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Anti-gay remarks common at SF schools

Data from a 2007 survey commissioned by the San Francisco Unified School District indicate that homophobic remarks are made frequently in schools citywide, regardless of neighborhood, an analysis by the Bay Area Reporter shows.

The survey results also show that teachers and staff often do not intervene when such comments are made.

But changes appear to be happening.

In 2007, students in grades 5-12 were presented with a school climate survey that asked them about violence and harassment, among other things.

Almost half of high school students ? 48 percent ? district wide reported hearing other students use words like "fag," "dyke," or "that's so gay" 12 or more times in the past year. Likewise, 48 percent had not heard teachers or staff intervene when the comments were made.

District wide, 7 percent of high school students reported that in the past year they were harassed or bullied because they were gay or lesbian or perceived to be gay or lesbian.

Four percent of transgender students or students who were perceived to be transgender said they had been harassed in high school during the same period.

Many schools' data show little variation on those numbers.

In San Francisco, students aren't always assigned to a school in their neighborhood, so youths from more conservative areas may end up at schools in more liberal neighborhoods and vice versa.

However, Kevin Gogin, who works in support services for LGBTQ youth for the district's school health programs department, suggested there's more to it than that.

"The children who come to our schools reflect our society at large," said Gogin. "The message of our society at large is there's a class of people who can be relegated to second-class citizenship and can be ridiculed as a result of it."

About 13,000, or 72 percent, of the district's high school students responded to the survey. Schools with too few responses were not included in the data from the district that the B.A.R . obtained through a public records request.

The survey was conducted by ETR Associates San Francisco. The data collected in 2007 were released in 2008 and are the most recent available.

Gogin said that he thinks what's changed since the data came out is that "we now have very explicit information from students telling us about their experience while they're at school, so we've been able to give that feedback to administrators and teachers. ... This is data that most places don't have."

'Big change'

At John OConnell High School of Technology, in the city's Mission neighborhood, 48 percent of the school's students reported hearing "fag," "dyke," or "that's so gay" at least 12 times, while 40 percent never heard it addressed by teachers or staff.

Eric Rose, who's the English department chair, the LGBTQ support liaison, and ? for seven years ? the adviser for the "very robust" gay-straight alliance, said there's been a "big change" at the school since the survey results came out.

"Everyone was shocked by that data," said Rose, who is gay. "Everyone wanted to change that, and I think we have."

One out of 10 students at the school, which had a survey return rate of 62 percent, reported they were harassed because of being gay or lesbian, or perceived to be. For transgender or transgender-perceived students, the figure was 5 percent.

But in one indicator of how unacceptable homophobia is at his school, Rose recalled that last year, a student asked him why, when someone makes an anti-gay slur, "everybody jumps all over their case."

Rose estimated that two-thirds of the school's students participated in the National Day of Silence last year.

He urged people to support gay youth through offering their time or money to groups such as the San Francisco-based Lavender Youth Recreation and Information Center, Gay-Straight Alliance Network, and the LGBT Community Center both financially and with their time.

Maxwell Sean Wallace, 18, who was the student-elected liaison between the San Francisco school board and the student advisory council from August 2008 to August 2009, is a recent graduate of Lowell High School and now attends Georgetown University.

Wallace said his election as board delegate "kind of shows the climate we have in our school district, where a 17-year-old gay kid can be elected to the board."

He said that in his experience, the climate at Lowell was "very positive."

There was "a great deal of support, not only from teachers ? many of whom were openly gay ? but also from students," said Wallace.

The district has been working to make sure that all students receive diversity education. Elementary students are required to get two lessons a year from the family diversity curriculum, which include books that show children being raised by same-sex parents.

Middle school students are supposed to have seven periods of diversity education and violence prevention, and high school students are to receive 10 periods of diversity and prevention education. The district should soon have data on how many teachers are using the curriculum, according to Gogin.

Some curriculum is available on the district's LGBT-focused Web site ? http://www.healthiersf.org/lgbtq [1] ? that was launched earlier this year.

In tears

At a forum on homophobia held at Mission High School in June, Sandra Lee Fewer, who has a gay son and is a member of the city's school board, spoke tearfully from the audience about homophobia in San Francisco's schools.

Fewer said she had heard of one teacher imitating to students how a gay man walks. She said educators need to be held accountable, but she said the district also hasn't invested enough money to change the culture.

"We don't put enough resources into this. ... Shame on us," said Fewer.

After the forum, Fewer, who chairs the board's curriculum and program committee, told the B.A.R. her gay son had always been a "happy kid," but was "miserably unhappy" as a student at George Washington High School, in the city's Richmond District.

She said that her son wouldn't say what had happened, but other youths she had talked to about the school have said they would never come out there.

She said her son's doing "way better" at Galileo Academy of Science and Technology.

Fewer said she planned to have an "in-depth discussion" with the curriculum committee, and said one idea would be to talk about the lives of LGBT people in students' textbooks.

Fewer hasn't responded to follow-up requests for comment since the forum.

Outside Washington High School early on a recent weekday morning, several students stood in small groups near an entrance to the school.

When approached to talk about safety for gay and lesbian students, one boy pointed at another one, as if to indicate the other student was gay. The other student pointed back. Neither would

agree to be interviewed.

Another student, Gustavo Cano, 14 and a Washington freshman, said he didn't hear remarks like "fag" and "dyke" much. He said that he had heard the remarks more at his old school, James Denman Middle School, but the comments were from students who were "just playing around."

At Washington, the climate data show, 59 percent of students reported hearing "fag," "dyke," or "that's so gay" 12 or more times, and 45 percent said they had never heard a teacher intervene in the past year.

The data also show that 7 percent of students at Washington reported being harassed in the previous 12 months because they were gay or lesbian, or were perceived to be gay or lesbian, and 3 percent said they'd been harassed because they were transgender, or were perceived to be transgender.

For middle schools district wide, 51 percent of students responding reported that they had heard homophobic comments in the past year. Forty-four percent had never heard teachers or staff intervene. At Denman, where 83 percent of students answered the survey, those figures were 56 percent and 33 percent, respectively.

The B.A.R. requested talking to staff at Washington High and Denman Middle schools but Gentle Blythe, director of the district's office of public outreach and communications, did not provide access to anyone at either school.

Erik Martinez, a youth program coordinator for the San Francisco LGBT Community Center, is one person working to help improve things for the city's LGBT students.

Martinez said that this last year his group started thinking about how they can actively participate in schools and work with administrators and teachers.

Martinez said at International Studies Academy, which is in the city's Potrero Hill neighborhood, he co-facilitated a general survey class on LGBT history, social movements, and issues like hate crimes. That collaboration will continue this year, he said.

Other aspects need to be included in education as well, said Martinez. He said a lot of the youth he's worked with "are queer students of color, so we can't be silent on racism or other forms of discrimination when we work with these students."

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News Article
http://ebar.com/news/article.php?sec=news&article=4193 [2]
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[1] http://www.healthiersf.org/lgbtq

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