

# **From Survival to Success**

*Opportunities for a More Inclusive Education*

The mission of the Syracuse City School District is to ensure that all students demonstrate mastery of defined skills and knowledge, appreciation of diversity, and development of character which will enable them to become productive, responsible citizens who can succeed in a rapidly changing world; this is accomplished, in partnership with our community, by transforming our educational system to respond to the unique needs of each student through excellence in teaching and learning.

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Dear reader,

Now more than ever, school administrators are increasingly having to deal with issues related to sexual orientation. This paper is a proposal on ways in which LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) related issues can be improved in schools. We think you will be surprised, if not appalled, to learn some of our findings. Consider this, for instance: "In 1979 the average age for men to identify their sexual orientation as gay was twenty; by 1998 that age had dropped to thirteen" (Spiggle 1999 p. 11).

And this:

*"Prior to the 1980s, those who opposed gay rights and the presence of open homosexuals as teachers dominated both the legal and the public discourses on this topic; as a result, they shaped America's view that schools had a duty to protect children from the 'threat' posed by homosexuality. In this context, seemingly, GLBT youth did not even exist.... Laws and policies put in place at the state and local levels have highlighted the existence of gay, lesbian, and bisexual (GLB) students and the challenges facing them, while notable federal court cases have reflected the failure of schools to punish those who harass these young people" (Strauss 2005 p. 433).*

This paper is the result of the collaborative effort between students in a Syracuse University Cultural Foundations of Education course, "Queer Kids, Straight Schools," taught by Dr. Elizabeth Payne, as part of an LGBT studies minor. In compiling this paper, we studied a broad range of scholarly research conducted by various experts in the fields of education, sociology, and women's studies, just to name a few. Furthermore, we conducted our own primary research by interviewing three subjects in the Syracuse City School District. One self-identified gay student, one heterosexual high school teacher, and one teacher who was gay but not out at work were interviewed.

We believe our findings are of critical importance not only to the Syracuse City School District, but to schools and all people in them across the nation. It is our hope that the information conveyed and stories told in this paper will be used as motivation and as a foundation for change.

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## Violence

One of the most obvious problems surrounding LGBT issues in schools is violence- physical and non-physical, visible and invisible. It is important not only to recognize that this violence affects everyone, but also to understand the sheer magnitude and frequency of the problem.

*The Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN), which is the largest organization working to end antigay bias in schools, looked at 42 of the largest public school districts in the nation... GLSEN's survey 'was endorsed by the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), the National Education Association (NEA) and the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP), and represents the experiences of nearly six million students nationwide.' The survey reports that a typical high school student hears anti-gay slurs as often as 26 times a day. When this occurs, faculty will intervene in such incidents only 3% of the time. As a result of this lack of intervention, 19% of LGBT students suffer physical attacks associated with sexual orientation with 13% skipping school at least once per month and 26% dropping out all together (MacGillivray 2000 p. 306).*

Most LGBT-related violence that goes on in schools stems from a much deeper and often overlooked problem: homophobia- the fear of being perceived as not heterosexual, and “being constantly threatened and bullied as if you are gay as well as the homophobic desire to make sure that others know that you are a ‘real man’” (Kimmel and Kimmel and Mahler 2003: 1449). This definition of homophobia, particularly as it relates to masculinity, plays a pivotal role in understanding this type of violence.

“Fear of appearing homosexual can lead to misdirected attempts to prove one's heterosexuality. Males may strut their machismo and refrain from expressing any type of intimacy. Females may take what they perceive to be feminine roles of helplessness and non-dominance” (Owens 1998 p. 8). These are examples of how homophobia alters

everybody in a way that creates an environment where hostility and violence become more prevalent- even among students who all identify as heterosexual.

For instance, one teacher mentioned an example of how homophobia perpetuated one girl to police and enforce the heterosexual behavior of two other girls. The two female students who identified as heterosexual were changing together in the locker room in a stall and a student began harassing the girls by banging on the bathroom door and yelling homophobic slurs at them, despite the fact that neither of the girls were gay. Nothing happened as a result of the first incident except that the student was spoken to. Only after the harassment continued for an extended period of time was the student suspended.

However, there are clear examples where homophobic violence specifically targets LGBT students. Mike, an African-American student at a Syracuse City High School, who identifies as gay, told story after story of ways in which he was targeted. Mike said he is frequently called names like “fag” and “homo,” and often even cornered or chased by the students bullying him. These occurrences happen “in classrooms, in hallways, anywhere- but there is never anything done about it,” he said. One incident Mike faced was particularly cruel. He explained what happened in detail:

*These guys decided to use blown up condoms and get all these sex pictures of naked guys, and they put them all over my locker, with letters saying like, this is a fag's locker. And they took a rainbow flag and cut it up into little pieces and threw it in my locker. And they spelled fag out with silly string in big letters on the front of my locker. I knew nothing was going to be done about it, so I just kept my mouth closed, cause I didn't want to make it like a big issue. I took everything off the locker to try and not make it such a big issue. I didn't tell anybody what happened. To this day, the teachers don't know what happened.*

Mike's decision not report the incident raised larger questions as to how openly vocal school administrators are in terms of setting a standard that disapproves of homophobic violence. Furthermore, because Mike's locker was vandalized the previous night during athletic practice, many teachers had the opportunity to pass by the locker upon arriving to school in the morning, and not one of them felt the need to take any action whatsoever. This clearly exemplifies that teachers in the school are not held accountable in reporting homophobic behavior. If they were, the traumatic experience Mike and all other LGBT students who saw his locker faced could have been prevented.

One high school teacher interviewed said schools need to take more precautionary measures to prevent homophobic violence. She told the story of a student who was verbally harassed by a lacrosse player using homophobic remarks right in front of teachers, and the student was only "spoken to" after the incident had come and gone and the harassed student approached faculty about the comment.

Because the majority of homophobic behavior and violence goes unreported in schools, this really shows how much the harassed student needed the school's support. If the teachers in this specific situation would have stopped the incident and addressed the lacrosse player directly, it would not have been the harassed student's burden to seek out teachers to intervene.

### **Schools Teach and Enforce Heterosexuality**

Less obvious than issues of violence are the oppressive and potentially damaging ways in which heterosexism is perpetuated in schools. "Heterosexism is defined as a 'belief in the superiority of heterosexuals or heterosexuality evidenced in the exclusion, by omission or design, of non-heterosexual persons in policies, events or activities' (Sears, 1997, p. 16)." (Robinson 2002, p. 421).

“Current school practices are invested in preserving the heterosexist structure of schools and continuing to reinforce heterosexuality as the ‘norm’” (Quinlivan and Town 1999). There are many ways in which this is being realized within schools, including policy, curriculum, homophobic remarks from teachers and peers, and also through contests and awards, given for sports or senior superlatives.

“According to the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, 97% of students in public high school in Massachusetts reported regularly hearing homophobic remarks from their peers in 1993, and 53% reported hearing anti-gay remarks from school staff” (Kimmel and Mahler 2003: 1448).

These sorts of remarks aimed at gender and sexual minorities slide by under the radar, while negative remarks about other minorities are taken very seriously. Mike, one of the people interviewed, put it eloquently when he said, “If somebody says something racist, there's zero tolerance for that. Every teacher knows that's wrong. But anti-gay slurs and jokes are allowed a lot more often. Sometimes the teachers even find them funny.”

There are, however, teachers who do try to stop homophobia and put an end to homophobia-related violence, but it seems there is a lack of institutional support to back them up on their efforts. For instance, one teacher, Julia, told the following story:

*"There's things where one kid makes other kids lives miserable. And there was one kid years ago who I had in tenth grade who really made this other kids' lives miserable, and I could never catch him at it, and he called his kid 'gay' and 'fag,' and I could never catch him. And then in eleventh grade, he was going into the honors society, and he needed to be nominated, and oddly enough I wasn't the only one who had reservations about letting him into the honors society. And there was nothing else we really could get him on, we didn't have him on tape, but there are yea, there are kids who are smart enough to do it without getting caught, picking on people who aren't going to knock their teeth out, and dumb enough to call people names."*

Unfortunately, none of these teachers had enough proof to take administrative action. This is just one example of how systems are set up and enforced to reward heterosexual students despite homophobic behavior that clearly threatens the well-being of others.

However, teachers aren't just passively allowing heterosexism and homophobia to exist in their classrooms. Often times it is much more overt. We can see this exemplified in another painful incident that Mike experienced. In a class, a movie was being shown where a man's backside was about to be exposed. His teacher covered up the television screen so the students would not see it, simultaneously commenting to the class, "I guarantee Mike would like that part."

Mike talks about other ways in which LGBT students face struggles in the classroom. "In class, you'll have to listen to people say, 'that paper was so gay' or 'this test is such a fag,' and it's such a distraction, especially since nobody else even seems bothered by it." These are further examples of the ways in which homophobic comments are harmful to students, and are not intervened on by teachers.

Another way "in which schools normalize heterosexuality is through the institutional recognition of heterosexist popularity in the election of various 'queens,' 'cutest couples,' and cheerleaders. Through these elections" certain populations of students are held up as the ideal and are the valued and accepted students in a school, while anyone who does not fit into this narrow definition is therefore devalued and marginalized (Payne 2006 p. 26).

In his interview, Mike picked up on other ways that heterosexual students are valued above all others. Mike said that it really bothered him that the kids who were the "most straight" were most rewarded by the school, "like the sports teams, they award

them with the MVP awards, the VP awards, and all these sports rings and sports jackets with their names on it, trophies - everything. And those kids show that stuff off. Everyone knows who the athletes are - especially the teachers - and they get away with more because of it. They're the most homophobic of everybody - the sports teams and the cheerleaders.”

While the negative effects of these problems may seem to be isolated to sexual minorities, the implications of such practices do not merely affect LGBT youth in schools, but their heterosexual classmates as well. We see evidence of this in the following quote:

*Discourses of homophobia and heterosexism that prevail in society define all sexualities other than heterosexuality as abnormal and deviant, thus relegating those who identify as other than heterosexual to the margins while simultaneously silencing their experiences of discrimination and inequality. However, homophobia is more complex than this and also includes the ways in which these behaviors are directed towards individuals who are perceived by others to be lesbian or gay, based on the nonconformist ways they act as boys and girls, men and women”* (Robinson 2002, p. 421).

This flies in the face of the district wide mission statement that call for “appreciation of diversity” and protection of all students.

### **Lack of resources**

Today’s high schools lack the necessary resources to enable LGBT students the same representation and guidance as is currently afforded to their heterosexual peers. Resources come in the form of library books, other reference material, inclusive curriculum, teachers with similar identities to act as role models, as well as support groups such as Gay Straight Alliances (GSAs).

For example, Julia talked about the difficulty she has faced in trying to obtain more diverse reading material. She said she had worked to bring more culturally diverse



books into the library for students who were interested in doing research projects about Mexican and Native American people, but her efforts to bring more LGBT content to students who have expressed an interest in it have been met with resistance. “A teacher actually got in trouble for suggesting that a student read one of these books. The parent came in and complained, and that's the problem. It's not the students, a student will come and just say, ‘I don't like the book, I don't want to read this,’ but when the parents complain it's that they're underestimating these kids. They don't let the kids have the room to determine for themselves what information is right for them.”

Another manifestation of students not being able to choose or not having access to the resources they need comes in the lack of GSAs and similar support systems. Students who are just starting to realize their sexuality and those that are looking to come out as LGBT have no way of knowing how to do it. There is a lack of role models for those students.

“Few schools have GLBTQ student support groups or programs where GLBTQ youth can receive support from GLBTQ peers and adult role models. The NEA (1999) contends that peer support groups help gay and lesbian students to deal with the social isolation they face in schools by offering a ‘nurturing place where they can view themselves and each other in a positive manner’” (MacGillivray 2000 p. 310).

The lack of LGBT support and role models extends to a lack of LGBT teachers and other faculty. Julia spoke to this in suggesting one possible reason for it is not that there is a lack of LGBT teachers, but that a lot of teachers are uncomfortable in being out with their students and are therefore invisible. Those few teachers she knew of who were out with their classes suffered negative responses, mainly from parents. Julia said that most of the time the students “didn't care.” She said “students are generally okay with it.

There's obviously going to be one or two who are like, we don't want to be in your class because you're gay, or whatever. But for the most part, the students don't have a problem with it."

The lack of resources extend to official forms and documents that the schools send out to students. "Official forms and documents of the school [also] rarely recognize the fact that not all families are composed of a mom, a dad, and kids. For instance, permission slips sent home for parents to sign often require the signatures of a mother and a father when, in fact, the student may have two mothers or two fathers" (MacGillivray 2000 p. 310).

These are just a few examples of how schools are structured to allocate resources in such a way that caters the heterosexual population, and thus LGBT people are marginalized.

## **Curriculum**

School curriculums are rarely challenged as an aspect of society that reproduces the violence discussed earlier or as an aspect that excludes individuals. However, in many ways current public school curriculum is directly connected to these issues. The goal of this section is to point out some of the potentially problematic characteristics of school curriculum that are otherwise unquestioned.

The first concern is that high school curriculums in most subjects rarely change. One of the teachers interviewed from the Syracuse City School districts stated that curriculums rarely change and that changes generally only occur "when the state makes a change... then we make a change." This is somewhat problematic. Despite the many changes that have occurred within our culture in the last five to ten years the schools are

teaching virtually the same exact curriculum. Curriculums should be adjusted far more often to account for the world around these students.

The second concern surrounds sex education in school curriculums. Obviously many schools are trapped adhering to federal regulations that require adherence to “Abstinence Only” education in programs that receive federal funding. However, the importance of more comprehensive sex education programs cannot be stressed enough. Teen pregnancy rates in the United States are among the highest in any industrialized nation and this is a negative reflection on the quality of our sex education programs. Inclusive sex education programs are essential to the curriculum in every school. In a study of high school curriculums Mac An Ghail (1991) found that “sex education tended to be subsumed under other curricular areas, such as biology, and personal and social education” (2). Sex education courses should be given merit in their importance and not restricted to side subsections of other course work that would detract from the importance of sex education itself. "We must wonder how curriculum might begin to insert itself into the tangled web of ignorance that currently exists in and around discourses about sexuality" (Sumara and Davis 1999: 200). In other words, schools should recognize that students do bring sexuality into school whether the school educates about it or not. Students should be educated on all forms of sex and sexuality, because all students, regardless of their sexuality, deserve the same access to information, knowledge, and empowerment on issues that directly affect their health and lives, such as teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.

A third concern is that within the curriculum, sexualities other than heterosexuality do not exist or are labeled as negative. This can be extremely damaging to students who cannot find a place to belong in what they are learning in school. “In the

classroom, whether or not a self-identified lesbian youth chooses to be 'out,' her identity is named by the myriad of social norms to which she does not adhere" (Loutzenheiser and MacIntosh 2004: 153). An example of this is the alienation that a student who is not heterosexual feels when literature such as "Romeo and Juliet" is covered but stories of other types of relationships are not. The student feels that they do not belong, which can have dramatic effects on that student's access to equal education.

Furthermore, teachers often openly discuss their heterosexual marriage, but teachers who are not heterosexual rarely openly discuss their relationships. This sort of situation also alienates the student that is not heterosexual. There is a complete absence of homosexuality from all of school curriculum. (*History* – Oppression and Gay liberation movement, *Science* – research on sex and sexuality, *Math* – The identification of gay or lesbian mathematicians that are discussed in class, *English* – Identification of gay or lesbian authors or content that contains alternative sexualities, *Sex Education*: homosexuality as a naturally occurring sexuality.)

Many people, however, still have the idea that education including homosexuality would be damaging to youth.

*This statement reflects a fear that students may be encouraged to become homosexuals if it is a topic of discussion in the classroom. However, research on sexual orientation provides absolutely no evidence that individuals learn to become heterosexual or homosexual based on what they learned in school (MacGillivray 2000:316).*

However, students do learn much of what is valued and devalued and what is normal and not normal in society through what they are exposed to in school curriculums. Leaving the existence of homosexuality out of school curriculums entirely is damaging to a large population of the student body and to the general population.

An important way of dealing with this problem would not simply be to mention homosexuality and teach about it by listing differences from heterosexuality. "We

suggest that curriculum theory ought to be more interested in understanding and interpreting differences among persons rather than noting differences among categories of persons" (Sumara and Davis 1999: 204). This means that it is important to discuss the differences that exist but not to simply leave it at that. Creating a dialogue about sexuality within school curriculums will allow students to gain an understanding rather than just highlighting what makes everyone different from one another. It is about creating a broader and more inclusive curriculum for all students benefit.

### **Proposal: Tools for change**

Certainly there are many things that can be done and on various levels to improve the situation of all students, particularly LGBT students, in schools. There have been a number of studies that have suggested a variety of changes that will be discussed in this section.

*During 1993, the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Students made recommendations on creating a supportive and safe environment for gay and lesbian students. These recommendations, eventually adopted by the Board of Education, included the proposal that schools should:*

- Develop policies that protect gay and lesbian students from harassment, violence, and discrimination.*
- Offer school personnel training in violence prevention and suicide prevention.*
- Offer school-based support groups for gay, lesbian, and heterosexual students.*
- Provide school-based counseling for family members of gay and lesbian students (Strauss 2005: 440).*

The first point about developing policies that protect LGBT students is important and schools should certainly take a more active stance on preventing the violence discussed previously in this paper. However, protecting LGBT students is not enough. The problems that are causing the need for protection must also be addressed.

The second point about providing personnel training is also key. Teachers and administrators need to be aware of what is going on in schools so that at the very least

they are better able to address concerns that students bring before them. One of the teachers from the Syracuse City School District commented that, “we need more psychologists.” That teacher went on to explain that with all the issues students have their school did not have enough specialized personnel to deal with these problems. While hiring many specialists may be beyond school budgets, there are many training programs for teachers and administrators that are affordable or free. The LGBT identified teacher from the school district explained the importance of teaching teachers.

*Preparing teachers for teaching, so that they know that teaching is not the only thing. They're very good with the curriculum, but they don't know how to deal with gang issues, pregnant teenagers, etc. They don't know how to work with the kids. That's a major thing we need to do in the future, helping kids get what they need before we try to teach them the curriculum.*

This is of course the next best method for achieving the best equipped staff possible. Students notice educators that are more prepared to handle issues in school. The LGBT student interviewed from the school district said that he wished more teachers would handle incidents of homophobic behavior like his current English teacher. "She just takes charge, like if someone uses the word 'fag.' She'll talk about why it's inappropriate and she'll then take action with the student who said it- there are definite consequences." This is important because when homophobic comments go unchallenged it only perpetuates the behavior and makes matters worse.

Third, schools should offer school-based support groups for all students. This stresses the importance of new student organizations such as Gay/Straight Alliances (GSA) that have been started at many schools across the country including one school in the Syracuse City School District. When one of the teachers interviewed was asked about what they thought the benefits of the GSA were, they explained “it has been very helpful for the students. [The GSA] has created more of an awareness at the school of these

issues.” A study by Lee (2002) also suggests six specific benefits to students that belonged to a high school GSA that were gained after the group was added:

- *The participants believed that their academic performance improved due to their involvement in the Alliance.*
- *The participants believed that their involvement in the Alliance positively affected relationships with school administrators, teachers, family and peers.*
- *The student participants became more comfortable with being known as gay, lesbian, bisexual or as a heterosexual ally through their involvement in the Alliance.*
- *Students felt safer and believed they were harassed less due to their involvement in the Alliance.*
- *The participants gained a new sense that they could ‘make a difference’ or contribute positively to society through their involvement in the Alliance.*
- *Involvement in the Alliance gave students an avenue for feeling a ‘sense of belonging to,’ and ‘identification with,’ the school.*

The numerous positive effects of a high school GSA suggest that schools should definitely allow and actively encourage and support the creation of these student groups at schools for the benefit of all students and the school environment. This is a fairly simple step for schools to take, which would greatly benefit all students in schools.

In addition to the numerous positive effects that support groups have for students, equally as many benefits could be gained from similar support groups for parents and/or family members. The importance of providing support and education for parents of an LGBT student is equally important because students with supportive and understanding parents will be much less likely to drop out of school, commit suicide or many of the other negative effects discussed earlier. Therefore, supportive and educated parents and family members could be a key link to the success of LGBT students in schools.

As discussed in the curriculum section of this paper, there are many things within the curriculum that are potentially problematic for LGBT students. “Many educators have called for diversity and an inclusive, multicultural curriculum as a way to learn about the

Other, and affirm the differences" (Kumashiro 2002: 55). There are many things that can be done to address these issues and improve the inclusivity of the public school curriculum. Lugg (2003) suggests several possible small additions to the content of various courses that could provide some visibility and a sense of belonging for LGBT students.

*When the histories of Native Americans are studied, the Berdache, who were men and women who assumed crossgendered identities, are also mentioned. In science classes, when genetics and reproduction are studied, the range of possible combinations between XX and XY are discussed. When students read *A Raisin in the Sun*, they learn that not only was the author Lorraine Hansberry, an African American writer, she was a lesbian African American writer who was also an early gay rights theorist. When the Holocaust is studied, queers are included in the list of whom the Nazis persecuted.... Quite simply, public school students would see a variety of people and their families, who live and lived in various racial, ethnic, class, and religious contexts, who are and were queer and nonqueer (120).*

These changes suggested by Lugg (2003) are not drastic changes to the curriculums already in place in most public schools. Rather, the suggested changes are merely an integration of LGBT existence into a curriculum that currently ignores a significant portion of our student bodies and society.

Another fairly simple way of improving the school environment for LGBT youth is an increase in the vigilance of teachers, administrators and coaches in being aware of the interactions between students. This is particularly important in certain spaces in school that students suggest are more problematic locations. The student from the Syracuse City School District commented in his interview that certain places were at higher risk of homophobic behaviors that threaten all students but specifically target LGBT students. He said locker rooms were the most problematic, followed by hallways, followed by classrooms, and then on the school bus. "You usually don't see adults in these places doing anything about it, because they don't feel like it's their job," he said.



The important thing for teachers, administrators and coaches to understand about this is that an increased vigilance in monitoring students in these particularly problematic locations would be very helpful for addressing many problems.

Like many school districts, the Syracuse City School District directly addresses the issue of diversity and valuing the unique needs of each student in its mission statement. However, despite this precedent, there are many ways in which the district isn't meeting that mission by ignoring the needs of LGBT students and teachers. Furthermore, by institutionally valuing a curriculum, structure, and atmosphere that is heterosexist in nature, schools are doing a great disservice to all people in them, regardless of their sexual orientation.

It would greatly behoove all schools to examine the ways in which they are upholding heterosexist structures and therefore perpetuating homophobia. Once these issues are appropriately addressed, schools can truly be on their way to creating a learning environment that fosters "appreciation of diversity, and development of character which will enable students to become productive, responsible citizens who can succeed in a rapidly changing world."

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