



Submission to the
Safe Schools Task Force

December 2002

Mission Statement

To encourage our youth to claim their right to participate fully in the society at large; to take their place within their home communities; to claim the same privileges and responsibilities as every citizen; to celebrate who they are, fully and without shame or apology.

Vision Statement

That queer youth have access to support no matter where they live in British Columbia.

Submission to the Safe Schools Task Force

Youthquest! commends Members of the Legislative Assembly for undertaking the Safe Schools Task Force and welcomes this opportunity for a forum on topics of concern to gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth.

Youthquest! is a province-wide agency providing a range of services for LGBTQ youth in suburban and rural communities. Weekly drop-ins are presently operated in 12 communities around the province, making it Canada's largest gay youth organization.

Background

Incorporated as a non-profit in 1993, Youthquest! Lesbian and Gay Youth Society provides support, resource and advocacy services to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth in their home communities.

- Through our drop-in programs, *youth* gain access to a supportive peer group and receive support in a safe, non-judgmental atmosphere. In most communities served by Youthquest!, the local drop-in is the only safe space for LGBTQ youth.

Youthquest!'s drop-in program presently operates at 12 sites in 12 communities in British Columbia. In 2001, more than 1300 program hours were provided in communities as large as Surrey and as small as Port Alberni and two new drop-ins were opened. In 2001, 783 distinct youth accessed the program for more than 3700 visits. Overall, these drop-ins have been accessed almost 14,000 times to date since Youthquest! was incorporated in 1993. So far in 2002, Youthquest! has opened a drop-in in Kelowna and assisted drop-ins to open in Vernon, Parksville and trans drop-in in Surrey.

In every case, the drop-in program provides a safe social space for LGBTQ youth in communities where this doesn't otherwise exist. The drop-in is a hangout – a "queer 7-11," if you will – but just as importantly, it is a place for youth to find peer support, non-threatening adult role models, and information on resources in the community.

- Through community outreach and training, *service providers* who work with youth gain a greater understanding and appreciation of the issues and needs facing the LGBTQ youth within their client base. The existing resource base becomes more accessible to this client base, avoiding duplication and ensuring that services are available in the youths' home communities.

Every year, Youthquest! offers hundreds of community outreach and training conferences, seminars, and workshops. Youthquest! participates in many community committees, providing

input into broad community initiatives (health goals, parks & recreation programs, AIDS strategies, crime prevention, etc.) and promoting awareness of LGBTQ youth issues on a local level.

- Through case and systemic advocacy on a provincial level, *the community* becomes aware of the existence of LGBTQ youth and more sensitive to the need to eliminate institutionalized homophobia and heterosexism, in order to allow these youth to reach their full potential.

Advocacy is provided for individual clients on a case basis, and in collaboration with community organizations on a systemic level. Youthquest! strives to maintain excellent working relationships with other LGBTQ youth organizations (many of which are affiliated with us) as well as broader organizations such as the December 9th Coalition, Gay and Lesbian Educators, and Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere. Youthquest! also advocates on related issues, especially the rights of transgendered individuals and the rights of young people generally.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgendered youth are at risk

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and questioning (LGBTQ) youth suffer social isolation, bullying, harassment and discrimination, and are at significantly higher risk for school drop-out, homelessness, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual exploitation, and suicide.

Youthquest! programs ...

Youthquest! provides specialized services, both direct and in-direct, for this marginalized population and educational outreach for other service providers who work with them. Youth programs include drop-ins, peer action support services, and telephone and online services. Service providers benefit from community outreach/education, our provincial resource centre, and research and publications programs.

Youthquest! has established its ability to run successful youth programs with volunteers, a small staff, donated sites and by developing community resource services. The establishment of high standards, a format based on the participation of youth and adult volunteers, and accessible community educational outreach are central to achieving successful implementation of youth service programs.

... build youth resiliency ...

Studies show that the formation of positive peer supports are a critical element in improved health and the ability of youth to recover from challenging situations. Youthquest! programs support

the formation of these peer supports, and provide positive role models of healthy life choices. Risk factors are significantly reduced or mitigated.

Youthquest! improves community appreciation of LGBTQ youth, their existence and needs through visibility and awareness initiatives, replacing homophobic ignorance with an increased awareness with positive messaging to build support and understanding of LGBTQ youth

... and strengthen family and community capacity ...

Youthquest! assists at-risk youth to build stronger relationships with their families despite the difficulties posed by their sexual orientation. Staff and volunteers act as mediators or advocates with family situations where appropriate and provide professional, specialized assistance to other service providers (including social workers) who are working to assist youth in building positive familial relationships.

Youthquest! programs are community developed and delivered. Programs work in partnership with existing community organizations and services, eliminating duplication and broadening choice for clients and innovative programming. Youthquest! improves the quality of existing community services by providing community education and outreach to enhance their ability to meet the needs of *all* members of the community.

Recognizing the relative wealth of skills and abilities to be free in many communities, Youthquest! has chosen to avoid establishing its own counselling bureaucracy and has elected instead to work with established service providers. By providing community and school counsellors with supplemental training in sexual and gender identity issues, Youthquest! seeks to broaden the range of counselling available to LGBTQ youth throughout the local community, and to assemble a gay positive resource base which would make services available pro bono or at token rates, on a "as needed" basis to youth referred through the drop-in program. This approach is cost effective in that it avoids service duplication, is consistent with the government's approach to community services and works toward the reduction and elimination of bigotry and homophobia in schools and society.

... to achieve healthy youth and responsible families living in safe, caring and inclusive communities through low-cost, high-impact services

For an annual cost just over \$100,000 (\$71,000 [our core services funding] was eliminated in 2002 by the Ministry for Children and Family Development) Youthquest! leverages hundreds of thousands of dollars of volunteered time and expertise, in-kind contributions, and financial assistance. The program is recognised for its role in prevention and early intervention, and its ability to maximize the utility of existing prevention services at a minimal incremental cost.

These prevention services represent a far greater value per dollar than costly intervention services such as foster care, alcohol and drug withdrawal, mental health beds, and the resulting financial and social costs.

Taking a Look at the Issues

The work of the Safe Schools Task Force will have a dramatic impact on the young people Youthquest! serves. Members of the task force have heard from members and supporters of Youthquest! throughout your series of meetings around the province and this submission is an attempt to reinforce those important personal stories with some statistical indicators and analyses.

For young people with sexual and gender identities seen to be as 'other' (and those perceived to be in these categories) schools can be unsafe, frightening and violent places.

Despite advances made in recent years, there remains an enormous amount of bigotry aimed at these students from classmates, as well as from the institutions and individuals who are responsible for educating them. In recent years, educators and administrators have accepted that external factors such as poverty and hunger can have a detrimental effect on learning. The very fact that the Safe Schools Task Force was struck is an important recognition that student safety is an equally vital prerequisite to learning as a full stomach.

Adolescence is the time when most people discover their sexuality in its various permutations. For those who discover a non-heterosexual identity, the process can be extremely isolating and threatening. Due to the overwhelming prevalence of heterosexual imagery in popular culture, educational resources and most families, a young person discovering a queer orientation can find themselves at potential odds with their loved ones, their friends, their clergy, even their own self-identity.

A deep-seated historic intolerance toward gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender people makes the coming out process difficult and, in the closed environment of high school culture, being identified (correctly or incorrectly) as a member of one of these groups can result in harassment and violence.

In order to address the lack of safety in the school environment, it is necessary to look beyond generalities and focus on the very specific nature of bigotry at work in the school system and the ameliorative steps that can be taken to eliminate it.

We will break this issue down into three parts:

The problems, the progress and the potential.

PROBLEMS

Statistics compiled recently confirm the worrying anecdotes that concerned educators and activists have been hearing for years.

There has been an academic argument over the proportion of the population that is LGBTQ, but attempts to quantify these communities are ethically dubious not only because the “statistics” amount to qualified guesses, but because one unsafe student is one too many. Nevertheless, as policy-makers and legislators, you are faced with convincing your colleagues that this issue should be on an agenda that is no doubt crowded. We concur, therefore, that numbers are a factor in your work.

A 1989 study concluded that if you take a student body of 1000 students, between 30 and 100 will be gay or lesbian (that doesn't count bisexual or transgender youth). Approximately 60 to 150 will have a gay or lesbian sibling and approximately 20 to 40 will have gay or lesbian parents. This means that 100 to 300 youth will be either gay or lesbian or have an immediate family member that is lesbian or gay. As many as one-third of all students could be directly affected by policies pertaining to sexual orientation or be subject to prejudicial treatment on this basis.

School and home offer little shelter to LGBTQ youth. An anonymous article in UBC's 1993 Perspectives in Education reported that queer youth are frequently the victims of violence at the hands of fellow students and family members. There is some evidence suggesting queer youth may be more vulnerable to sexual assault. More subtle but even more damaging is the steady barrage of negative images and messages coming from the school yards, pop culture icons, media, youth professionals, clergy, teachers, and parents. This onslaught of degrading images creates and enforces the negative self-image held by many queer youth. Unlike youth from other minorities, queer youth are unlikely to receive any support from their families. Indeed, families are often the first to reject queer youth.

Raymond Silver's 1991 Master's Thesis, Discrimination and Non-Discrimination Against Gay and Lesbian Teachers in British Columbia, describes how gay and lesbian teachers often struggle to counsel gay students. "(gay and lesbian) Teachers are often confused about how to react to the discrimination they observe, particularly men as they discern a lack of support from administrative personnel... They find it particularly difficult to counsel (gay) youngster's for fear that administrators, colleagues, and particularly parents will misinterpret their intentions."

The reality is, queer youth have no one to share with; few if any, role models; and few sources of support. The lack of support from families, churches and social services, combined with the barrage

of negative images so prevalent in society result in incredibly low self-esteem and increased risk of violence. The resulting loss of self-esteem is manifested in a heightened risk of AIDS and sexually transmitted disease infection, poor health choices, increased likelihood of drug and alcohol abuse, heightened likelihood of involvement with social services or the justice system, and a tragic loss to the society at large.

Many gay youth grow up believing the same gay stereotypes as their straight school mates: that AIDS is inevitable (so why bother with abstinence or safer sex); that God and church have no room for them, that long-term friendships and romantic relationships are impossible; that they will live bitter, lonely lives; that adult homosexuals are sexual predators and child molesters; that straight people universally hate queers; that we have no history, have made no contributions to the cultures we come from; that we don't have families; that failure is inevitable. They access queer-youth drop-ins desperate for validation but with little trust in the future.

A study by the McCreary Centre found that close to half of British Columbia's gay and lesbian students interviewed have attempted suicide and 71 per cent had seriously considered suicide. Suicide is considered the leading cause of death among lesbian and gay youth, with about 30 per cent of youth suicides attributed to issues around sexual orientation. It is worth noting here that a subtle but positive change of attitude has evolved in recent years, with the recognition that suicide by queer people is a result not of anything inherent or congruent to non-heterosexual identity, but rather to society's reaction to this fact. That is, people do not commit suicide because they are gay, they commit suicide because society discriminates against them because they are gay. This may seem a semantic differentiation, but it is in fact a necessary reality to accept if we hope to advance toward reductions in this tragic statistic of self-destruction.

The impact of harassment on education is evident only partly from a U.S. statistic in which 28 per cent of gay and lesbian high school dropouts cited harassment based on sexual orientation as the reason they did not complete school. Those students who remain in school are often faced with a climate that is not conducive to learning.

The McCreary study indicated that 20 per cent of gay and lesbian students in B.C. were assaulted in the past year and that 22 per cent said they rarely or never felt safe at school. Thirty-seven per cent reported feeling like "outsiders" at school while 80 per cent reported hearing homophobic or transphobic remarks on a daily basis. More than one-third had been threatened with violence. An earlier study by the same organization stated that nearly half of street-involved youth identify themselves as not heterosexual, an indication that home life for non-heterosexual young people can be no respite from a troubled school life.

Educators are cited as often contributing to a hostile environment, with more than one-quarter of

respondents reporting teachers making homophobic remarks.

All of these factors, and others, combine to create an enormous and potentially tragic consequence for LGBTQ youth. Few statistics say as much as one study, which reported that 40 per cent of homosexual students have dramatically low self-esteem compared with nine per cent of their heterosexual peers.

PROGRESS

This category offers a brief and bitter-sweet summary of the past several years. While public opinion surveys indicate that Canadians generally have advanced commendably in their attitudes toward gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender citizens, that degree of progress does not seem to be mirrored at the school level.

This is due partly to a fear among school administrators and educators to address sexual issues in general and sexual orientation issues in particular. Teachers in some districts, such as Surrey, have reasonable concerns about the impact on their career of being seen as “pro-gay.” Yet, silence can be as deafening to queer youth as homophobic remarks and the refusal of school boards and staff to proactively address this issue continues to send a tacit message to all students that homophobia is still acceptable in our schools.

One of the most successful and significant movements in recent years is the development of Gay-Straight Alliances in schools. These GSAs represent a lifeline to queer students and are perhaps the most effective method devised to reduce the isolation felt by GLBTQ youth. In many instances, however, these groups have been formed amid controversy by a few courageous pioneering students and staff.

On the other hand, for every successful development in the education system, there seem to be countless remaining challenges; For every step forward, a step backward.

We view the current predicament faced by Youthquest! as an example of this “reversible progress.” After years of working with GLBTQ youth on a shoestring budget, we received a degree of secure funding in recent years through the provincial government. Despite two extensions in funding in the past year, our organization faces potentially terminal difficulties without government support. The immense achievements of our agency, based on a remarkably small budget, are a model of successful co-operation between government and the non-profit sector. The loss of funding and the potential closure of our agency would be a sign that government and society have not progressed to the extent we might believe.

POTENTIAL

As individuals who have worked in the field of ensuring safe school environments for queer young people (and, in the absence of that safe environment, providing an ameliorative support network outside schools), the staff and membership of Youthquest have developed some very tangible recommendations that we sincerely hope will find their way into the Safe Schools Task Force report.

GSAs - Officials from the Ministry level through local school boards to administrators and teachers should encourage formation of support groups such as Gay-Straight Alliances. Teachers should feel secure in sponsoring such groups, students should feel confident in joining them and administrators should feel safe in encouraging them in their schools. These organizations can be the first line of defence against the host of tragic consequences associated with the isolation of GLBTQ students. In the absence of officially sanctioned school-based programs for GLBTQ youth, the government should ensure a parallel availability of community support options.

Zero Tolerance - Schools in British Columbia already have official “zero tolerance” policies regarding harassment, but a specific and explicitly expressed interdiction against homophobic bullying is absolutely necessary. Teachers should be required to report homophobia and the use of derogatory terms relating to sexual orientation should be explicitly banned. Schools have defended their exclusion of explicit anti-homophobia statements by relying on the argument that “zero tolerance” includes homophobia. However, this hair-splitting refusal to explicitly ban homophobia delivers a strong implicit message. People who work and study in schools know very well that “zero tolerance” is a paper tiger, especially as it pertains to homophobia.

In particular, schools lack specific guidance and protocols on how to implement such policies as they relate to LGBTQ discrimination. Over the last twenty years schools have identified the negative impact of racial and gender discrimination and harassment and the need for action in these areas. While they still have a long way to go, there has been some progress. However in the area of LGBTQ discrimination, little or no progress has been made. The development of detailed implementation protocols and the identification of Best Practices models such as those adopted by the Visalia Unified School District in California would go a long way towards give school boards the necessary tools to effectively implement zero tolerance policies.

Physical Security - Parents may assume that their children, while in school, are being supervised, but an enormous amount of harassment can take place behind the backs of teachers, particularly as class sizes increase and support staff are reduced. Increased class size and school size make individual safety more difficult to ensure. GLBTQ students are often assaulted during physical education class, in the guise of rough sports or “accidental” contact. The locker room is a terrifying place for many

GLBTQ students, who can be extremely vulnerable amid the bustle of activity before and after gym class. A lack of supervision in this most intimate of school spaces can result in violence and intimidation, which leads many students to create excuses to exempt themselves from phys ed, to the detriment of their health and academic standing. Plans to make phys ed a required course through Grade 12 should be accompanied by a recognition of the dangers it presents to queer students and others and concrete plans to ensure supervision and safety.

Professional Support - British Columbia teachers have some sensitivity resources available to them on sexual orientation issues, but it is unevenly offered and not required. These resources need to be enhanced and teachers, like everyone, need to be more aware of the effect of their comments. Nurses, counsellors and social workers in every school must be equipped to deal with issues affecting gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth and their families and friends.

Curriculum - Part of the isolation felt by queer students is the almost complete absence of role models or other examples in the curriculum. Health issues tend to be addressed in contexts appropriate to heterosexual youth and a lack of safe sex information for gay and straight youth can have fatal results. Age-appropriate learning resources must address the range of student experience, from kindergarten, when students formulate understandings of different family structures and relationships, to Grade 12, from which young people must graduate into a world where accommodating diversity is a prerequisite to good citizenship and personal success.

Local Governance - The Canadian federal system devolves responsibilities to various levels of governments and Youthquest! recognizes that some aspects of educational implementation are the responsibility of locally elected boards. We urge the members of the Task Force to work toward a province-wide standard for safe schools, so that young people can expect the same education, opportunities and security of the person, regardless of where in the province they live. We urge the Task Force to build bridges with governmental and non-governmental agencies to work in concert to fulfill the recommendations of the Task Force report.

CONCLUSION

In this submission, we have attempted to put into concrete form some of the recommendations we urge you to include in the final report of the Safe Schools Task Force. Creating a safe environment for learning is a challenge to be met through cooperation of many different parties, but the fundamental message of support for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth must come from the very top and be inculcated through every aspect of the education system to the final delivery of excellent education to every British Columbian.

Please do not underestimate the power of a simple message that being gay, bi or trans is OK. But please also do not assume that this alone will solve the myriad difficulties facing LGBTQ youth.

Thank you for the efforts you have put in individually and as a task force, representing your caucus and constituents, to attempt to make B.C. classrooms safer. Few tasks you undertake in the course of your career could be more important and, although the results will be difficult to measure, they will no doubt have a tremendous influence on the lives of countless young British Columbians.

In closing, we cannot miss the opportunity to respectfully urge you to intervene on behalf of Youthquest! to include funding for our agency's tremendously vital work providing for the needs of gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth. Please be among the first to state loudly that gay youth have people who care about them and safe places to turn for assistance. The work of Youthquest! has provided a lifeline to hundreds of young people and their families around the province. We have much left to do.