

GLBT Youth in Iowa Schools Task Force

A coalition of educators, civil rights and GLBT advocates,
in partnership with the Iowa Civil Rights Commission

Findings And Recommendations

January 2006

Introduction: Clarifying the Issue

All students need a safe, supportive atmosphere in which they can learn, including students that are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender (GLBT). Unfortunately, bullying, harassment, and discrimination against GLBT students is the rule—and not the exception—in our schools. As these students face verbal and physical harassment, educators, policy makers, parents, and other students are hampered by the lack of quality information, resources, and policies to protect GLBT students.

However over the past two years, Iowa has made significant progress in helping create safer schools for GLBT students. Several education associations and leaders have made policy recommendations to help end bullying, harassment, and discrimination against all students, including those that are GLBT. Governor Vilsack, Lt. Governor Pederson, Iowa Civil Rights Commission, Iowa State Education Association, School Administrators of Iowa, as well as numerous statewide and local organizations have all endorsed or modified existing policies to protect GLBT students.

But, work remains to be done to protect all students from bullying, harassment, and discrimination.

School Climate

There is extensive evidence on both the national and state levels that GLBT students are disproportionately targeted for harassment and discrimination in schools. Left unchecked, this harassment and discrimination may often escalate to the level of physical violence or violent crime.

Specifically, results from the 2005 Iowa School Climate Survey by the Iowa Pride Network (www.iowapridenetwork.org) indicate that:

- 92.3% of GLBT students in Iowa reported hearing homophobic remarks frequently in their schools.
- 83.3% of GLBT students report being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation.
- 61.2% of GLBT students do not feel safe at school because of their sexual orientation.
- 59.2% of GLBT students reported some incident of having their property stolen or deliberately damaged, such as their car, clothing or books.
- 33.6% of Iowa GLBT students reported some incident of physical harassment (being pushed or shoved) because of their sexual orientation; while nearly 18% (17.8) of students reported some incident of physical assault (being punched, kicked or injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.

Moreover, studies also indicate that educators often fail to respond. The 2005 Iowa School Climate Survey found:

- 74.8% of students reported that faculty/staff only some of the time or never intervened when they were present when homophobic comments were made.
- 90.2% of students reported that teachers or staff intervened only some of the time or never when comments about students' not acting "masculine" or "feminine" were made.

The climate of fear created may result in increased absenteeism, decreased academic performance and increased risk of suicide. The 2005 Iowa School Climate Survey found that over 21.6% of GLBT students had missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe.

In addition, the 2005 Iowa School Climate Survey found that a hostile school climate has an impact on school achievement levels:

- GLBT students frequently the target of rumors, lies or physical assault had 15%-30% lower GPAs.
- GLBT students were 2 times less likely to go to college if frequently the target of rumors or lies.

- GLBT students were 4 times less likely to go to college if frequently verbally harassed.
- GLBT students were 5 times less likely to go to college if frequently physically assaulted ¹

The 2005 Iowa School Climate Survey only reinforces the experiences of GLBT throughout the nation. Specifically, results from the 2003 National School Climate Survey by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (www.glsen.org) indicate that:

- 84% of GLBT students report being verbally harassed (name calling, threats, etc.) because of their sexual orientation.
- 91.5 % of GLBT students report hearing homophobic remarks, such as “faggot”, “dyke” or the expression “that’s so gay” frequently or often.
- 39.1% of GLBT students report being physically harassed (being shoved, pushed, etc.) because of their sexual orientation.
- 64.3% of GLBT students report feeling unsafe at their school because of their sexual orientation.
- 82.9% of GLBT students report that faculty or staff never intervened or intervened only some of the time when present and homophobic remarks were made ²

GLBT Youth in Iowa Schools Task Force

In fulfilling one of the responsibilities of the Iowa Civil Rights Commission (ICRC) -- to investigate and study the existence, character, causes, and extent of discrimination in the state and to attempt the elimination of such discrimination by education and conciliation – the ICRC created a task force to address a growing need in schools and communities regarding the safety of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) students. The goals were simply to:

- Encourage conversations to take place at the local and state levels regarding issues that face GLBT students or those perceived to be GLBT
- Provide facts about GLBT students and their issues
- Provide resources to help in the decision and policymaking process
- Increase the awareness of parents, communities, and policy makers of the inequities regarding safety in Iowa schools

The Task Force is made up of individuals from the Iowa Association of School Boards, Iowa Civil Rights Commission, Iowa Department of Education, Iowa State Education Association, School Administrators of Iowa, Area Education Agencies, private business, public schools, local school boards and representatives from the GLBT community. Collectively a plan was designed to accomplish these tasks.

Beginning in the spring of 2002 the Task Force has worked to put together evidence of the problem in Iowa schools, resources for parents, communities and schools, and increased awareness in multiple venues. Since its inception, the Task Force has

- Provided panels or speakers at over 50 education conferences or educator trainings that were attended by over 1,500 individuals, including school board members, school superintendents, principals, nurses, counselors, teachers, student teachers, alternative school personnel, coaches, social workers, and parents.
- Sponsored 15 public forums in Ames, Burlington, Davenport, Polk County, Iowa City, Fort Dodge, Dubuque, Cedar Falls, Pella, Sioux City, Mason City, Council Bluffs, Indianola, Marshalltown, and Cedar Rapids that were attended by over 2,000 parents, educators and others concerned about the safety and success of GLBT students in Iowa schools. Over 200 local groups sponsored the 15 public forums.
- Developed and disseminated a 50+ page resource booklet on “Making Our Schools Safe for GLBT Students” to nearly 20,000 people.

- Worked with Governor’s Office, legislators, and public policy makers on policies to ensure the safety of GLBT students, as well as those perceived to be GLBT. Successful in getting the School Administrators of Iowa, Iowa State Education Association, and Iowa Department of Education to endorse or encourage safe school policies that protect GLBT students.

Key Findings

This report summarizes findings from both national and Iowa-specific research, public forums, community conversations, educational presentations, and school events in Iowa. Individuals involved and/or participating in these activities or events were asked their views and opinions relating to GLBT student safety in Iowa schools.

1. In districts all over Iowa, in both rural and urban communities from the smallest districts and communities to Iowa’s largest, GLBT students are becoming visible. Many educators are not prepared to provide an equally safe learning environment for these students and others that may be perceived to be GLBT.
2. School districts have the legal liability to assure GLBT students’ safety and protect them from harassment.
3. Bullying, harassment, and discrimination has a direct and measurable impact on school achievement levels and future college aspirations. GLBT students frequently the target of rumors, lies or physical assault had 15%-30% lower GPAs. GLBT students were 4 times less likely to go to college if frequently verbally harassed and were 5 times less likely to go to college if frequently physically assaulted ¹
4. Often heterosexual students are the victims of harassment based on their perceived sexual orientation. Seven out of ten students who reported past or present harassment based on perceived sexual orientation are actually heterosexual ³
5. Harassment and victimization of GLBT students in Iowa schools occur regularly, although the exact number of cases is unknown. Current education law does not require schools to collect or report such data locally or to the state.
6. All students can succeed in school, including GLBT students, if a positive and supportive climate exists.
7. Many educators and school board members expressed concern about not knowing whom to approach for information about legal and safety issues for GLBT students. Professional development and support for educators is necessary and critical in assuring the safety of GLBT students.
8. There is a lack of awareness about information available to schools, parents and communities regarding GLBT students. Opportunities for parent and community education are needed.
9. Many parents and community members did not realize that GLBT students in Iowa schools are not receiving the same rights to safety and non-harassment/non-discrimination as all other students. Opportunities for parent and community education are needed.

Specific Recommendations:

1. The Governor, legislative leadership, Iowa Association of School Boards, Iowa Department of Education, Iowa Civil Rights Commission, Iowa State Education Association, and School Administrators of Iowa should support equal educational opportunities for all students by addressing GLBT issues publicly.

2. The Governor and legislature should act on the Iowa Civil Rights Commission's recommendation to expand civil rights legislation to prohibit the discrimination of Iowans based on sexual orientation to enable the State Board of Education to enforce a statewide policy protecting GLBT students in Iowa school settings.
3. The Iowa Association of School Boards, Iowa Department of Education, Iowa State Education Association and School Administrators of Iowa should:
 - Encourage local school districts to:
 - Approve and support the formation of Gay-Straight Alliances.
 - Add "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" to non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies and monitor their implementation.
 - Create a culture and climate where all students, teachers, administrators, and staff are safe and free from discrimination.
 - Ensure that GLBT and other minority students are reflected in educational materials.
 - Train their staff on issues and strategies for working with GLBT students, as well as other minority students
 - Disseminate the Task Force's "Making Our Schools Safe for GLBT Students" resource booklet with other safe school materials given to local school districts.
 - Encourage the Iowa Legislature to pass legislation that would require school districts to protect students from bullying, harassment, and discrimination with enumerated categories, including "sexual orientation" and "gender identity."

In addition, the Iowa Association of School Boards should:

- Add "sexual orientation" and "gender identity" to their recommended non-discrimination and anti-harassment policies to local school boards

The Iowa Department of Education should:

- Collect data on the number and type of GLBT related harassment incidents that occur in Iowa schools as part of the regular school improvement site visits that will look at student safety, school climate and culture, and include as part of the equity review that is incorporated into the school improvement review process.
- Monitor schools to assure the safety of all students, and that there is a plan for addressing the harassment of all students.
- Train their staff on issues and strategies for working with GLBT students, as well as other minority students

4. Local Schools and School Boards should:

- Adopt the model anti-harassment and non-discrimination policies from the National School Boards Association, Iowa Department of Education, Iowa State Education Association, and School Administrators of Iowa that prohibit harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation.
- Create a culture and climate where all students, teachers, administrators, and staff are safe and free from discrimination.
- Reflect GLBT students and other minority students in school curriculum and classroom materials.
- Diversify library and media holdings to include GLBT issues, people, and resources.
- Approve and support the formation of Gay-Straight Alliances, informing teachers, administrators, counselors, staff, and school board members about the federal Equal Access Act. This federal law allows students to create a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) group at school. Schools are required to permit GSAs if other non-curricular groups are allowed to exist in the district.

- Seek data in their surveys re: harassment/safe environment at school. Administrators should post anti-harassment and non-discrimination policies around the building and disseminate harassment/discrimination complaint materials.
 - In addition to appropriate discipline for those who bully or harass GLBT students, schools should hold student assemblies, small group seminars, or other educational activities addressing safe schools for all students, specifically including those that are GLBT.
 - Provide in-service training for all staff (including support staff such as bus drivers, maintenance and cafeteria staff) to create awareness and commitment to addressing harassment, preventing harassment, and creating a culture and climate where all students feel safe.
5. The GLBT Task Force will provide resource packets and training/education, as resources permit, to teachers, administrators, counselors, staff, school board members, parents, students and other interested persons at educational conferences/trainings, public forums, and other activities.

Conclusion

GLBT students are not safe and encounter anti-gay bullying, harassment and discrimination daily in Iowa schools. The work of the Task Force is not complete until all GLBT students are safe. Although steps are being taken by individuals and some education associations, statewide education and policy leaders need to make a commitment to protecting all students, including those that are GLBT, from bullying, harassment, and discrimination. Thus, it is clear that there is a great need for statewide legislation to protect all students from bullying, harassment, and discrimination.

In addition, there is a need for data to be collected on the issue of GLBT students' educational experiences. The Department of Education is the logical entity to collect this data and disseminate its findings. Without this information, the state and local schools are electing to dismiss the messages students (gay and straight) are sharing regarding hostile school environments, lack of teacher, school board, and administrator response to student harassment, and the increased number of students reporting severe social isolation in their schools.

Though the law may continue to remain silent on this topic for the short term, as Iowans, it is not our nature to allow harm, whether mental, physical, or emotional, to come upon our children. The work ahead, as suggested in the recommendations, will come without great expense or difficulty. The majority of support will be needed in the area of leadership and assisting with building a climate in which all students feel welcome and safe to learn. All Iowans, but particularly elected officials, policymakers, and educators, have a responsibility to

- understand the breadth and depth of the issue,
- communicate clearly all aspects of the issue,
- develop and/or provide resources and supports to assist schools and communities in addressing the issue, and
- monitor the progress for continual improvement and change in practice

to ensure that GLBT students are safe and have the opportunity to learn and succeed in our schools. This is the model used to assure that no child is left behind.

The most effective way for school districts to ensure that they fulfill their legal obligations and at the same time, protect students from harassment and discrimination is to adopt and implement a policy that clearly prohibits bullying, harassment, and discrimination on the basis of real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity.

1. Iowa School Climate Survey, 2005, Iowa Pride Network, www.iowapridenetwork.org
 2. National School Climate Survey, 2003, GLSEN, www.glsen.org.
 3. Seattle Teen Health Survey, 1999.