

GLSEN: THE GAY, LESBIAN, AND STRAIGHT EDUCATION NETWORK

OVERVIEW

Imagine a high school in Iowa where the Gay Straight Alliance meeting room is filled to overflowing each week with heterosexual students committed to making their school safe for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender students. Imagine a middle school in the Pacific Northwest in which teachers readily incorporate gay, lesbian, and transgender figures and events into their social studies curriculum in order to present to all students positive, historical lesbian, gay, and transgender role models. Try to picture a New England school where the captain of the football team summons up the courage to come out to his teammates and, instead of being met with scorn and isolation, hears his peers apologize to him for having made it difficult for him to be open with them about his sexuality. These scenarios may seem unlikely to those unfamiliar with the work of GLSEN, but they're all true stories that have already occurred. The following case studies will describe GLSEN and the strategies it has used to win significant accomplishments in schools and school districts across the country to end anti-gay harassment. To do this, the following article will examine GLSEN's experiences in five school districts across the country, and will then offer lessons learned to readers interested in how these accomplishments are relevant to the work of embedding teen dating violence prevention programs into schools across the country.

GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, is the leading national organization fighting to end anti-gay bias in America's K-12 schools. GLSEN works to combat harassment and discrimination leveled against students and school personnel. It creates learning environments that affirm the inherent dignity of all students, and, in so doing, teaches them to respect and accept all of their classmates—regardless of sexual orientation and gender identity. GLSEN believes that the key to ending anti-gay prejudice and hate-motivated violence is education. For this reason, GLSEN brings together students, educators, families and other community members—of any sexual orientation—to reform America's education system. GLSEN supports over 1600 school based Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs)—school-based, student-led, non-curricular clubs—and over 70 volunteer-based chapters in communities across the nation. Both GSAs and GLSEN chapters organize to end anti-gay bias and homophobia in schools and create positive change by making schools welcoming, supportive and safe places for all students, regardless of actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.

GLSEN works in four ways to achieve such reform: local organizing, impacting public policy by shaping public opinion, educating educators, and helping students fight for their rights. GLSEN's activists believe this work is crucial, especially given that:

- Nearly 70% of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students report verbal, sexual, or physical harassment;
- 90% of LGBT students regularly hear anti-gay comments at school;
- Over one-third of LGBT students hear anti-gay comments from school staff;

- Lesbian, gay and bisexual youth are about four times more likely to skip school because they feel unsafe;
- Four of five students who experience anti-gay harassment do not, themselves, identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender; and
- 75% of the nation’s teachers have received no training about the needs of LGBT students.

GLSEN knows that much of the harassment identified above may be based on gender rather than actual sexual orientation. Indeed, much anti-gay name-calling is, essentially, sexist and occurs when the individuals being harassed do not fit proscribed gender norms. (“He walks like a girl.” “Hey, dyke! Act like a girl and guys might want to go out with you.”). Given this, collaboration with other activists doing anti-sexist work to end teen dating violence and to promote gender justice makes obvious sense.

Recently GLSEN has identified three specific, key strategic imperatives for its work over the next few years to combat such anti-LGBT and sexist bias:

1. Make anti-LGBT bullying, harassment, and name-calling unacceptable in America’s schools;
2. Engage and empower educators in creating schools where every student can fully participate in school life regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression; and
3. Ensure that the national education agenda to create effective schools includes LGBT issues.

Following are five case studies that exhibit the kinds of strategies that GLSEN uses to achieve its mission.

FIVE CASE STUDIES

San Ramon Valley Unified School District (California)

For two years the GLSEN San Francisco-East Bay chapter worked behind the scenes to convince school administrators in this suburban community to train its school staff on LGBT issues and fully to support students who wished to start Gay-Straight Alliances. In spite of extensive advocacy and to the chapter’s dismay, this did not occur to any extent. While school administrators, themselves, seemed personally to understand the issues, they were heavily influenced by reactionary local media and a small but very outspoken group of people intent on keeping LGBT issues out of local schools. With extensive staff assistance, the chapter has since facilitated the formation of a local coalition of many, diverse individuals—parents, business people, faith leaders, students, and educators—whose primary goal is to provide opportunities in which local students, parents, teachers, and others can give voice to their reality around LGBT issues in San Ramon’s schools. One exciting manifestation of the local coalition’s leadership was the recent election of

three progressive school board members, even in a tough election year. Further, though the school district has yet to mandate any explicit staff training on LGBT issues, it has finally and officially recognized the importance and right of students to form Gay-Straight Alliances in all three of the district's high schools.

San Lorenzo Unified School District (California)

For about five years, the GLSEN San Francisco-East Bay chapter has worked with school board members, administrators, classroom educators, school support staff, parents, and students to effect positive change around anti-LGBT harassment and discrimination in this very diverse East Bay community. At first, such change seemed unlikely. The mere attempt to conduct anti-homophobia training angered some people. But the chapter deliberately developed and applied a strategy of gradually educating and informing key decision-makers, starting with school board members and key community leaders, even those who were not "on board" with these issues at first. Five years later, the district has not only trained all of its staff about LGBT issues, but it is reviewing its social studies curricula to ensure that it is LGBT-inclusive where age-appropriate. This is a powerful example of having a long-term vision to secure long-term change that is acceptable and even necessary to most school stakeholders.

Kodiak Island Borough School District (Alaska)

The local GLSEN chapter in this small, isolated island community led a campaign to facilitate change in local school district anti-harassment policy. Because of the small-town, insulated nature of this small community, it was crucial that very public and many private 1:1 discussions occur in which students and decision-makers could engage in discourse about the issues. What is unique about this chapter's work was its ability to build a coalition around safe schools issues with the town's relatively large Filipino community and Catholic leaders and parishioners. Chapter activists were and continue to be clear that any change that occurs around LGBT-related issues must be done over time and that all players involved are provided ample opportunities to participate.

Anchorage School District (Alaska)

Lesbian and gay students, and those who were perceived to be gay or lesbian, first shared their "personal realities" with key school officials and were instrumental in effecting what promises to be a comprehensive plan to address anti-gay harassment and discrimination in the Anchorage School District. A quasi-public forum on talk radio with the school district's superintendent resulted in opening her eyes to the challenges faced by actual and perceived LGBT students. Following that public forum, she and others started the process of first revising school district policy to protect LGBT students from harassment, and then co-hosted a Training of Trainers (TOT) on LGBT issues based on GLSEN's curriculum kit, "The GLSEN Lunchbox." This valuable resource aimed at school staff provides scores of activities that raise awareness about LGBT issues in schools. The activities are geared to a variety of learning styles and a variety of time constraints for such staff training. The kit includes activities that provide the quantitative and qualitative impacts of anti-gay harassment as well as strategies and actions to create positive changes in schools. The long-range goal in Anchorage is for all district staff to

be trained on LGBT issues using the GLSEN Lunchbox and other local training resources.

Minneapolis School District (Minnesota)

In the summer of 2001, in Minneapolis, GLSEN held a national training institute for 50 of its local activists and chapter leaders. During that intensive week, the activists joined with GLSEN Twin Cities to conduct an extensive, door-to-door canvass of a middle-class neighborhood. The purposes of the canvass were four-fold:

1. Raise public awareness of anti-LGBT harassment and discrimination in K-12 schools by encouraging people to sign—on the spot—postcards that asked then U.S. Senator Paul Wellstone to open public hearings in Congress on anti-LGBT harassment and discrimination in K-12 schools;
2. Give activists the valuable experience of using the words, “gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender” with complete strangers—not something many of them had done previously;
3. Increase the visibility of the local GLSEN chapter and its efforts to make Twin Cities’ schools safe for all.

The canvass was far more successful than anyone had imagined it would be. Over 80% (about 550 households) of those canvassed agreed to sign the postcards on the spot, indicating that, contrary to common assumptions, most people in middle-class America seem to understand the importance of explicitly providing safe schools for all students, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. In fact, many of those canvassed asked for multiple cards to give to their friends and colleagues in their churches. The experience was highly motivating for participants, many of whom have since conducted similar canvasses in their own communities to raise awareness about harassment and discrimination of actual and perceived lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.

LESSONS LEARNED

- *Think globally; act locally.* Schools in America are local in their governance and culture. Any attempt to change school policy and culture around given issues must have successful local components.
- *Make people aware of their own power.* Quiet, behind-the-scenes meetings with school administrators may only go so far in effecting positive and substantive school change, particularly when the issues become public. Publicly engaging and involving many local progressive people makes them aware of their own power and gives them tools and energy to sustain such positive change.
- *Develop long-term relationships.* Recognizing the power of 1:1 communication in developing long-term relationships with school districts and with local activists is

crucial to creating positive, substantive, and long-lasting change in schools—especially change that is embraced by all in the school community.

- *Build broad and diverse coalitions.* It is important in this work to build a broad and diverse base of activists and allies from places well beyond those we might assume to be directly tied to our issues. Coalitions are stronger than the sum of their members in leveraging power and creating long-lasting change.

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