

Advancing Safe Schools in San Diego

Problem Overview:

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth are at increased risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviors, suicide attempts, and suicide. A nationally representative study of adolescents in grades 7–12 found that LGB youth were more than twice as likely to have attempted suicide as their heterosexual peers. In 2009, the San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) analyzed Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) data to see if students who reported harassment because “someone thought they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual” were at an increased risk for suicide. The results confirmed that students who reported being harassed, compared to those who were not, were more likely to report feeling unsafe at school; feeling sad/hopeless; and considering or planning suicide, or having attempted suicide.

Program/Activity Description:

To ensure that schools in the SDUSD are safe places for all students and staff, the district convened the Safe Schools Task Force to look at existing policies and procedures that address bullying, harassment, and intimidation. The task force brought together administrators, teachers, community members, and agency staff, with special outreach to the LGBT community. The Task Force —

- Developed a district-wide Bullying, Harassment and Intimidation Prohibition Policy (unanimously adopted by the SDUSD board in April 2011) that complies with federal and state laws and extensively delineates the types of protections addressed (including race, religion, creed, color, marital status, parental status, veteran status, sex, sexual orientation, gender expression or identity, ancestry, national origin, ethnic group identification, age, and mental or physical disability).
- Developed a procedure addressing bullying, harassment, and intimidation that outlines reporting duties for staff and students, lists training requirements for all staff, and includes an investigative reporting form.
- Established sub-committees to focus on staff development, curriculum, and communication regarding the new policy and procedure.
- Encouraged school sites to create “Safe Spaces” specifically for LGBT students.

The superintendent of SDUSD was a vocal supporter of the new policy and procedure and spoke publicly on the importance of safe schools.



Program/Activity Results:

As a result of the task force activities and the superintendent’s support, during the 2011–2012 school year —

- All SDUSD cabinet-level staff attended training on LGBT issues.
- 75% of district high schools had active gay-straight alliances (GSAs).
- All middle/high school sites received Safe Space Kits from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)—designed to help educators create safe spaces for LGBT youth in schools.
- The SDUSD formed new partnerships with three agencies that serve LGBT youth—the San Diego LGBT Center, and local chapters of GLSEN and GSA Network.
- The first-ever GSA at a middle school was started.
- The SDUSD incorporated LGBT information into four district training events.

The CDC-supported HIV Resource Teacher participated on the Safe Schools Task Force and is the chair person for staff training, which began in fall 2012. Questions related to LGBT youth will be included in the SDUSD’s 2013 YRBS, and the data analysis will help determine if the district’s anti-bullying policy and related activities have made a positive impact.