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Governor Culver Hosts Conference on LGBT Youth

Congressman Boswell and Christie Vilsack address over 400 participants

DES MOINES—Nearly 450 educators and students from across Iowa attended the 2nd Annual Governor’s Conference on LGBT Youth addressing anti-gay bullying and harassment in Iowa schools.

Governor Culver welcomed the crowd and said, “In a few days, I expect to have the honor of signing a safe schools bill. This is a real step forward.” He also asked the students and educators for their help, saying, “It’s not going to be easy to set these local policies, so we need for you to be engaged,” Culver said.

The Governor went a step further by saying that he hoped he to be able to sign additional legislation to ban discrimination based on sexual orientation under the Iowa Civil Rights Code. “I’m proud of the fact that as a candidate for governor I pledged to support this change in Iowa law,” he said. “I hope to have the opportunity to sign this bill as well this year and with your help, I will.”

The conference is timely as the Iowa Legislature passed Safe Schools Legislation earlier this week. The legislation makes Iowa the tenth state in the country to adopt comprehensive anti-bullying policies. The new law is specifically designed to ensure that all children are protected from bullying and harassment. The bill protects children based on real or perceived age, color, creed, national origin, race, religion, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical attributes, physical or mental ability or disability, ancestry, political party preference, socioeconomic status, or familial status.

“Name-calling and harassment are serious problems in our schools,” said Brad Clark, Executive Director of the GLBT Youth in Iowa Schools Task Force. “Sissy, geek, and homo have become everyday language for our youth. I applaud Governor Culver and the education community for addressing this problem to ensure every student is free from bullying and harassment in Iowa schools.”

The 2005 Iowa School Climate Survey released by the Iowa Pride Network illustrates the amount of harassment faced by LGBT students in Iowa:

- 92.3% reported hearing homophobic remarks frequently in their schools.
- 83.3% reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation.
- 61.2% do not feel safe at school because of their sexual orientation.
- 33.6% 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.

Clark also noted that the new law received support from the education, civil rights, faith and public health communities, including the Iowa Department of Education, Iowa State Education Association, School Administrators of Iowa, Iowa Medical Society, Interfaith Alliance of Iowa, and Iowa Civil Rights Commission. Many of those groups along with numerous education and civil rights organizations joined together to host today's conference.

The conference was keynoted by Moises Kaufman and Brent Hartinger. Kaufman is the author/director of The Laramie Project, a play which explores the murder of Matthew Shepard from anti-gay hate crime in Laramie, Wyoming, in 1998. Kaufman is an award-winning writer and director and also wrote Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde. The Laramie Project and Gross Indecency have been among the most honored and most widely performed plays in America over the last decade. In addition to the keynote speakers, Congressman Leonard Boswell and former First Lady Christie Vilsack addressed the audience.

Following Kaufman's presentation, members of the West Des Moines Valley Drama Department performed scenes from The Laramie Project. Valley High School performed the play last fall despite vocal opposition to the production from a small group of local residents.

Hartinger is the author of many books for kids, teens, and adults, including Geography Club, which was #2 on the 2006 Banned Books List by the American Booksellers Association. In 1990, Mr. Hartinger was one of the founders of Oasis, one of the nation's first local support groups for GLBTQ young people, and he recently co-founded an anti-censorship group called Authors Supporting Intellectual Freedom.

Iowa Safe Schools also honored Dr. Tom Narak, Superintendent of the West Des Moines School District, as the first recipient of the Kathy Collins Reilly "Courage in Education" Award. The award was created to recognize school administrators who create or further safer, more inclusive schools for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students in Iowa and is named in honor of Kathy Collins, a former teacher and later legal consultant for the Iowa Department of Education and School Administrators of Iowa. Collins has been a highly visible advocate of policies and practices to end bullying, harassment, and discrimination against LGBT students in Iowa schools.

The nominations for Dr. Narak cited his outstanding leadership in both West Des Moines and Indianola schools to create safe environments for all students, including LGBT. Most recently, Dr. Narak supported Valley High School's production of "The Laramie Project" over vocal opposition, stating publicly that working toward the elimination of bullying and harassment on the basis of sexual orientation is simply the "right thing to do," and anything that jeopardizes the safety and well-being of children in schools is "just wrong."

"We are pleased to honor Dr. Narak. He has demonstrated a strong commitment to create safer schools for all students. His courage to stand up for gay and lesbian students is inspiring," said Clark.