

Presentation to the Safe Schools Committee

By: Romi Chandra

Gab Youth Services @ The Centre

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604-684-4901

email: gabyouth@lgbcentrevancouver.com

I am youth worker from Gab Youth Services at The Centre in Vancouver. I have been working there for close to 4 years. We run peer support drop-in programs for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (lgbt) youth in Vancouver. Before I started working at Gab, at 16, I traveled all the way from Maple Ridge to Vancouver to find support and a safe place at The Centre. When I turned 18, I dropped out of school because I felt that students who called me names everyday did not want me at my school or by teachers who ignored them. Gab provided me a place where I felt strong enough to help my peers who were going through the same things that I went through.

Over the past few years, Gab has grown quite a bit. We have established an amazing anti-homophobia workshop called PrideSpeak. PrideSpeaks are workshops intended to raise awareness around issues of bullying and homophobia for students and teachers. We decided to take on this task because no one else was doing this for queer youth. No one talked about their existence in schools, let alone the bullying that came along with it. We did it because youth are dropping out of schools, they are being shamed by people close to them and they are killing themselves.

When we first started PrideSpeak 6 years ago, we only provided 10 workshops because everyone was afraid. Some were afraid of the content, or how administrator and parents might react. The workshop allows people to retain their values and beliefs, at the same time respecting others who are different from them. During our presentations to teachers, some said that they don't feel that they cannot provide support to lgbt students because of their beliefs, which is unfortunate, but it also provided a place where teachers were identified as allies. This kind of dialogue is extremely important as these teachers were the safe ones that students could turn to. We have talked to parents who had concerns about the content of PrideSpeak. With enough communication will all these groups, we were successful in clearing most of their fears.

Since then, Gab has been doing over 120 workshops a year to high school students and teachers. We have gone as far as Prince George and Invermere. Students from grades 6 to 12 have seen our presentations. If students do not want to participate on the workshop, teachers have given students alternative activities such as writing a 2-page essay on what types of behaviours might create a positive environment for all students at their school. This example was given by a teacher at Handsworth Secondary School where a former student took his school to court for not providing a safe space for him. When we do our workshop, we ask students to stand to the right of the room if their school is a safe place for lgbt youth and left if they feel it is not safe place.

Of the 12,000 students we have done the workshops for, 90% of them say that their school is not a safe place for lgbt students, even with schools that have Gay/Straight Alliances.

We are now training youth through out BC to do these workshops in their schools. However, we keep running into the same problems that I mentioned earlier in these various districts. We are banned from doing our workshops in Surrey, Langely will not allow students be asked their opinions on issues around homophobia. I have a difficult time understanding how students can learn, if they are censored by school boards that are supposed to be a voice for them.

Recommendations:

I would like to see the **Ministry of Education take a step forward to approve PrideSpeak as a viable source for education.** We are providing education to these youth in a way that seems so secretive, teachers are fearful in Surrey to bring us in because of their school board. How can schools in Delta feel that it is important to discuss this issue, yet in the district right next to them they say that this problem does not exist? Something can be done to provide unity to all the schools in BC in which schools can address bullying based on sexual orientation without any fear.

We are doing PrideSpeaks from the sides of our desk with no funding specially to this program. We ask teachers to provide honorariums so that we can cover our transportation and material costs, and most schools can barely afford this due to limited budget. **I would also like to see your government provide official support, financial and otherwise to initiatives that already exist in educating and making schools safer.**

We have been doing workshops with teachers and feel that they need to be educated on handling homophobia. We would like to see that **all teachers and administrators receive training on addressing homophobia.**

I feel that it is very important that the province mandate that all schools in BC address homophobia. The Ministry of Education has done this for anti-racism work when schools were not safe for people of colour and there is absolutely no difference as to what is happening now with queer youth. If Christy Clark is truly interested in putting students first, she would quickly move to **introduce province wide regulations that make it so that every student in BC is introduced to the concept of homophobia.** Thank you for taking your time to listen to me.