

Presentation to the Safe School Task Force
GALE-Victoria - Secondary Perspective
Monday, December 2, 2002 - 3:45 pm
Presenter: Karen Leahy-Trill

Introduction:

- I am qualified elementary school teacher/sign language interpreter
- presently working as a sign language interpreter in a secondary school
- have been employed in this area with the same school district for 16 years

- helped set up/facilitate a GSA in March, 2001
- resource person to 2 other GSAs in Victoria area schools
- member of GALE-Victoria Chapter
- set up/present chair of the Diversity Committee of our local union (CUPE 947)

Terms/Abbreviations used in this presentation:

- GSA - Gay/Straight Alliance
- GLBTIQ - Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered, Intersex, Questioning
- GALE - Gay and Lesbian Educators {also includes Allies}
- Queer - is used here as an inclusive term for people who are GLBTIQ; is easier to say; as a recently 'reclaimed' word by the Gay Community it is said with respect and is not intended as an insult

Issues facing our students:

(in brackets and underlined are references to attachments which are included in this submission)

1) Homophobic remarks are common in high schools.(see attachment #1 McCreary Report; item #8)

- our students confirm this; our staff confirms this; 'that's so gaaay' ; 'faggot' not swear words so not dealt with in that way, however most educators will not condone 'nigger' or 'chink' etc.

- imagine how it would feel if you were/are Gay and going through 13 years of the education system and continually hearing 'gay' as one of the biggest insults/ condemnations one could possibly hurl at you - and no one stood up to say that was wrong/prejudicial

- imagine how this affects self-esteem and the freedom to 'be who you really are'
(see attachment #1 McCreary Report; item #4)

- if homophobia education were part of the curriculum, this would increase sensitivity to Queer students
(see attachment #2 Times Colonist article, June 11, 2002)
(see attachment #4 BC Attorney General News Release April 9, 2002)

2) Any student, regardless of sexual orientation/gender identity may be the target of this type of bullying/harassment.

- because these homophobic remarks are so powerful they can and are used on anyone, regardless of sexual orientation/gender identity, as evidenced in the high-profile case of Azmi Jubran
(see attachment #3; Times Colonist article, April 10, 2002)
(see attachment #4 BC Attorney General News Release April 9, 2002)

3) Many students drop out of school because of homophobic bullying.

- I am personally aware of many students in this situation; have not seen any statistics on Queer youth and drop-out rates

- a common path for these students is: high school, alternative school, 'store front' school/correspondence programme, drop out of schooling altogether

4) GSAs offer support for students who may feel marginalized because of homophobia; yet there are reports that there are barriers to the setting up of these clubs.

- many of our students/educators tell us that they do not receive administrative support for these clubs like they would for any other club in the school

- my experience shows that our GSA posters are targeted: with 'faggot' scrawled all over it; obscene comments about a student who has offered to be a contact for the group when named on the poster

- as a GSA facilitator, we have brought in many speakers who ALL comment that if they would have had a GSA in their school, it may have helped them stay in school, deal with their sexual orientation/gender identity instead of engaging in risky behaviours

- some of our guests have pointed out that even if they did not attend GSA meetings, they would have felt comforted knowing that there was such a group in the school (knowing that someone cared/acknowledged the existence of Queer youth)

Recommendations to the Safe School Task Force
Submitted by GALE-Victoria
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- 1) That Anti-Harassment policies and School Code of Conduct include "sexual orientation or gender identity" as a basis of discrimination.
- 2) All school districts/schools should have clear policies and procedures to deal with those individuals who harass people who are Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex.
- 3) Mandate workshops on GLBTI issues for all elementary, middle and high school administration and district administration. Encourage PAC executives, Trustees and district staff to participate in these workshops.
- 4) Authorize the use of resources dealing with GLBTI youth and family issues for all school students (see purple attachments)
- 5) Encourage all middle and secondary schools administration to support the setting up of GSAs (Gay/Straight Alliances) along with other clubs that support understanding and acceptance of diversity.

Supporting Documentation/Attachments/References:

- 1) **McCreary Report**, 1999 "Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth in BC: an Adolescent Health Survey" (Key findings - summary P. 6)
- 2) **Times Colonist** article, Monday, June 11, 2001 - C3 "Sensitivity lessons lead to fall in gay bashing"
- 3) **Times Colonist** article, April 10, 2002 A1,2 "School district to pay for gay taunts"
- 4) **BC Attorney General News Release** April 9, 2002
- 5) **GALE-BC** Resource Lists (purple):
 - a) Community Groups and Services for LGBT Youth in BC
 - b) Fiction and Non-Fiction Books for Classroom Use (K-12)
 - c) Video Resources on Homophobia and Heterosexism
 - d) Web Sites which Provide LGBT Resources for Educators and/or Youth
- 6) **Vancouver Island Organizations** supporting GLBTIQ youth
- 7) **Vancouver Island Regional Gay Youth Network** - list of resources/supports
- 8) **BC Auditor General's Report** - 2000-2001 Safety in Schools
- 9) **Greater Victoria School Trustees Meeting Minutes**, June 24, 2002 P. 3 & 4

Students' Comments/Feedback:

1) Need for Support

- self-acceptance; strength
- wellness
- provoking discussion
- self-understanding
- support

2) Attitude Change in School Community

- (homophobia and heterosexism education)
- GSA announcements not read out as others are for basketball, leadership etc.
 - emphasizing sameness
 - respect for diversity; individuality
 - need acceptance of different points of view
 - to promote awareness of the effects of name-calling, language and its impact (i.e. 'that's so gaaaay'; 'faggot')
 - challenge peoples' stereotypes of people who are GLBTIQ
 - inclusive language in schools

3) Safe School

- do not feel school is a safe place
- processes for homophobic bullying/harassment not effective

4) Action/Empowerment

- empowerment; courage
- reveal - eliminate fear
- to create a supportive atmosphere
- change, hope
- awareness/education
- end separateness/difference
- breaking barriers
- access – resources/support
- promote awareness/reflection
- learn strategies to combat name-calling

Statistical Support:

McCreary Survey, 1999, Key findings: # 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, 10

McCreary Survey, 1999, Key findings: # 8

McCreary Survey, 1999, Key findings: # 9

Students' vision- Charter for Public Education:

That all schools celebrate the Diversity of each and every individual and that all schools are safe for every individual.

Students' suggestions:

- have GSAs set up at every school so students don't have to do it
- include and make note of Queer role models in curriculum (i.e. Leonardo da Vinci, Emily Dickinson, Florence Nightingale...)
- start in elementary schools and include homophobia and heterosexism education in the curriculum; have workshops for staff and the community
- actively celebrate the diversity of each and every student – Awareness Week
- develop more effective and appropriate ways to deal with homophobic bullying and harassment (eg would you put up with a student calling another student 'nigger')
- inform the school communities of our expectations and human rights
- students have taken workshops – they want to speak about homophobia to their peers/staff
- in this district, students are one of the focus groups giving input on new policy and action plan being developed to protect GLBTIQ youth (we have also spoken with Queer parents)