

Creating Safe School Environments for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Questioning Students in Seattle

Initiative Description

Seattle Public Schools has implemented a range of activities to support a safe school climate that promotes the success of all students. The approach adopted by Seattle Public Schools

- Combines district-level policy changes and school-level programs.
- Is well-known among students and school staff.
- Is supported by school level programs, including Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), posters, assemblies, special events (e.g., Day of Silence), and other schoolwide activities.

Evaluation

This evaluation assessed the extent to which these policies and programs impact creation of a safe, welcoming school environment.

- Data were collected from 107 middle and high school students in GSAs and 92 high school students not involved in GSAs.
- Interviews were conducted with 8 school principals, 4 district stakeholders, and 17 GSA coordinators.
- All data were collected during the 2005–2006 school year.

Findings

Evaluation findings revealed

- GLBTQ students are the victims of harassment more often than straight students, highlighting the importance of ensuring policies are adopted to promote safe and welcoming school environments for all students, including GLBTQ students.
- GSAs appear to provide an avenue for students to participate meaningfully at school and to develop positive connections with school, both important protective factors supported by existing research.
- Principals cited four keys to creating a safe and welcoming environment for GLBTQ youth: having supportive staff members, tapping into outside resources, securing training for staff, and integrating the issues into the school climate.
- District stakeholders identified six critical components of successful implementation of GLTBQ-related policies and programs: public recognition of the issue, staff support, student involvement, integration of GLBTQ issues into the curriculum, collaboration with community partners, and patience.

Implications

Seattle Public Schools has demonstrated their commitment to improving the academic experiences of all students by actively supporting safe and welcoming school environments. This evaluation provides insight into how youth experience their school environment, how the policies and programs support GLBTQ youth at the school level, and what has contributed to the sustainability of these efforts over time.

The Public Health Problem

Students who identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual; who are questioning their sexual identity; or who engage in same-sex relationships face negative school experiences, such as

- Barriers to participation in school activities.
- Barriers to academic achievement.
- Verbal harassment.
- Increased absenteeism because of the school environment.



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