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Four lessons to create a safe school

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California Teachers Association
By Dina Martin

Myndi Hardgrave is proud to be the faculty adviser for the Gay-Straight Alliance — but she prays for the day when the club can be put to rest at Hanford West High School.

“Gay-Straight Alliances should not exist,” she says. “It is sad and shameful that in 2011 our society is still so ignorant and closed-minded that a GSA is necessary to protect our students.”

Still, GSAs are one of four key factors that the nationwide Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) identifies as helping to create safe schools for GLBT students. The other three are an explicit anti-bullying training with emphasis on sexual orientation and gender identity, the presence of supportive staff, and curriculum that includes GLBT figures.

At a time when GLBT students have killed themselves after relentless bullying at school, these four factors become critical to a healthy school culture. Educators who work on these issues know that once you make schools safer for GLBT students, you’ve made it safer for everyone.

Lesson One: Establish a Gay-Straight Alliance

Hanford West’s GSA now draws some 30 students to its meetings and is actively involved in campus and community events. There is a markedly different atmosphere at the school now, compared to six years ago when two gay students approached Hardgrave with a request to be the GSA adviser.

At the time, the English teacher had to do some soul-searching before agreeing to the students’ appeal. After all, although she is gay, Hardgrave hadn’t come out to the school community and was resistant to doing so. She also worried that the students would be made targets. Despite her concerns, Hardgrave realized saying no to the students “went against everything I stood for.” So she said yes.

As she predicted, the action unleashed a firestorm in the conservative Central Valley town. The religious community organized protests, students were verbally attacked, and the Gay-Straight Alliance became fodder for the local media for weeks on end. A parade of critics filled the school board meetings to denounce the GSA as promoting deviant behavior and demand that it be banned.
Hardgrave also took heat from some of her colleagues and the community — even receiving a death threat. In the end, both the administration and the school board defended the club's right to exist. Six years later, Hardgrave not only continues to advise the GSA, she has set up a "safe zone" in her classroom for GLBT students, and she is known all over the campus as the "go-to" person when GLBT issues arise.

"Almost without fail, if the complaint gets back to me, I work with the administration to make sure it gets addressed," Hardgrave says.

Establishing a GSA at Hanford West High was a crucial element in changing the school environment — as rocky as its beginnings were.

Founded in 1998, Gay-Straight Alliances are student-run clubs that provide a safe place for students to meet, support one another, talk about issues related to sexual orientation, and work to end homophobia. From its birth in the San Francisco Bay Area, the GSA Network [1] has expanded nationwide, and now includes more than 800 GSAs in California high schools and middle schools. While school faculty like Hardgrave serve as advisers, the energy and initiative behind the clubs come from students.

"We provide an environment that is safe for the gay community," says GSA President Veronica Felts, a senior at Hanford West High who felt compelled to join the club as a straight ally after the bruising Proposition 8 anti-gay-marriage initiative.

Felts had never been politically active before, but she became passionate about the issue and determined to stand up for GLBT students on campus.

"You still hear students saying 'That's so gay,' but I've found that when you call them on it, they apologize," she says. Still, Felts would like to see more teachers step forward to establish "safe zones" in their classrooms, where GLBT youth can go to find support. That too, she says, makes a difference.

Kirsten Barnes, a counselor at Hanford West and president of the Hanford Secondary Education Association, agrees that the atmosphere on campus has become more tolerant in the six years since the GSA was established, but the work isn't done.

"A lot of times, it's a matter of educating the teachers as well. We still have to let teachers know that name-calling is unacceptable, and they have a responsibility to stop it when they hear it," she says.

A similar campaign is under way at Menlo-Atherton High School in Menlo Park where this year the Gay-Straight Alliance has teamed with the school's Peer Education Team in a yearlong GLBTQ (the Q is for Questioning) awareness campaign that includes fliers and posters around the campus, and will culminate with a training of faculty and staff by students.

GSA President Max Philp took to the school's public address system on Oct. 11, National Coming Out Day, to come out to the entire student body. He told the school: "I feel that the

closeted, insecure and questioning students at Menlo-Atherton need to know that it is okay to be whoever you want to be. There are people who will love you for who you are."

Lesson Two: Provide anti-bullying training emphasizing GLBT issues

While a number of school districts offer some professional development in GLBT issues, teachers in the San Juan Unified School District in Carmichael, outside of Sacramento, have been at it for 10 years already. As part of its social justice commitment, the San Juan Teachers Association (SJTA) offers a three-day, 18-hour training titled "Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning Issues." The training consists of films, discussions, journaling, an overview of the law AB 537, and hearing from a panel of GLBT students. Through the discussions and self-examination that takes place, teachers report they are able to more deeply understand issues that confront GLBT students.

"We [SJTA] have been the driving force behind this training," says SJTA President Steve Duditch. "But we also have a great partnership with the district. We are now developing programs together. No one wants to be out of compliance with the law and face a lawsuit."

Like many educators, Duditch believes the training is about more than legal compliance; it's about tolerance, acceptance, respect, and creating a positive learning environment.

"I want my class to be a safe space for everyone," says Elaina Zarka, who recently began her teaching career at Sylvan Middle School. "I want my students to be comfortable and engaged, as opposed to being afraid to come to school."

Although she had previously talked to her students about bullying, Zarka hadn't approached GLBT issues with them until she took the training.

"I decided to change gears one day, so I led a discussion about GLBT bullying. I was able to reiterate that it's not about sex or sexuality, it's about respect," she says, noting that the students appreciated having the classroom discussion.

Lessons learned in the training translate into some very practical skills as well, especially in an area that has demonstrated against gay rights.

As a culminating exercise, for example, participants sat across from each other posing and answering questions they had generated, including: "Are you going to teach gay issues?" "Why do we have to share the locker with a gay guy?" and "Do you promote the homosexual agenda in class?" The teachers then switch places and attempt answering other sensitive questions.

"We want them to practice in a casual atmosphere so that they will feel comfortable when they encounter these questions from students and parents," explains Vicky Velasco, a middle school teacher who is leading the exercise.

The answer that many of the teachers come back to is that ultimately, they are obligated to follow California law, and under AB 537, students (and teachers) in a public school cannot be discriminated against based on sexual orientation or gender identity. "The bottom line is that we are here to educate our students, and we can't do that if they feel unsafe or unwanted in our classrooms," Velasco says.

Lesson Three: Develop the presence of supportive staff

Although middle schools are often thought of as ground zero for name-calling and bullying, it's not the case everywhere. Eleanor Evans, a social studies teacher at Millennial Middle School, a science, technology, engineering and mathematics magnet school in the San Diego Unified School District, shares that she hasn't heard a slur since she started school this year — while it had been rampant when she taught high school last year.
"Last year, I heard words every single day. It was shocking," she says. "This year, I haven't heard a racial slur or GLBT name-calling. It's almost an unreal world, but I think it's because of the administration working with the staff. It's a staff-driven school, and we make the decisions. Our school is extremely diverse, and we teach respect for each other from the first day."

Evans is the San Diego Education Association representative to the district's Safe Schools Task Force, which is working to develop a comprehensive policy on harassment as well as a district-wide program.

"I think educators are taking this more seriously. There's more awareness," Evans says. "Educators, whether it's the bus driver or classroom teacher, must be aware and attentive. They know what's right and what's wrong. When they hear something, they need to stop it."

To be sure, educators in the San Diego school district are taking their responsibility seriously. Some make it clear at the beginning of the year that they have a zero-tolerance policy toward name-calling. At the same time, when it does occur, many use it as a "teachable moment."

Myndi Hardgrave at Hanford West High has tried different approaches when students use offensive language.

"I was in a class when one boy turned to another and said, 'You're so gay,'" she recalls. Hardgrave immediately addressed the comment without getting angry. She asked her student to rephrase what he was trying to say without being hurtful.

Menlo-Atherton High School English teacher and GSA adviser Stacey Woodcock, who is a member of the Sequoia Union Teachers Association, also speaks up when she catches students using offensive language.

"I'll say my sister is gay and I have many LGBT friends, and it can be really hard for people who are gay to hear 'gay' used as a putdown," Woodcock says. "I aim for compassion and understanding, rather than reprimanding."

Teachers of every orientation know that GLBT bullying is an issue they must address in order to create a presence of supportive staff in a school. Other teachers maintain it is an important lesson for self-identified GLBT teachers to come out at school so that students can see that being GLBT is normal.

"It was scary at first, but I feel it is important to take that risk," says Melissa Bryden, who teaches math at Del Campo High School in Carmichael and was one of the leaders in the San Juan Teachers Association training. "I think it's important to break down stereotypes. I find that kids look up to me, and know that they have someone to turn to."

Coming out, of course, is a personal decision, and easier for some than others. Hardgrave acknowledges the difficulty in a more conservative area.

"In the Central Valley, most educators who are gay, even right now, have a fear of coming out of the closet. Even today, in this entire district, I'm the only one who is out," she says.

Hardgrave doesn't make a formal announcement to her students, but brings it up when she talks to students about offensive language that won't be tolerated in class. After that, it may come up in more casual references.
"I'm not preaching anything. I may refer to 'my girlfriend,' but I make it a normal part of my life," she says.

Hardgrave acknowledges that the atmosphere in schools today is much more tolerant than when she was in high school some 20 years ago, and this is largely due to societal changes. But now that there are more openly GLBT students on campus, there may even be more of a need for supportive teachers, counselors and education support professionals.

"There are a lot of gay students," Hardgrave says. "The fact that we're here, that I have a rainbow on my lanyard, and I walk around openly — I know it makes a difference to those students."

Lesson Four: Include GLBT figures in the curriculum

Students also need to see GLBT figures integrated into the curriculum to more fully develop a tolerant world view.

Many educators and schools are making use of specific GLBT anti-bullying curriculum in their classrooms. Through the work of NEA, GLSEN, the Human Rights Campaign and many other organizations, there are abundant materials available. Among them are resources through the Human Rights Campaign's Welcoming Schools program, which offers tools on embracing family diversity, avoiding gender stereotyping, and ending bullying and name-calling.

Including lessons in tolerance doesn't have to mean teaching an entirely new curriculum. Working with at-risk high school students at the Jack London Community Day School in Los Angeles, Edgar Angulo not only has found ways to infuse tolerance messages into his math, science and life-skills lessons, but includes GLBT figures as well. For example, during a math class, he may point out that it was a gay man, Alan Turing, who helped break the Nazi codes during World War II. He wants his GLBT and straight students to know there are prominent people in the world who happen to be gay.

Angulo, who is a member of United Teachers Los Angeles, has also worked to establish an atmosphere of tolerance in his classroom in other ways, including talking about the impact of slurs and being open about being gay.

"My work with these students is based on trust, so if I want them to open up to me, I need to open up to them. They see themselves as outcasts, and they began identifying with the same issues," he says. "It's taken awhile, but it's made a huge difference."

Of course, Angulo doesn't just focus on GLBT issues in his class, but brings in women and racial and ethnic groups as well.

"I think it's very important. We live in a diverse world and we run into all kinds of people. In my classroom there is a Rainbow flag, a Salvadoran flag, a Mexican flag," Angulo says. "The message is that we are all here, we're in a safe environment, and we're here to learn and to have fun."

http://www.cta.org/Professional-Development/Publications/Edu... [2]

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