



Education Department Resource

Staff Development on Homophobia Issues

Why Schools Need to Act, and What They Can Do

"I'm 17 and I'm gay. Adolescence is hell for me. I am told that my sexuality is something to be ashamed of, something to hide, something evil. I have cowered in my closet in shame and fear. I found myself lying to my parents and friends, being constantly afraid of discovery, and censoring my words and actions with paranoid concentration. I remember hiding books from my parents because I was ashamed of them discovering about me. In short, I hated my sexuality and myself. My closet wasn't a refuge, it was a prison, and it was destroying me. By staying silent, I was confirming the emotions that were killing me inside. I am not just a statistic. I live in a Boston suburb in a white house with black shutters. I go to school every day, feeling that I can't be honest, that I have no right to be proud, that I am a second-class citizen. Just this past week, as I was walking down my street in my town where I have lived all of my life, a pick-up truck full of guys ran me off the road, screaming "You lesbian!" at me. Homophobia is everywhere, and bigotry is inexcusable. It's time to start showing you care."

-- Testimony of a seventeen-year-old lesbian student before the Massachusetts Governor's Commission on Gay & Lesbian Youth, November 1992

As gay issues* become an increasingly prominent story on the nightly news -- and as gay people of all ages demand that our schools be places where homophobia is no longer sanctioned -- many school staffs find themselves confronted with an issue for which they feel completely unprepared. In other communities, gay issues seem to be invisible to many educators, and awareness of the suffering of gay students is practically non-existent. Staff developers thus confront a dual challenge: how to serve those communities ready to address the issue of homophobia, and how to raise awareness among those staffs who are still in denial that a problem even exists. The difficulty of surmounting these challenges is compounded by the fact that many staff developers have little experience with this topic and are unsure of the best way to proceed.

In this article, I propose to help developers in both camps. For those who are struggling to bring understanding of the issue to colleagues (and may be looking to better their own understanding as well), the article begins with a survey of the impact of homophobia in schools and why it is a topic that must be addressed in staff development. For those seeking to implement effective programs in communities that are ready to address the issue, I will then offer some basic lessons drawn from GLSEN's experience as the first organization to implement a state-sponsored staff development program on homophobia in the United States.

INTRODUCTION

A NEW CHALLENGE FOR STAFF DEVELOPERS

* When using the word "gay", the author intends it to be all-inclusive people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgendered.

HISTORY

A PIONEERING EFFORT IN STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Our work in this area began shortly after GLSEN was founded in 1990 in Boston as a community-based, teacher-led organization of people of all sexual orientations working to end homophobia in schools. In 1991, the newly-elected Republican Governor of Massachusetts, William Weld, was moved by reports of the high rates of suicide among gay youth to make a commitment to improving the conditions which drove one out of every three gay youth to attempt to take their own lives. Out of this grew the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, appointed in 1992, the first statewide body specifically focused on improving the lives of gay youth. The Commission held hearings across the state in the fall of 1992, and the picture that emerged after these hearings called for immediate action. Consequently, in February 1993, the Education Committee of the Commission (which I co-chaired) released its report, *Making Schools Safe for Gay & Lesbian Youth*, which outlined the problems of gay youth and offered a plan of action for schools to follow. Although over seventy pages long, the report's key recommendations can be summarized in six concise points:

- 1). School policies protecting gay and lesbian students from harassment, violence, and discrimination.
- 2). Training teachers/counselors/educators in issues relevant to the needs and problems of gay and lesbian youth, including protecting them from harassment and

violence as well as drop-out and suicide prevention.

- 3). Establishment of school-based support groups on the "Gay-Straight Alliance" model pioneered by independent schools.
- 4). Provision of gay-positive, school-based counseling for gay youth and their families.
- 5). The development of library collections which provide accurate information on gay and lesbian people.
- 6). The development of curriculum which incorporates gay and lesbian themes and subject matter into all disciplines in an age-appropriate fashion.

The Commission saw these recommendations as the bedrock for building inclusive school communities that allow gay and lesbian students to receive the education they deserve. Fortunately, the Massachusetts State Board of Education agreed, and voted unanimously to adopt the first four points as recommended state policy for all schools in May 1993. To fulfill recommendation #2 on teacher training, GLSEN was asked to develop the first statewide training program on homophobia in schools for the Massachusetts Department of Education's "Safe Schools for Gay and Lesbian Students Program," and then conducted trainings attended by representatives from over three-quarters of the state's high schools. Clearly, Massachusetts came a long way in a short time, and the lessons from that experience hold much for other systems to learn.

RATIONALE

WHY OUR SCHOOLS NEED TO ADDRESS GAY ISSUES

For those that are new to gay issues, some background might be helpful. According to a study by Professor James Sears of the

University of South Carolina, the average student realizes his or her sexual orientation at age 13. For a heterosexual student, many avenues of support -- family, friends, school, and the community -- exist to help with any difficulties that may then arise. By contrast, gay students rarely feel able to ask their families, friends, schools, or communities for help, fearing the possible response they might get. The essential difference between gay youth and youth from other under-represented populations (such as Jews, African-Americans, or Latinos) is that gay and lesbian youth do not grow up with people like themselves. The products of heterosexual families (in the vast majority of cases), gay youth usually come from communities where few gay adults are visible, attend schools with no openly gay staff, and belong to friendship groups where "fag" is the favored insult and "that's so gay" is a common put-down. Often feeling completely isolated, these youth must make a perilous journey to adulthood through a society which provides them with only negative feedback. As one seventeen-year-old lesbian explained in her testimony before the Commission:

"There is one difference that sets sexual minorities apart from other minorities -- we can be invisible, and are assumed to be a part of the heterosexual majority until we declare otherwise. I tried that for a while, going so far as to use a guy to prove to myself that I could be straight if I tried hard enough. But instead of being accepted into the mainstream, I lost my self-respect. I felt completely isolated from my friends and family. It appeared that I was the only one who ever had these 'queer' feelings. I couldn't come out to anyone, because surely they wouldn't want to be friends with anyone as sick and deranged as I. This initiated a downward spiral of self-hatred and anger motivated by homophobia. I hated myself for seeming to be everyone's worst nightmare -- a homosexual."

The isolation this student so eloquently explains puts gay and lesbian youth at high risk for a variety of problems, including:

1). Violence. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, "Homosexuals are probably the most frequent victims" of hate crimes. Gay and lesbian youth are hardly immune to this society-wide phenomenon: a survey by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force found that 45% of gay men and 20% of lesbians reported being harassed or attacked in high school because they were perceived to be lesbian or gay. This was illustrated by the testimony of a Chris Muther, then a twenty-year-old college student, who shared the experience of himself and his best friend in high school:

"We were shunned by many of our classmates for being, as many saw us, just plain weird... We were also picked on. We were called queer and faggot and a host of other homophobic slurs. We were also used as punching bags by our classmates just for being different, something that sent us into further isolation."

2). Verbal Abuse. It comes as no surprise to any teen-ager or high school teacher that gay students are often subjected to verbal abuse. Comments like "fag," "dyke," and "that's so gay" are used so regularly in high schools (often even by teachers) that few even notice such hateful language as being anything out of the ordinary. According to a survey conducted by the Commission, 97% of students at one suburban high school had heard homophobic language used in school. Another Commission survey found that 43% of students said they heard such language "often," 51% "sometimes," and only 6% said "never." Finally, 53% of the students surveyed said they had heard teachers use such language. As one student put it, "I was called 'faggot' so much that there were times that I thought this was my given name."

3). Homelessness. Many families react badly when they find out one of their children is lesbian or gay. A University of Minnesota

study found that 26% of young gay men reported being forced to leave home because of conflict resulting from their "coming out." An eighteen-year-old gay male testified that:

"I remember back in high school, before I dropped out, feeling really out of place and alone. I never quite understood why I felt so different... I just couldn't handle it anymore. I had nowhere to go, no one to talk to. When I did confide in a school counselor, she screwed my life up. She went back to my parents and told them all these things I had been saying. I got kicked out of my house in July. There was violence involved. My mother came at me with an iron and I called the police. The police came and my mother told them I was always in Boston with fags and that I'm doing this and doing that. The policeman started to crack all these fag jokes and telling me what he would do if his kids were gay and told me that I should just leave. I said, "Where am I supposed to go?"

4). Substance Abuse. Under such stress, many gay and lesbian youth turn to alcohol or other drugs to escape from their problems. The above-cited Minnesota study also found that 58% of the young gay men surveyed could be classified as having a substance abuse disorder. As a seventeen-year-old gay male put it, "I've spent more than one lonely night sobbing while downing shot after shot."

5). High Drop-out Rates. The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services found that 28% of gay youth drop out of high school altogether, usually to escape the harassment, violence, and alienation they face at school. A sixteen-year-old lesbian testified about the discomfort that had caused her to drop out:

"I think what has changed for me the most because of coming out has been school. It is not a place where I can feel comfortable being gay so therefore I cannot feel comfortable being myself. In the past year my life has become extremely unstable. My attendance at school has fallen steadily and

school has become a place I no longer want to be. I'm scared of the confrontations I may run into ... Things are different now, because they know I'm gay."

6). Suicide. Often, gay youth feel so hopeless that ending their lives feels like the only solution to their problems. According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, gay youth are two-to-three times more likely to attempt suicide than heterosexual youth (with 500,000 suicide attempts in the U.S. annually). Up to 30% of successful teen suicides each year are by gay teens (1500 out of a total of 5000 deaths). Using the Department's statistics, this means that a gay youth tries to kill him or her self every thirty-five minutes in the United States, and that a gay youth succeeds in doing so every six hours. Chris Muther, the student quoted above on violence, testified about the tragic denouement to the story of his best friend:

"[One night], when Richard was leaving the Athol [a small town in rural western Massachusetts] Public Library, two people were waiting for him in the back seat of his car. He didn't see them as he got in ready to make the five-minute drive back to his parents' house. An arm came out of the dark, pulling Richard's neck tightly against his seat. Another arm came out of nowhere and began punching against his ribs. Defenseless and scared, he could do nothing as he was beaten in his own car. When it was over, he was too ashamed to go home because his parents would see his black eye and his bloody nose, so he drove around in pain. He said he had no idea who beat him. The only word his attackers had said was "faggot"... A few months later, my sister called me. She told me Richard had driven his maroon Ford Escort to a deserted Athol street and left the engine running, killing himself."

While the issues are multiple, the theme is clear: gay youth simply do not get equal opportunity, in our schools or in our society. Faced with this reality, it is hard for school

officials to maintain that there is no need to act.

WHAT TO DO

IMPLICATIONS FOR EFFECTIVE STAFF DEVELOPMENT

Once a will has been created to deal with the issue of homophobia, there remains the challenge of devising an effective staff development program so that good intentions are translated into concrete actions. GLSEN's trainings, devised by and for teachers, have been hailed as uniquely successful in reaching school staffs, with GLSEN's work honored for its effectiveness with a special proclamation from Governor Weld in 1993. . Based on their success, the following lessons are offered for those trying to establish staff development programs.

1. Address resistance right away

Many educators will be initially skeptical about a staff development program on gay issues. Some will be downright hostile, citing personal or religious objections to such programming. Many may feel the agenda is "brainwashing" or imposed acceptance of gay people: suspicious of the developer's motives, they can quickly tune out of any presentation, no matter how thoughtful or well-crafted.

To deal with this obstacle, an instrument called the "Riddle Scale" can be useful. Developed by Dorothy Riddle, an Arizona psychiatrist, the Riddle Scale ranks attitudes toward difference on an eight point scale, from "repulsion" ("people who are different are strange") to "nurturance" (difference is indispensable to society"). Staff need to understand that developers respect their personal beliefs and their desire to hold whatever private feelings they might have on gay issues. However, staff can use the Riddle Scale to effectively illustrate the

difference between personal beliefs and professional responsibilities. We all harbor likes and dislikes: however, we must all be at step 5 of the Riddle Scale, "support" ("I work to safeguard the rights of those who are different") when it comes to our students. We do not have the right to allow our personal prejudices to interfere with our professional conduct, and staff must understand that appropriate professional conduct is what will be addressed in training -- not "sensitivities" or "awareness."

I often use the following analogy myself. My father, a fundamentalist evangelist, thought all Jews would go to hell, as they had not accepted Christ as their personal savior. He was entitled to this belief which, on the Riddle Scale, is akin to repulsion. In fact, as a former History teacher, I know that he has a constitutional right to believe this, thanks to our First Amendment. However, if he were to become a professional educator, he would not be free to create, or allow to be created, a climate in his classroom that is so anti-Semitic that Jewish students cannot learn. He would have a job to support all of his students so they could get an education and, if his personal prejudices would get in the way of fulfilling that obligation, then he would need to revise his conduct so that it would be more professional. Helping staff understand that it is the same for gay students -- regardless of one's personal beliefs about gay people -- can help them understand the rationale for training at the outset.

2. Get Rid of the Guilt Factor

Discussion about prejudice often makes individuals feel guilty and, in their desire not to feel bad about themselves, many are resistant to talking about the subject, since they feel that such guilt is either the goal or the intent of the workshop. It is important to recognize early in the workshop that homophobia and heterosexism are deeply ingrained attitudes which all people possess to one degree or another, regardless of sexual orientation. Since we were all raised

in the same society, we inevitably absorbed its attitudes, and to think we could somehow escape attitudes as pervasive as homophobia and heterosexism is naive and delusional. No one is innocent: therefore, no one should feel guilty. Talk about this early on and get it out of the way so participants can hear your message, rather than become too involved in their own reactions to the message.

3. Link training to core values of the school

As a classroom teacher, I often dreaded faculty trainings. I didn't see how they helped me in my teaching, and often felt they were frills that had nothing to do with what I was paid for doing. With an issue whose "strangeness" is as apparent as homophobia, the potential for such reactions among staff is quite strong.

The only way to deal effectively with this issue is to make sure that the staff understands how this topic is linked to core values of the school. Many schools have mission statements, or at least "buzzwords," which are key to understanding how they see themselves and their job. It is important to show how the work you will undertake with them will help fulfill this mission and help them be better teachers. If you can't show how what you're doing will help them work more effectively with kids, you've probably lost them right away.

4. Make It Real

Teachers care about kids. If they don't see a subject as somehow pertaining to their students, they quickly lose interest. Overcoming this challenge can be hard when dealing with homophobia issues. Because the climate in our schools is so hostile for gay people, few (if any) students self-identify as gay to staff, and many staff may feel that this issue simply isn't relevant in their community. The developer must make it real for them.

Focusing on student stories is the best way to do this. I have found three ways to do this: live speakers, available often through local youth support groups; "read-arounds," a technique wherein staff read aloud from written stories culled from personal acquaintances or from books like Ann Heron's *Two Teenagers in Twenty*; and video excerpts, particularly from Pam Walton's excellent *Gay Youth*. By bringing it back to stories of real students, developers can reinforce the sense among staff that this is an issue that has real pertinence to their daily work.

5. Leave Time for Talking

Teachers like to talk: that's why a lot of us went into this profession in the first place! But, especially on an issue like this, people need to talk as well. Given the current rebellion against all things "politically correct," it is critical when addressing homophobia to create a space where everyone can be heard -- even if what they have to say is objectionable to the developer. By allowing people a chance to engage with the subject -- rather than presenting them with "the answer" -- your message is much more likely to be well-received and to "stick." As the proverb goes, "I hear and I forget; I see and I remember; I do and I understand." Allow participants the chance to do the talking, and thinking, for themselves, and they are more likely to truly get involved with the issue.

6. Offer specific suggestions

Nothing is worse than having your consciousness raised and then having no avenue for follow-up. Many staff will be moved and "ready to go" as a result of workshops, but often are disappointed or frustrated by the lack of a means to convert their new understanding into action. Offering examples of actions can help staff feel empowered to take their learnings and move ahead. GLSEN distributes a simple "Ten Steps" handout at our workshops, and participants tend to gobble them up and

want more (teachers love handouts!). We also ask participants to write down a specific step they will take and, on occasion, put it in a self-addressed, stamped envelope which we mail back to them three months later. Simple actions like this can help make the difference between a workshop whose effects are like Chinese food (gone in an hour) and one that's like chocolate (stuck on your hips forever...)

7. Designate Responsibility for Follow-Up

It's all well and good to hand out "Ten Step" suggestions, but who is going to make it a reality? I often publicly ask at the end of a workshop who is responsible for implementing the kinds of changes we discuss, and make sure everyone knows who that is. Accountability is crucial: if a key individual takes responsibility in front of the group for making change, it is more likely to happen. In the best of all possible worlds, a structure is the best way to insure follow-up. Designating a committee or working group that will be charged with monitoring process is the best way to insure follow-up. But, through any means necessary, make sure that there is a plan for follow-up after the workshop, or else it will all come to naught.

8. Come Back Often

Given the pervasiveness of homophobia, it is unrealistic to expect "one-shot" trainings to have much effect. It took us all many years to learn homophobia, and it will take some time to learn not to be. People eat best in bite-sized chunks, which they can chew and digest properly. New ideas often need to be consumed in the same way. If a series of shorter sessions can be established to follow up on initial training, staff will get the chance to mull things over, try out some actions, and then assimilate what they have learned. Spreading development out over a longer time period will give it more of a chance to "sink in."

9. Involve the Community

Schools are communities, and staff development cannot proceed in a vacuum. Students, parents, and citizens all are stockholders in our schools and any comprehensive effort to bring about change must involve all of them. If homophobic attitudes and actions are sanctioned outside school doors, no amount of staff development will ever make the school a safe place. Furthermore, parents and community members will have questions about a "gay agenda" in their schools, and may be suspicious or resistant to initiatives arising out of staff development on the issue. If it's going to work, they've got to be involved.

Students are obviously the easiest to reach. Having assemblies, designating a given subject class as a place to institute smaller-group discussions, and similar steps can all help raise the issue with them. Parents are a little harder, although PTA-sponsored evening trainings have proven very successful in many communities. Parents, Family, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays is a wonderful resource to call upon here. A Mom is much more likely to listen to another Mom than a staff developer, so involving PFLAG can be critical to success. The community at large is the hardest to get at. Making sure that they are aware of, and invited to participate in, programming can defuse some tensions. Many will just want to know what is going on: invite them and, for those who cannot come, make an audio or video tape so they can have their fears allayed.

All of these steps will not change the fact that some adults will fight such initiatives. However, giving them the chance to get involved, and making sure you can link your work to the core mission of the school, is likely to keep the number of resistant adults to a minimum, and will also win trust from the community that their school is "doing the right thing." It's their school: invite them to become a bigger part of it. But keep in mind that, if you plan to dislodge long-held biases, some people will get upset.

That comes with the territory, and in many ways is more a tribute to your effectiveness than anything else.

CONCLUSION

MAKING A DIFFERENCE THAT MATTERS

Staff development on gay issues is in many ways the final frontier of diversity work, and no one has all the answers on how to do

it right. Because of the political volatility of the subject in today's climate, many want to shy away from it. We can't do that. The fact is, our students are at risk, and our schools less able to educate, because homophobia goes unchallenged in so many communities. Staff can play the key role in challenging that, and staff development can be the tool which makes that change a reality. Boldly go where few staff developers have ever gone before. Some kid's life is depending on it.