

# Tips for Making It Real

## implementing AB 537 at your school

**AB 537, the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000, protects students from harassment and discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity. Here are some tips for making this law a reality at your school.**

### 1. Do Your 'Homework'

If your school doesn't believe you when you tell them about anti-LGBT harassment and discrimination (bias incidents), you can prove it through research.

- **Participate in the Make It Real Evaluation Project.** Evaluate what your school is doing to follow AB 537 and conduct a school climate survey. To receive a copy of the Make It Real Evaluation Kit, contact GSA Network.
- **Take a tally.** Keep a running tally of the amount of times you witness anti-LGBT harassment.
- **Keep a journal.** Write down daily entries noting how many anti-LGBT incidents occurred, who was involved, and how it made you feel. Get other people in your group to keep a journal too, and come up with a standard set of questions for everyone to answer.
- **Write a report with your findings, and publish.** Make sure you include your objectives, methods, findings, discussion, and conclusions. Take it to your principal, your school newspaper, or your local newspaper – good research findings make headlines.

### 2. The Principal Principle

Your principal is the person who has the most control over what happens at your school. Schedule a meeting with your principal to discuss the issues that LGBT students face at your school. Plan ahead and make specific requests.

- **Have a written meeting agenda.** This should include (1) introductions, (2) an overview of why you are having the meeting, (3) students' individual stories, (4) presentation of research, (5) ask for a specific action and when it will be done by, (6) allow time for the principal to respond, (7) summarize and confirm actions and commitments and (8) thanks.
- **Ask for a specific action.** Ask your principal to: commit to a written procedure for dealing with harassment, hold an all school assembly to educate the student body about harassment and discrimination, conduct a staff training on how to intervene and report bias incidents, or send a letter to parents asking for help in creating a safe school environment. Have an idea for a timeline before you present your action.
- **Follow up on your meeting.** Send your principal a letter thanking him or her for the meeting and summarizing any agreements made. Keep your principal informed about bias incidents you experience or witness, the general climate of your school, and what your goals are and how he or she can help you achieve them.

### 3. Teach It Teacher

Teachers are in the classrooms, the hallways, and throughout the grounds of the school. Their attitudes, actions, contributions, oversights, and mistakes profoundly affect the school environment. Secure active teacher allies through education and conversation.

- **Find teacher allies.** Look for a teacher who advises a GSA, or is a member of the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN). If you can't find one, approach a teacher who intervenes when he or she witness anti-LGBT harassment, or a teacher who seems sensitive to LGBT or minority rights issues. Approach him or her with a specific request – ask the teacher to commit to intervening when harassment occurs in his or her classroom or to accompany you when you meet with your principal.
- **Teach your teachers.** Ask your school if you can create a sensitivity training for teachers, invite teachers to discussion groups, make a student presentation at a faculty meeting, and confront teachers who make anti-LGBT slurs or don't intervene when students make them.



#### 4. Parents: You Can't Live Without 'Em

Parents can have a huge impact on school policy. They can be powerful allies, whether speaking to other parents, to your principal, or your school board.

- **Create parent allies.** Ask around in your circle of friends – maybe someone has a parent who is supportive and willing to help. If not, contact your local PFLAG or GLSEN chapter. Once you've located someone, invite him or her to a meeting in which you present your research and personal experiences. Ask for a specific action, such as to help you create broader support among parents.
- **Activate your parent allies.** Ask for the PTA or other parent groups to advocate for a resolution in support of school safety, or to support your group on any action you are taking.

#### 5. Pull Together: Create a Student Group or Coalition

A lot of students who aren't LGBT understand the need for equality and share a vision of social justice. Find allies to join your effort to reduce homophobia or work with a coalition of students and student groups on a broader issue.

- **Create a student group.** Once you find a group of students eager to work for social justice, you can create a task force or group geared towards increasing awareness, responding to bias incidents, and creating change on campus.
- **Activate your group.** Reach out to students, athletic teams, and other student groups, and work to achieve social justice at your school. Respond as a group to any bias incident that occurs on campus, or work together on any project you want to undertake.
- **Work in coalition with other groups.** A coalition is an organization of existing organizations. Invite as many organizations to join as possible and reach out to individual students to broaden your membership.

#### 6. Move the Student Body

The support of the student body is important for making any change in your school environment. There are many ways you can educate your peers and raise awareness on campus.

- **Hold a school assembly.** Choose a specific issue to focus on, pick a theme, and make sure you involve as many student groups as possible. This is a great way to reach the student body.
- **Change the handbook.** If your student handbook does not include a harassment or discrimination policy that is inclusive of LGBT students, you can get students to support changing it.
- **Set up in-class presentations for students.** Ask a supportive teacher if you can run a workshop in his or her class to educate students about harassment and civil rights issues.
- **Engage the student government.** Plan a meeting in which you make a specific request of your student government, such as a resolution to support safety and equality for all students.

#### 7. Media Activism

Effective use of the media is a great way to reach lots of people and publicize your research or any action you take.

- **Use your school newspaper.** Find out who controls it and what the process is for getting a story included in it. Ask a staff member to write an article about your research or your group or to print an article you have written.
- **Explore other media outlets.** Check out all public communication forums that exist in your school, such as radio or closed circuit TV, posters and announcement boards, websites, or newsletters.
- **Start a newsletter.** If you want to go beyond the media that already exist at your school, start a newsletter with your group and distribute it.
- **Go outside of your school media.** If you want to communicate with the community beyond your school, check out local newspapers, radio stations, and TV stations.

#### 8. Lobby your School Board

You can have a lasting impact on school safety and nondiscrimination if you can lobby your school board to create an Equity Compliance Plan, a district wide plan for implementation and compliance with AB 537. If you'd like to work with other GSAs in your district, contact GSA Network.

- **Prepare for a meeting.** Develop a clear proposal to present to your school board. Involve as many allies as you can.
- **Propose an Equity Compliance Plan.** Ask for clear complaint procedures, harassment report forms, a plan for informing the community about the procedure, the designation of staff members who will investigate incidents, staff and administrator trainings, and curricular materials that will teach students the value of diversity and the importance of equality.
- **Develop an effective presentation.** Make a clear presentation that will state your case. Tell your stories, share your research, describe your process of on-campus education, and make a specific request. Invite as many allies and supporters as you can.
- **Avoid the "zero tolerance" policy trap.** Advocate for a fair, flexible, and strong school policy but not a "zero tolerance" policy. Studies of these policies have shown that they are applied in a discriminatory fashion, disproportionately used to suspend or expel students of color. "Zero tolerance" policies put administrators in a bind because they cannot distinguish between serious and minor infractions. Any solutions we propose should be consistent with civil rights values and the ultimate goal of fairness and respect for all. Advocate for a policy of "constructive engagement" in which all harassment and discrimination will be taken seriously, addressed immediately, recorded and tracked, and met with a combination of discipline, counseling, and support.