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# Going Beyond Gay-Straight Alliances to Make Schools Safe for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students

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It's the beginning of another school day. In homerooms across the United States, high school students endure a familiar ritual of "morning announcements" over the school PA system: *There is a girls basketball game this evening—come and support the defending state champs. Don't forget to remind your parents or guardians about Back-to-School Night Tuesday. Mr. Rodriguez's Spanish classes will be on a field trip today. The Gay-Straight Alliance will meet after school in the library. The chess club meets after school in the cafeteria . . .*

While PA announcements are a familiar ritual, the notices of Gay-Straight school-sponsored student clubs reflect a growing trend. The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN), a national organization working to end bias in schools, estimates that over the last five to ten years hundreds of Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs) have been established nationwide. As a result, for thousands of high

school students morning announcements about the GSA are a normal part of the school experience, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and their allies have a school-based club from which to advocate for increased safety and inclusion in school.

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*"...The positive effects of GSAs are most likely to be long lasting when they are part of a broad, on-going, organization-level plan..."*

In contrast, most adults remember that discussions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) issues during high school years were limited to anti-gay name-calling, jokes about peers who did not fit accepted norms for heterosexual popularity, and whispers about certain unmarried educators. While an unwelcoming or hostile environment is still the norm for many LGBT young people in schools,<sup>1</sup> a national movement by young people and their adult allies to address the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and



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transgender students in schools is calling attention to this previously invisible minority and the harassment, discrimination, and prejudice that they endure from adults and peers in school.

Currently, the establishment of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) in schools is one of the most visible and widely adopted strategies for calling attention to and addressing the needs of LGBT students. Though some school officials, parents, community members, and even state legislators have challenged the appropriateness and need for GSAs, research available about GSAs and their impact on school climate indicates that these student clubs provide support for students and call attention to previously ignored issues of school harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender expression.<sup>2</sup>

Although GSAs can play a vital role in making schools safer and more inclusive places for all students, GSAs are only part of the bigger picture. This report summarizes a recent pilot study of schools participating in the Massachusetts Safe Schools Program. Individual students and staff come and go. Without change throughout a school's organizational setting, the gains of one year may be lost when GSA members graduate or club advisors retire, change schools, or move on to other work. The pilot study

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results show that clear policy statements (both statewide and local) backed up by technical, legal, and financial resources, along with involvement from key administrators (e.g., building principals, district superintendents and school committees), educators, community leaders, and student leaders are at least as important as GSAs in creating lasting school safety.

### Documenting the Need for Safe School Strategies

A growing body of research has identified the health and safety risks LGBT young people face within school settings.<sup>3</sup> The risks range from a “failure to thrive” to physical violence that can result, in the worst case, in death. Studies using the government’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey and other survey sources have clearly established that gay and lesbian youth face extraordinary stresses that may lead to consideration of suicide.<sup>4</sup> LGBT youth and youth perceived to be gay or bisexual also face psychological and physical danger in the school setting at the hands of their peers.

Examples of such actions include name-calling, taunting, and even physical violence ranging from bullying (shoving, pushing, hitting, etc.) to being severely beaten and/or raped.<sup>5</sup>

### ***Support for Gay-Straight Alliances***

National organizations like GLSEN work with local school-based organizations to call attention to the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and provide resources to school officials to address these needs. Additionally, many national education organizations have passed declarations of support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students and have taken active roles in addressing this underserved group in schools. These organizations include the National Educational Association, the American Federation of Educators, the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, and the National School Boards Association. Moreover, recent court decisions in several states have ruled that school districts failing to address anti-gay harassment and discrimination are liable for substantial monetary damages. A few states (e.g., Wisconsin, Minnesota, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and California) have enacted legislation prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation against students in schools.

## ***Massachusetts Safe Schools Program***

In 1993 Massachusetts became the first state to sponsor a Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Youth (SSP), which is run by the Department of Education. The Massachusetts SSP provides consultation services and program development resources to schools as they take steps to become safer places for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. For example, over 140 high schools throughout the state have participated in staff training programs and sponsor GSAs. In fact, the establishment and support of GSAs has become the centerpiece of the SSP in Massachusetts, and GSAs can apply for small annual grants from the DOE to subsidize their school-based activities. The SSP also sponsors statewide and regional conferences for educators, teacher educators, administrators, and students that include workshops and other presentations designed to increase the number and the success of high schools participating in the SSP.

The Massachusetts SSP offers an unprecedented opportunity to understand how schools can change to better meet the needs of LGBT students. Individual educators, parents, community members, and students, as well as school systems in other states, may benefit enormously from lessons learned from Massachusetts's schools. Studying how school settings in Massachusetts respond to the policies, expectations, and aspirations of the SSP will contribute to the development of effective programs for students and faculty in other locations.

This important research shows that without appropriate supports in school settings, LGBT youth may struggle in isolation with important developmental tasks such as intimacy issues (i.e., a sense of being truly known and valued) and self esteem.<sup>6</sup> This stress may lead to alcohol or drug abuse, risky or premature sexual behaviors, underachievement academically, or social isolation.<sup>7</sup> On the other hand, some recent researchers have argued that lesbian and gay students may overcompensate and become academic or social “overachievers.”

Developing effective school policy to address the concerns raised by this body of research depends on access to information that can provide guidance to school personnel, parents, and other decision-makers interested in making schools safe and productive places for all students. The programs and activities of GSAs are often the catalyst and vehicle for just such an infusion of new information and perspectives for students, educators, and administrators. It appears that one of the things that GSAs do best is to pique the interest and involvement of a range of students (including heterosexuals) in learning about cultural and social issues related to sexual orientation. In such discussions, issues important to all participants often intersect, for example, experiences of prejudice and

understanding the perspective of someone perceived as different. However, as noted earlier, the transformative power of GSAs may be limited without widespread organizational change, and we have far less information about how schools successfully undergo such change to become safer, more welcoming places for LGBT youth.

## **Safe Schools and Organizational Change**

The University of Massachusetts/IGLSS Making Schools Safe Project is studying how selected high schools in Massachusetts use a range of strategies and initiatives to create a more welcoming and safe social and learning environment for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. An important contribution of this study is to understand the contributions and limitations of individual strategies, such as GSAs, within the context of the whole school organization change. By placing such efforts in a systemic context, we better understand the important interactions, contributions, and limitations of strategies for successful and enduring school change.<sup>8</sup> Based on the analysis of our pilot study data, we have identified several key ingredients for creating safer school environments for LGBT students that will last.

**Statewide Legal Mandates, Policies, and Programs:** The combined support from statewide legal mandates, policy recommendations, and program assistance from the Massachusetts Department of Education played a crucial role in facilitating organizational change at local levels. For example, statewide legal mandates and recommendations provided external legitimacy and “back-up” support for administrators, educators, parents, and students at the local level who anticipated or faced community opposition to such initiatives as launching a GSA. Legal mandates alone, however, did not insure long-term school change. School administrators and educators reported that legal mandates containing specific recommendations *along with* access to technical and financial resources to support individual school initiatives were essential to the successful implementation of safe school strategies. Statewide programming efforts now provide information and assistance in planning successful activities, developing student leadership roles, and gaining the support of other adults in the school setting for such endeavors as a GSA.

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*“Study participants identified the active support of the school principal as the most important factor that made decisions ‘stick.’”*

**Key Administrators and Adults:** According to school personnel who were directly involved in safe school efforts, the active support of key administrators (i.e., principals, district superintendents and school committees) was crucial to the success and sustained presence of safe schools initiatives. “Support” ranged widely from public statements or actions by administrators to a perceived willingness of superintendents and school committees to sign off on safe school efforts, support the principal, and not to block change efforts. Unanimously, study participants identified the active support of the school principal as the most important factor that made decisions “stick.” Principals could also grant release time for staff and students to attend out-of-school SSP events and enforce student discipline codes for anti-gay harassment in the school. Additionally, principals play a crucial role responding to and diffusing criticism from parents who resist the presence of a GSA in the school.

In every school at least one adult (a teacher, counselor, school nurse, or librarian) whom students and principals per-

### ***The Overall Study: Making Schools Safe***

The project’s first stage, undertaken in 1999, focused on eight high schools in Western Massachusetts. We used standard qualitative data collection strategies (interviews, observations, and document collection) to focus data collection. The second stage of the project targets local community-based support groups for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth. (Although the Safe Schools Project does not explicitly include transgender students, our study will include an analysis of issues for transgender youth.) We are conducting focus group interviews with and administering written questionnaires to youth who participate in these community-based support groups to identify youth perspectives on how schools address safety for LGBT students, and in particular, their perspectives on school-based GSAs. The third stage of the project will add schools to the study to increase the racial, ethnic, class, and regional diversity of the student populations and to include some schools that are not actively addressing LGBT issues. Including these schools will enable us to examine what organizational characteristics may prevent or discourage schools from addressing LGBT issues and to compare the social and academic climates in these schools with schools that are participating in the Safe Schools program.

Once the full study is complete, IGLSS will publish a report on the project findings and a self-assessment workbook for schools.

ceived as trustworthy and credible was an active leader in changing the school's policies. This adult could be either gay or straight and did not necessarily need to be knowledgeable about LGBT issues, but she or he was willing to act as an advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students with other adults and students in the school. This adult bridged communication between students and others in the school, for example, as a GSA advisor, and was entrusted by the principal to work on a potentially controversial topic.

**Community Participation:** Community members, such as leaders of community-based lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth groups, played complex and important roles in school change efforts. For example, community leaders often provided important expertise in issues related to homophobia and heterosexism and the development of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. As may be predicted, SSP-related initiatives such as founding a GSA, often rallied explicit and vocal community support and opposition. Interestingly, and contrary to popular wisdom, strong opposition to SSP initiatives sometimes actually increased the resolve and support of building principals for implementing safe school strategies. Through the process of meeting resistance, principals tended to clarify their own commitment to the democratic values and principles that undergird change efforts, such as the idea that all students should be able to access public education without fear of being hurt and without fear of harassment based on their gender, race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation. Moreover, explicit community support for safe school strategies was sometimes best rallied in the face of community opposition.

**Student Leadership:** Students in most schools played a crucial role in galvanizing and supporting changes. In almost all schools, the impetus for implementation of safe school strategies initially came from

students who attended a regional conference or knew of safe school activities in another school and then approached educators or administrators for help and approval. Often, these students' requests and leadership led to the support for starting a GSA and other activities. Student leaders were also catalysts in generating adult actions in the system, seeking out an adult teacher or administrator whom the students perceived to be supportive and enlisting that person to become their GSA sponsor. While this adult may have been supportive emotionally and socially to students all along, the students' efforts helped to turn that support into public action.

**Getting Started:** The unique contexts of individual schools determined how, when, and what changes were implemented. No "correct" sequence or pace appropriate for every school emerged from the pilot study. This finding reinforces the importance of

allowing local control over how and when to undertake the organizational changes recommended by state agencies or advocacy groups (e.g., GLSEN). However, the

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pilot study also clearly suggests that no single strategy is *sufficient* to change schools. A school might begin with a GSA, or anywhere else, but eventually the entire school setting must be involved. Having a policy on the books, implementing one-time special programs for all students or staff, or even having an on-going program for some students did not guarantee long-term organizational change. In every school, educators talked about the constant turnover in the student and staff population and its effect on long-term change efforts. If a school's primary response to safe school recommendations was to sponsor a one-time staff training or only to sponsor a GSA, LGBT-related issues did not become a school-wide and on-going concern for others in the school and were not normalized as a part of school structure and culture.

## Implications for Change Efforts

Popular ideas about school change, such as the GSA model, offer useful and important contributions, galvanizing a group of students and adults committed to change. As this group learns more about the issues in the context of their particular school, they act as a “change agent group” for the system by advocating for specific initiatives, sharing information, and creating connections between SSP efforts and other initiatives important to the community and school.

But the findings from the Making Schools Safe pilot study demonstrate that any stand-alone strategy is likely to be insufficient to change schools settings in far-reaching ways. The first stage of this large-scale research project already provides some suggestions for members of school communities who are strategizing about how to make schools safer for LGBT students:

***Solicit and nurture the support of the school principal.*** The success of school change efforts builds on the support (or at least the neutrality) of

the school principal. Engage the principal in a positive, mutually respectful dynamic early on in the process to ascertain his or her values and beliefs about LGBT issues and to identify the best place to begin. For example, a principal may be hesitant to support a GSA but is instead very supportive of training or workshops for educators.

***Just get started.*** No single intervention or activity is going to be sufficient, nor is there a magic sequence of events or changes that must occur. Good results can begin from any number of points of entry. Perhaps the best place to start is to find a relatively broad base of support for a specific effort. Again, in one school this may mean workshops for the staff while in another it may mean a GSA.

People working for change must also address the developmental needs and readiness levels of different members of the school setting. Schools bring together

the entire scope of values and beliefs found in their communities, therefore, a range of types and levels of program opportunities is crucial. For effective systemic changes to be institutionalized, all members of the school organization must be invited into the process. For example, bus drivers and cafeteria workers see first hand how students treat each other in the informal school settings and can contribute important perspectives to change dialogues, such as their perceptions of the overall school climate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth in the informal spaces of school life. School nurses may be able to establish rapport with students that encourages honest dialogues beyond the classroom setting. Parents, educators, and administrators who question the appropriateness of school change initiatives for LGBT youth should be able to express their misgivings. For change to occur, members of the school organization and community must perceive at some point that their

feelings, values, and ideas are acknowledged and respected, whether or not they are always reflected in the change initiatives.

\* \* \*

In conclusion, the Massachusetts Safe Schools Program offers lessons important to Massachusetts and to the rest of the United States. Results from this pilot study strongly suggest that a systemic change perspective leads to long-term efforts to meet the school-based needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth. If schools are to become truly hospitable to the interests and needs of LGBT youth, school leaders must employ multiple intervention strategies and engage the best efforts of students, parents, community members, and school personnel.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Elia, J. (1994). Homophobia in the high school: A problem in need of a solution. *The High School Journal*, 77, 177-185; Harris, M. E. (1997). *School Experiences Of Gay And Lesbian Youth: The Invisible Minority*. NY: Harrington Park; Khayatt, D. (1994). Surviving school as a lesbian student. *Gender and Education*, 6(1), 47-61; O'Connor, A. (1994). Who gets called queer in high school? Lesbian, gay and bisexual teenagers, homophobia, and high school. *The High School Journal*, 77, 7-12; Reis, B., et al. (1999). They don't even know me: Understanding anti-gay harassment and violence in schools. (A report of the five year research project of the Safe Schools Coalition of Washington State). Seattle, Washington: Safe Schools Coalition; Smith, G. (1998). The ideology of fag: The school experiences of gay students. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 39(2), 309-335.

<sup>2</sup> Doppler, J. (2000). A description of gay/straight alliances in the public schools of Massachusetts (Doctoral dissertation, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 2000). *Dissertation Abstracts International*, 61,09A.

<sup>3</sup> See Herr, K. (1999). Institutional violence in the everyday practice of school: The narrative of a young lesbian. *Journal for a Just and Caring Education*, 5(3), 242-55; Kissen, R. (1993, *Sp-Sum*). Listening to gay and lesbian teenagers. *Teaching Education*, 5 (2), 57-68; McFarland, W. (1998). Gay, lesbian, and bisexual student suicide. *Professional School Counseling*, 1(3), 26-29; Rotheram-Borus, M. J., Hunter, J., & Rosario, M. (1994). Suicidal behavior and gay-related stress among gay and bisexual male adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Research*, 9, 498-508; Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth (1993). *Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth: Breaking the Silence in Schools and Families* (Education Report ). Boston, MA: State House, Room 11.

<sup>4</sup> See Garofalo, R., et al. (1998). The Association between health risk behaviors and sexual orientation among a school-based sample of adolescents. *Pediatrics*, 101 (5), 895-902; Remafedi, G. (1990).

Fundamental issues in the care of homosexual youth. *Adolescent Medicine*, 74, (5) 1169-1179.

<sup>5</sup> See Reis, 1999, note 1.

<sup>6</sup> See Gonsiorek, J. C. (1988). Mental health issues of gay and lesbian adolescents. *Journal of Adolescent Health Care*, 9, 114-22; Savin-Williams, R. (1990). Gay and lesbian adolescents. F. W. Bozett & M. B. Sussman (Eds.), *Homosexuality and Family Relations*. (pp. 197-216). NY: Haworth Press; Walling, D. R. (1993). *Gay Teens at Risk* (Fastback 357): Phi Delta Kappa Educational Foundation.

<sup>7</sup> See Savin-Williams, note 6, and Zera, D. (1992). Coming of age in a heterosexist world: The development of gay and lesbian adolescents. *Adolescence*, 27 (108), 849-854.

<sup>8</sup> For more on this approach, see Jackson, B., & Holvino, E. (1988, *Fall*). Developing multicultural organizations. *Journal of Religion and the Applied Behavioral Sciences*, 9 (2), 14-19; Ouellett, M. (1996). Systemic pathways for social transformation: School change, multicultural organization development, multicultural education and lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth. *Journal of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Identity*, 1(4), 273-294.

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