The California Safe Schools Coalition recommends that teachers intervene when they hear bias-related comments. Each comment should be used as an opportunity to provide education and reinforce school policy. Educators should treat all slurs as serious and preventable (Russell, 2010).

Becoming friends

Our staff feels that the GSA and other clubs are promoting an atmosphere of kindness and tolerance at the right time. The staff agrees that the GSA is a welcome addition to the family of clubs promoting tolerance and understanding. One student summarized the club’s mission when she said, “I’ve seen positive stuff, such as new friendships and tolerance for different races, ethnicities and gender expressions. It’s a group of different kids who you’d normally not associate with, but we’re all friends.” ■

References

Russel, S.T.; McGuire, J.K. & Laub, C. (2009). “Understanding Differences Between Schools in Overall LGBT School Safety.” *California Safe Schools Coalition Research Brief No. 9*. San Francisco, CA: California Safe Schools Coalition.

The 2009 National School Climate Survey Executive Summary. Key Findings on the Experience of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in Our Nation’s Schools. www.glsen.org.

GLSEN Day of Silence: www.dayofsilence.org.

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