Focus On

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Persons

THE "T" IN GLBT STANDS FOR TRANSGENDER

WHY TRANSGENDER STUDENTS NEED OUR HELP

All too often when addressing gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender (GLBT) issues the emphasis is on gay, lesbian and bisexual individuals to the exclusion of those who are transgender and gender non-conforming. But as the NEA's 2009 report on GLBT people in education, *Stepping out the Closet, Into the Light*, noted: gender nonconformity—not appearing or acting masculine or feminine enough according to societal standards—is perhaps the root cause of why students and adults discriminate against not only GLBT people, but heterosexual people who are perceived as GLBT.

Regardless of sexual orientation, the more gender non-conforming a youth, the more likely he or she is to face homophobic violence. Youth whose gender nonconforming stands out—particularly transgender youth—**face higher levels of violence and risk of serious physical harm**. For this reason, even if a school has never graduated a student who identifies as transgender, all K-12 schools need to take steps to protect gender non-conforming youth.

DEFINITIONS

Transgender: an umbrella term that can be used to describe people whose gender expression is non-conforming and/or gender identity is different from their assigned birth gender.

Gender Expression: an individual's characteristics and behaviors such as appearance, dress, mannerisms, speech patterns, and social interactions that are perceived as masculine or feminine.

Gender Non-conforming: a term used for individuals whose gender expression is different from societal expectations related to gender.

Gender Identity: a person's internal, deeply-felt sense of being male, female, something other, or in between. Everyone has a gender identity.

According to Stacey Horn, Professor at University of Illinois at Chicago, "It's bad to be gay in terms of harassment. But it's equally bad to be a straight kid who doesn't fit into the box of what people think a boy should be or a girl should be. I had one student say to me, 'Well, the gay kid, you can't make fun of him because he's gay and can't help it. But that boy who looks like a girl, he's fair game, because he's just being weird.'"

While there are similarities between the experiences of gay, lesbian and bisexual youth on one hand and transgender youth on the other, important differences do exist.

According to Professor Jenifer McGuire at Washington State University:

■ Transgender youth are less likely to be supported by their family and have more difficulty getting their family to respond to school harassment.

■ Transgender youth are more likely to drop out of traditional schools.

■ Transgender youth are more likely to hear school personnel make negative comments than hear them intervene to stop a negative comment.

■ Policies and practices that support gay, lesbian and bisexual youth are not necessarily applied toward transgender youth.

■ The presence of or "attachment" to a supportive adult is critical for transgender youth—more so than actions of the school generally.

FACTS ABOUT TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

According GLSEN's 2009 *Harsh Realities: The Experiences of Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools*:

Biased language and school safety:

■ 90 percent of transgender students heard derogatory remarks such as "dyke" or "faggot," sometimes, often, or frequently at school.

■ 90 percent of transgender students heard negative remarks about someone's gender expression sometimes, often, or frequently in schools.

■ Over 50 percent of transgender students had been physically harassed, e.g., shoved or pushed, in the school in the past year because of their sexual orientation (55 percent) and their gender expression (53 percent).

Impact on educational outcomes:

■ Almost half of transgender students reported skipping a class at least once in the past month (47 percent) and missing at least one day of school in the past month (46 percent) because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

■ Transgender students who experienced high levels of harassment had significantly lower grade point averages than those who experienced lower levels of harassment (verbal harassment based on sexual orientation: 2.2 vs. 3.0; gender expression: 2.3 vs. 2.8; gender: 2.2 vs. 2.7).

CREATING A SAFE AND INCLUSIVE SCHOOL ENVIRONMENT FOR TRANSGENDER STUDENTS

❶ **Be a Supportive Adult:** The presence of just one, supportive adult in the life of a transgender student at school is the most critical factor in increasing a transgender student's sense of safety and academic achievement and in decreasing the risk of truancy and dropout. Studies show that students do better when teachers and other school employees intervene and stop harassment when it happens, and when students know there is an adult who can serve as a resource on GLBT issues. *Resource: For information on ways to be a supportive adult and assist in creating a safe and supportive school environment go to:* www.nea.org/assets/docs/glbtstatus09.pdf

❷ **Organize Staff Training:** To increase a school staff's ability to respond to the needs of transgender youth, comprehensive staff training needs to be put in place. This training should include all staff, including school counselors, school nurses, sport coaches, education support professionals, and other part-time, volunteer or classified staff—the entire school community. *Resource: For information on free training for* NEA *members go to:* www.nea.org/assets/docs/GLBT_TrainingFlyer2009-2010_one_page.pdf *or contact Paul Sathrum at* psathrum@nea.org *or* 202/822-7787

❸ **Use Inclusive Language:** One immediate way of creating an inclusive and welcoming environment for transgender students is to be aware of language. The use of inclusive language, referring to students rather than boys and girls, will create an environment in which all students feel engaged and welcomed. Also, respecting the student's choice of name and pronoun ("he", "she") consistent with their gender identity will create a welcoming and inclusive environment. *Resource: For information on transgender issues, including language go to:* www.transequality.org

❹ **Explore Curriculum Resources:** While most transgender students don't have access to GLBT-related curricular resources in schools, studies have shown that the inclusion of GLBT issues in school curricula is one of the most important factors in producing a better school climate for transgender and GLB students. *Resource: For information on creating safe schools and curriculum resources go to:* www.welcomingschools.org *or* www.glsen.org

❺ **Support or Start a Student Club/GSA:** Studies show that the mere presence of a student-led peer organization such as a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) fosters safer school climates. This is especially true for transgender students looking for support. According to GLSEN's 2007 *National School Climate Survey* among transgender students who had a GSA, over two-thirds (68 percent) said that they attended meetings often or frequently. *Resource: For information on starting or supporting a student club/GSA go to:* www.glsen.org

❻ **Review your School or District's Student Anti-discrimination and Anti-bullying Policies:** Educators need to make clear to all students that they will not tolerate the harassment or bullying of any student for any reason, including their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. School policies that specifically define and prohibit bullying, discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity or expression improve school safety, whereas general anti-bullying or anti-discrimination policies do little to help those who are GLBT or perceived as GLBT. These policies should include procedures for reporting incidents to school authorities and be enforced. *Resource: For information on policy issues go to:* www.greatlakescenter.org/docs/Policy_Briefs/Biegel_LGBT.pdf

DID YOU KNOW?

Sexual orientation is completely distinct from gender identity. The sexual orientation of transgender youth may be gay, straight or bisexual. Transgender does not equal gay; many transgender people identify as heterosexual. Others do not define themselves within a strict category of sexual orientation.

Sources (listed in order of appearance)

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