

## **GALE BC's Brief to BC Government's School Safety Task Force (MLA's Lorne Mayencourt, Brenda Locke and Wendy McMahon)**

We in GALE BC welcome this initiative by the government of British Columbia, to examine all aspects of school safety and to make recommendations for change. We have no doubt that you have heard, and will continue to hear, a great number of submissions with many comments and suggestions. We are proud to say that GALE BC has been very concerned about school safety for about 11 years, and that we have been speaking out and writing frequently in that time.

You are obviously aware of the many recent highly publicized cases of youth suicide in BC where bullying was clearly involved. We refer specifically to the incidents involving Hamed Nastoh (Surrey), Dawn Marie Wesley (Maple Ridge), and Jamie Lazarre (Prince George).

There have also been other highly publicized events involving youth bullying, violence, and harassment. These include:

- the Comox Valley student who videotaped a school fight, and then was not supported by his school district when he publicized the event;
- the North Vancouver student who successfully complained against his school district, because of homophobic bullying/harassment. The Human Rights Tribunal's ruling is now being appealed by the North Vancouver School District, which does not seem to accept the severity of the bullying problem;
- the parent in Whistler who fought publicly with the school board about her daughter's continued harassment on school property.

There is no doubt in our minds, and probably yours too by now, that there have been many scores of other similar cases of school violence (in varying degrees) in BC's public and private schools. However, most of these incidents do not receive much notice outside their own immediate area, so it's impossible to really know the full extent of the problem.

Many varying factors are at play in the bullying and harassment in different communities, schools, and grade levels. But most anecdotal reports from youth (secondary students, dropouts, and recent graduates who talk with GALE BC presenters) include the same comments about the issue of school safety (or lack of it). These youth regularly state that the two most common aspects of the problem are **Racism** (in its many forms) and **Homophobia** (again, in many forms, including targeting anyone whether or not that person is actually perceived to be part of a sexual minority group). Persons who self-identify, or are perceived by others, as Transgender, Two-Spirited, Inter-Sexed, or Questioning, are also at extreme risk for harassment. We will refer here to all these sexual minority groups as "**queer**" (intended as an inclusive term, not as an insult).

What the students and other youth are telling us is clear: **Any student can be the target and victim of homophobic bullying.** Schools must treat the problem seriously when it appears, and should be actively educating students, families and staff about our diverse populations, **before** queer students and families self-identify, and even if our presence is not obvious to school staff.

This submission outlines some strategies that are specific to addressing homophobia in schools. We don't in any way intend this as a complete list of strategies to be undertaken. We understand fully that the many factors at play in bullying are a complex of overlays and interactions. But our experience and expertise in GALE BC are with the various aspects of homophobia, and so we offer ideas that are pertinent to this type of bullying. We know that a successful, province-wide strategy will have to include our suggestions along with the many other ideas offered by people who are experienced in all the other aspects of name-calling, marginalizing, and harassment.

We believe that a few school district trustees (and their agents, the school administrators) are seriously trying to specifically address the problem of homophobic violence and harassment in schools. These people are very supportive of efforts to reduce harassment, to appreciate and celebrate diversity, and to educate all school staff and students, (with appropriate training and resources). We would particularly commend the school trustees of the Vancouver and Victoria school districts; these leaders have recently made some initial decisions that will start to deal with the lives, the realities, and the needs of queer youth in their schools.

But there are many other school trustees and administrators -- far too many -- who do not really understand the severity or extent of bullying and harassment in schools. And some, unfortunately, do not seem even remotely interested in educating themselves or taking any form of systemic action to address the issue of school safety for queer youth. Our youth are not well served by the inaction and apathy of these educational "leaders". Our youth, all of them, deserve much better!

Obviously all attempts to resolve the issue of school safety must recognize the variety of factors at play in bullying, discrimination and harassment, but they absolutely must recognize and address the persistence and prevalence of both racism and homophobia, in all schools, grade levels and communities. And the Ministry of Education must take the lead in exercising its authority and responsibility in the work of promoting school safety.

It is not appropriate for the Ministry of Education to say (as Deputy Minister Dosdall did in a recent letter to GALE BC, in April 2002) that it is up to each school district to handle school safety issues, independent of the Ministry. We would reject this attitude and policy as thoroughly useless if this government is truly serious about addressing the issue of school safety. It is precisely because many school trustees and administrators do not really wish to deal with all aspects of school safety, or don't know how, that the Ministry of Education must take a strong leadership role. When trustees or district personnel, particularly in some rural boards, state that there are no gay youth in their schools, or that they have no problems with anti-gay bullying, then we believe that the Ministry of Education should help to burst their bubble of denial!

If the Ministry of Education refuses to order all school boards (public and private) to "do the right thing" (and lay out the necessary steps), then this is simply an abdication of the Ministry's responsibility to provide a safe and inclusive education to all students in BC. "**All students**" means not just those in public schools, but all students in all schools, including those private or independent schools that may have a religious underpinning. There is no reasonable justification for private or independent schools to claim an exemption from the provincial government's minimum standards of safety for all students. Nor is there any good reason for the minimum safety standards for **all students** to be inferior to those applicable to working adults in society.

## **GALE BC Recommendations to the British Columbia Minister of Education**

The following is a short list of GALE BC's suggestions to make all independent and public schools in BC safe for queer youth and families. Some of these recommendations would involve moderate financial outlays, while others would cost very little other than a show of political will and leadership by the Minister of Education. These are not "suggestions" to simply be passed on to the various school boards. To be effective, they must be mandated and implemented by your government, and they must pertain to all public and private schools in BC.

1. Mandate the inclusion of queer youth and family issues in the Career and Personal Planning curriculum at least once every second year throughout Grades K – 12; and authorize the use of many more relevant books and videos for all grade levels. (*GALE BC publications include age-appropriate lesson plans and resource suggestions.*)
2. Advise all schools and school districts to specifically include the phrase "sexual orientation or gender identity, whether actual or perceived" [among the many prohibited grounds of discrimination or harassment] in Anti-Harassment policies, in district or school Student Codes of Conduct, and in their disciplinary policies; and further, to make these policies and codes well known to all staff, students and families.
3. Advise all schools and school districts that anti-discrimination education should include and connect the various forms and causes of discrimination, but that each area needs to be addressed separately and sensitively at times, because of its unique aspects.
4. Encourage all secondary schools and school districts to support the development of Gay/Straight Alliances, along with any other school clubs that promote understanding and acceptance of diversity.
5. Encourage teachers, administrators, district officials and Parent Advisory Councils to use the resources and speakers available from various queer and queer-friendly organizations.
6. Mandate workshops on queer youth and family issues for secondary and elementary administrators and for district-based administrators, and offer similar workshops for District Parent Advisory Councils and for School Trustees.
7. Reinstate the funding for the training component of the Focus on Bullying Program, and specify inclusion of anti-homophobia content in the materials and training.

**Respectfully submitted by W. Stephen LeBel (for GALE BC) December 5, 2002**