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By Matt Baume

LGBT youth advocates at Gay Straight Alliance Network have launched the "Make It Better Project," an initiative that confronts bullying head on by showing students and adults what they can do to improve school safety.

"We're focused on connecting people in the public who want to do something and take action," said Executive Director Carolyn Laub.

GSA Network, based in San Francisco, has been working to promote LGBT youth safety around the country for over a decade. The organization helps schools train their employees to intervene in cases of bullying, and also pushes for non-discrimination policies.

Consequences of harassment in schools include absenteeism, lower grades, mental health issues, and substance abuse.

Adults who don't work in the school system can also be of help, Laub said. She recommended that interested residents attend school board meetings and pressure elected officials to institute anti-bullying programs, both in their local system and in the schools that they attended.

GSA Network is about to launch a collaboration with Write Your Principal, a new grassroots website that encourages citizens to push for LGBT protections in their hometown schools.

As the Make It Better project launched, local resident Ian Stallings approached GSA Network and organized a fundraiser that took place last week. Money raised at the event will help continue the initiative over the next year.

Students in school districts in the Bay Area and beyond have welcomed the organization's

assistance.

"My school does not tolerate any form of bullying," said Max Philp, a student and activist at Menlo-Atherton High School in Atherton. "The faculty and administration are also proactive in calling out any students who bully in any form. Currently, my school is having a 'Be The Change' month, where teachers are supposed to give lessons each week about bullying, and there will also be a school wide assembly addressing the issue of bullying."

Laub said that some school administrators are becoming more aware of bullying. A spate of recent suicides by young people, reportedly because they were bullied at school because they were gay or perceived to be gay, has only added to the urgency.

"There are a lot of examples where school administrators already understood that bullying was an issue on their campus, but the headlines have reinforced that they need to be proactive in fixing the climate of their schools," said Laub.

GSA Network's advocacy is guided by five steps that education experts know decrease harassment. Those steps include instituting a well-publicized non-discrimination policy, training teachers to intervene, establishing a gay-straight alliance on campus, having highly visible resources for LGBT students, and including LGBT issues in the curriculum.

"I actually have seen things get better," Philp said. "Once teenagers are actually aware of the consequences of their actions, they are more likely not to use hurtful words or slang. ... After the administration, faculty, other students, and I at my high school addressed the issues of anti-gay harassment and bullying, the atmosphere at my school has been much more open and inviting for LGBTQ students."

"This has evolved into a different story than just an It Gets Better video," said Laub, referring to the popular YouTube video project that was started by columnist Dan Savage. "This is about new resources being invested. ... People in our own community finding out what they can do."

More information can be found at http://www.makeitbetterproject.org [1] and http://www.writeyourprincipal.com [2].

http://ebar.com/news/article.php?sec=news&article=5232 [3]
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