

# Gay-Straight Alliance Network

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## GSA Network and Visalia Unified School District Reach Historic Settlement in Anti-Gay Case

**Parties Agree to Comprehensive Reforms to Counter Sexual Orientation Discrimination**

SAN FRANCISCO, August 13, 2002 – An historic settlement in an anti-gay harassment lawsuit was filed in federal court today, the first filed under a recent California law that protects students from discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Visalia Unified School District, the defendant in the case, and the Gay-Straight Alliance Network (GSA Network), the lead plaintiff, agreed on a comprehensive plan to prevent the discrimination brought to light by George Loomis, a former VUSD student and also a plaintiff in the case.

"This settlement is a real milestone for California students," said Carolyn Laub, Executive Director of the GSA Network. "It demonstrates that when students challenge a hostile school culture, they can win. The agreement also provides a model to school districts that want to make changes to comply with California's school non-discrimination law – as well as a warning to school districts that have resisted or ignored it."

The participation of GSA Network in the lawsuit, which was strongly opposed by the District, sets a precedent with momentous implications, since most students who have sued school districts in the past are no longer enrolled and can recover damages but lack standing to insist on broad reform to protect all students.

"GSA Network represents students in school now, and our members have a stake in seeing the district implement real reform," said Laub. "This is why the settlement breaks new ground – it brings about systematic, lasting reforms that will create safer schools for all Visalia students."

Loomis and other Visalia Unified students described a climate of pervasive hostility, including:

- Teachers and other staff making anti-gay slurs and statements to students
- Students harassing, spitting at, throwing objects at, sexually harassing, and attacking other students
- Administrators either refusing to respond or isolating students who complained and encouraging them to leave school and enter independent study, a program that severely limits students' future academic options, providing only one hour of instruction per week.

"We fought for six years for a law that protects students when their schools refuse to," said Senator Sheila Kuehl, who authored AB 537, the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000, which protects students from harassment and discrimination on the basis

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*GSA Network is a project of the Tides Center.*

of sexual orientation and gender identity. "I'm delighted to see that students are using that law to press for change and to build a better, more equitable, more humane society."

"This settlement ensures that other students won't have to go through what I went through," said George Loomis. "That's what matters most."

Laub noted that the case and its settlement coincide with the rapid growth of the GSA movement in California's Central Valley.

"In just over a year, fifteen new GSAs have been founded in the Central Valley, and student activists are leading a dynamic movement to alter the culture of hostility that still pervades far too many schools," said Laub.

"It's great that our school district has made these commitments, because George was definitely not alone in experiencing harassment in this district," said Jennifer Lopez, a GSA leader and student at Redwood High School in Visalia. "My friends and I want our school to be a safe place, and this settlement gives us hope that it will become one."

The three-year agreement between GSA Network and VUSD includes requirements that the district:

- Develop and disseminate clear harassment and discrimination policies and procedures,
- Conduct mandatory, annual training for K-12 teachers and other staff on preventing harassment and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation,
- Conduct mandatory, annual, peer-to-peer training for all 9<sup>th</sup> graders on preventing sexual orientation harassment or discrimination, and
- Assign a compliance coordinator in each school to handle sexual orientation harassment and discrimination reports.

GSA Network will provide the peer training for students, while Intergroup Clearinghouse, a human relations organization that trains schools on creating a bias-free environment, will conduct the staff training, the first of which will take place on August 19.

The ACLU of Northern California represented GSA Network and Loomis, and the law firm of Howard, Rice, Nemerovski, Canady, Falk & Rabkin acted as pro bono co-counsel in the case.

Founded in 1998, GSA Network is the nation's largest youth-led organization dedicated to ending harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in schools through the establishment and support of GSA clubs. With offices in San Francisco, Fresno and Los Angeles supporting more than 275 GSAs, GSA Network has created a regional support system for California's burgeoning GSA movement, helping California youth lead the way to a more equitable future. More information can be found at <http://www.gsanetwork.org>.

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