

Largest Ever Study of Anti-Gay Harassment in Schools Shows the Problem is Widespread, Dangerous and Preventable

Study Proving That Schools Can Take Steps to Improve Student Safety Has National Implications for Addressing Harassment on the Basis of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

Harassment and bullying based on sexual orientation remain persistent and pervasive in California schools, according to a watershed study, entitled *Safe Place to Learn*, released today by the California Safe Schools Coalition. Among the highlights of the study:

- 7.5% of California's middle and high school students, or more than 200,000 students every year, are targets of harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation.
- Students harassed on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation are three times more likely to miss school because they feel unsafe, and more than twice as likely to be depressed, to consider suicide, or to make a plan for suicide.
- Students harassed on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation are also more likely to have low grades, use drugs, smoke, drink alcohol, or be victims of violence.
- Two-thirds of lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) students reported harassment based on sexual orientation, and nearly half (47%) of LGBT students experienced repeated harassment.
- 91% of all students report hearing their peers use slurs about sexual orientation and more than 40% reported hearing teachers making such negative comments or slurs.
- 27% of students reported being harassed because they weren't "masculine enough" or "feminine enough," and more than half of all students said their schools are unsafe for boys who aren't as masculine as other boys.

"When 200,000 students are suffering the devastating consequences of harassment each year, schools can't ignore the problem any longer," said Molly O'Shaughnessy, Director of the California Safe Schools Coalition. "This is an epidemic in California schools that needs immediate attention from state and local school officials."

The study comes four years after the enactment of a statewide anti-discrimination law protecting gay students and faculty, sponsored by state Senator Sheila Kuehl (D)--California is among only nine states with laws against discrimination or harassment in schools based on sexual orientation or gender identity--and just one week after the announcement of one of the largest settlements (\$1.1 million) ever involving harassment allegations by former gay and lesbian students against the Morgan Hill Unified School District, located near San Jose.

Notably, the *Safe Place to Learn* study measures the effectiveness of specific factors that may reduce harassment:

- Students who know of a school policy specifically prohibiting harassment based on sexual orientation are 19% less likely to be harassed based on sexual orientation and 25% more likely to feel safe at school.

- Students who say their teachers step in when they hear name-calling based on sexual orientation are 35% less likely to be harassed because of sexual orientation and 9% more likely to feel safe at school.
- Students whose schools have a Gay-Straight Alliance club are 16% less likely to be harassed because of sexual orientation and 23% more likely to feel safe at school.

Civil rights and anti-bias groups have taken note of these statistics in particular. "The study is unique in that it not only documents the problem but points to strategies for addressing it, including the adoption of policies, programs and training that are designed to increase awareness and interventions by faculty," said Bob Kim, a former ACLU attorney specializing in student harassment cases and current director of outreach and training at The Respect for All Project, one of the member organizations of the California Safe Schools Coalition. "Concerned adults and educators should know that there are effective resources and staff development programs available that can make a difference in these alarming statistics," said Kim.

Many organizations in the Coalition do provide resources for schools. The Respect for All Project, for instance, offers subsidized anti-bullying and anti-prejudice training for schools in California using films that are produced by its founders, Academy-Award winning director Debra Chasnoff and executive producer Helen S. Cohen. Films by the Project include *Let's Get Real*, a gripping new documentary about bullying among middle school students; *That's a Family!*, a film for K-8 students that fosters respect for children in different kinds of family structures, including those with lesbian and gay parents; and *It's Elementary--Talking about Gay Issues in School*, a landmark film released in 1996 that makes a powerful case that all students are affected by anti-gay prejudice and models how schools can address the problem. Staff trainings using the films are partially subsidized by philanthropic foundations such as The California Endowment and the Evelyn and Walter Haas, Jr. Fund.

The *Safe Place to Learn* study includes 26 times the number of respondents than any other survey on the issue in the nation and is the first comprehensive statewide analysis of harassment based on sexual orientation and gender nonconformity in California, where more than one-in-eight of the nation's children live. The report analyzes data from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), a broad-based state survey, and an independent companion survey conducted by the California Safe Schools Coalition measuring the effectiveness of school anti-harassment practices. The data were analyzed by the California Safe Schools Coalition and researchers at UC Davis' 4-H Center for Youth Development.

The California Safe Schools Coalition is a statewide partnership of organizations and individuals dedicated to eliminating discrimination and harassment on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity in California schools. Members of the California Safe Schools Coalition include the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California; Anti-Defamation League; California Teachers Association; Equality California; Gay-Straight Alliance Network; Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network; Human Rights Watch; L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center; National Center for Lesbian Rights; Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays; San Diego LGBT Community Center; Transgender Law Center; and The Respect for All Project.

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Note to Editors/Reporters: For more information on the report or the California Safe Schools Coalition, see www.casafeschools.org. For more information about *The Respect for All Project*, see www.respectforall.org.