

A Brief from the Surrey Teachers' Association

to

The Ministry of Education Safe Schools Task Force

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Surrey District Conference Centre



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The intent of this report is to give brief anecdotal snapshots into the reality and severity of homophobia in Surrey schools for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students and staff.

Firstly, the report will describe the atmosphere in the Surrey School District with respect to educational leadership on the part of the school board trustees and administrators specifically on the issue of homophobic bullying and harassment as well as anti-homophobia education.

This brief will also outline the efforts of the Surrey Teachers' Association (S.T.A.) to address homophobia in schools specifically through their Ad Hoc Committee on Homophobia and Heterosexism (H&H Committee).

Finally, it includes "Recommendations for Change" within the Ministry of Education. It is our hope that the Ministry will begin to demonstrate educational leadership in this area so that LGBT students and staff can be safe, accepted and valued in our district and others across B.C.

Context of the Surrey School District

LGBT students and teachers work and attempt to learn in a largely hostile environment with respect to homophobia in schools.

In April of 1998, the Surrey School Board surveyed over 14,000 students from Grades 8 to 12 about their concerns for physical and emotional safety at school. Thirty percent of those students cited homophobia as a "serious safety concern" in their schools. Therefore, over 4000 students in this district recognize homophobia as a serious safety concern at school. This is not surprising, as verbal harassment (via anti-gay slurs) is common in schools. Any student is at risk and can be the target of this form of hatred based on incorrect assumptions, perceptions and negative stereotypes that their peers harbor about LGBT people. The absolute lack of anti-homophobia education in this district puts Surrey students at particular risk. The risk will remain until there is district leadership towards teaching anti-homophobia education in classrooms

LGBT and heterosexual teachers report that they feel targeted by extremist parents who claim they are "promoting a gay agenda" or "recruiting children into the gay lifestyle" whenever they engage in anti-homophobia education in schools. Teachers also report that they are uncomfortable or wary when teaching about homosexuality within the context of the Personal Planning and C.A.P.P. curriculum, or any other curricular area.

Their concerns originate, in part, from the actions of a vocal minority of parents or "so-called" parents who are from outside the district. These individuals have written extremely vitriolic letters to the local newspapers, picketed schools, verbally harassed LGBT and heterosexual teachers and attempted to malign teacher's professional reputations simply because they stand up for LGBT students and families in schools. The Surrey Teachers' Association has spent an inordinate amount of time defending their member's rights through grievances and arbitrations against the Surrey School Board.

The offices of the Surrey Teachers' Association have been picketed. The STA has been labeled, "anti-family" by some members of the community and their supporters in the media. Progressive LGBT and heterosexual teachers and parents have been called, "perverts", "pedophiles", and "faggot lovers" by picketers on school property and at school board meetings. Secondary students and other non-teaching school board employees have also harassed them.

Trustees and Principals have largely remained silent and tacitly allowed these actions to escalate without ever speaking out about the seriousness of the problem of homophobia in schools. The School Board also supported the removal of a student from an openly gay teacher's classroom after his parents complained they didn't want a gay teacher. An arbitration award was rendered to the Surrey Teachers' Association against the School Board for discrimination based upon the employee's sexual orientation.

These flashpoints have routinely occurred whenever the STA passed anti-homophobia motions at their local general meetings or supported anti-homophobia measures at the B.C.T.F. level. They have also occurred whenever the same-sex book banning case was prominent in the media.

The Surrey School District has gained local, provincial and national media attention for their opposition to the use of books about same-sex families by teachers in classrooms. This district now has an Extra-Curricular Clubs Policy which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to form Gay Straight Alliance clubs in schools. The Surrey School Board has spent in excess of \$880,000.000 of taxpayer's money in litigation to prevent LGBT friendly books from being used in Surrey schools. In some cases, the board has also attempted to restrict the use of specific professional resources for teachers, which deal with homosexuality and anti-homophobia education. (These include "Counselling Lesbian and Gay Youth" as well as "Challenging Homophobia in Schools" produced by GALE-BC with the support of the B.C.T.F.) These resources are B.C.T.F. Lesson Aids for all teachers throughout the province. The S.T.A. has successfully challenged prohibitions on these GALE/BCTF resources through their grievance procedure. Planned Parenthood, Gay and Lesbian Educators of B.C. (GALE-BC) and the YouthCo Aids Society are also specifically prohibited from being guest speakers in Surrey schools. All of these actions have contributed to a chill within Surrey for heterosexual and LGBT students and staff alike.

To the best of our knowledge, the Surrey School Board has not developed or supported the use of any anti-homophobia resources or educational materials in schools in this district.

A few years ago, they provided Professional Development for seven individuals (four teachers, two counselors and one principal) through the Justice Institute of B.C. that was specific to homophobia. This was a direct result of pointed questions from employees and parents at televised school board meetings.

Board officials, principals and trustees currently have no expertise in the areas of homophobic bullying and/or anti-homophobia education. Teachers are the only educational leaders on these issues in this district. Sadly, they do so at their own peril.

Surrey Student and Staff Quotes

LGBT students and staff were asked the following questions about their personal safety at school:

LGBT students were asked:

"As an LGBT student, do you feel safe in Surrey schools?"

"As an LGBT student, is your reality reflected at school via classroom discussions, course content, resources, etc?"

Here are a few of their responses. They are purposefully anonymous to protect the individuals from further homophobic harassment at school or work.

From an LGBT teacher:

"A few years ago, I was harassed at home over a number of months with repeated graphic homophobic phone calls placed to my house. One of my students was found to be responsible. The principal of my school at the time asked if I would consider keeping the student in my class - I didn't. I asked that the student be expelled, but he was permitted to remain at the school. I had to face him and his friends everyday for two months after that until summer came. Looks, taunts, jeers - it was awful. Just driving up to that school put a knot in my stomach and tears in my eyes. I practically ran down the halls to get to my class, head down, not acknowledging anyone. The following school year, after further incidents of harassment (from the same student), I took a stress leave. I left that school at the end of that school year. I couldn't stay in a place that caused me so much anxiety.

I have worked in a number of other Surrey schools since then. In every school I have been a victim of name-calling at the hands of students as I walked down the halls. Do I feel safe working in Surrey schools? Do I feel supported by this district? Ha! You're kidding, right?"

From LGBT students:

"At my school, it seems the only LGBT awareness there is comes right from me. The only class discussions and LGBT resources are started and exist because I am there to bring it up. For a closeted LGBT youth there is nowhere to turn in Surrey schools. In the classrooms, being gay seems like an invisible issue. Homophobia just isn't being combated. We need to do something about it."

"As a gay student in my school, I do feel safe, but only because I'm not out yet. I do know that if I do come out, I will be ridiculed and teased and end up getting into many fistfights. I know this because there have been some people who were out and I couldn't believe the things people did to them. They got booed at and pushed around all day. If we had Gay Straight Alliance clubs and if people at school knew more about gay people and how we are just the same as them, then maybe I could come out without having to worry about getting jumped or things like that."

"As a gay student, I do not feel safe in any schools, and I also do not feel safe in Surrey. I fear to walk to and from school, and to be in the school halls by myself. As a gay student, my reality is not reflected through classroom discussions or course content. As for resources, my school has one book - "Gay Rights" - and this book is not too useful or helpful to me. I do wish that there should be a course, classroom discussions, books/resources and GSA's in all schools."

The Ad Hoc Committee on Homophobia and Heterosexism

This committee was formed five years ago by the Surrey Teacher's Association in direct response to the level of homophobia and heterosexism in this district. Members of the committee are teacher volunteers who are heterosexual, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender. The S.T.A. Executive appoints them without being publicly elected at S.T.A. meetings. This is to ensure the safety of committee members as some cannot be open about their sexual orientation in this district and some do not want to be targeted for being our heterosexual allies. That fact alone speaks to the level of fear in this district.

The H&H Committee has identified four major objectives for the current school year:

- Encourage and empower students to deal with homophobia and heterosexism at school
- Encourage the acceptance of diversity
- Networking between schools, students and community organizations
- Educate STA members

Some Projects initiated by the S.T.A. Ad Hoc Committee include:

- B.C.T.F. led Professional Development workshops for Surrey teachers on homophobia, heterosexism and GSA club formation
- Working with Secondary Teacher Librarians to ensure that student resources and library collections are age appropriate, accurate and LGBT friendly
- Providing school counsellors with LGBT information about support systems and community services for LGBT students.
- Educating STA members about what to do when they hear homophobic slurs or comments in their classrooms or schools.
- Working to provide Surrey teachers with violence prevention information and strategies in schools, which specifically pertain to anti-gay harassment.
- Providing advice to LGBT teachers on how to protect themselves via referral to the STA Office and the provisions within their collective agreement.
- Development of resource materials such as "Moving Beyond Silence- Addressing Homophobia in Elementary Schools."

“Recommendations for Change” to the Ministry of Education

Given the absolute lack of leadership by all levels of the Surrey School Board on anti-homophobia education in our schools combined with an unwillingness to make LGBT friendly schools there is a dire and pressing need for B.C. Ministry of Education leadership.

We recommend the Ministry immediately act on the following points:

- Mandate that all school districts in B.C. provide anti-homophobia education for students from Grades 3 to 12.
- Act as an educational leader in publicly acknowledging the seriousness of homophobic harassment in B.C.’s schools.
- Legislate and provide funds for professionally facilitated Anti-Homophobia workshops for Principals, Vice Principals, Superintendents and Trustees.
- Immediately grant Ministry Approval for a range of age appropriate books/videos (Kindergarten to Grade 12), which accurately and positively portray LGBT people and same-sex families.
- Legislate that all schools in B.C. amend their District Code of Conduct Policy to “prohibit discrimination based upon one’s real or perceived sexual orientation and/or gender identity.”
- Provide advice to school districts on specific consequences for perpetrators of anti-gay harassment upon students in schools.