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Health and Success for Young Men of Color

Aug. 18, 2011 ? Carolyn

Our state's future prosperity and health depends on all Californians having a fair chance to thrive and succeed. However, the growing population of young men of color faces poor health and well-being outcomes at a disproportionately higher rate than their white counterparts. The proliferation of severe school disciplinary measures disproportionately pushes boys and young men ofcolor out of our public education system.

To tackle the health and educational disparities facing young men of color the California Assembly Select Committee on the Status of Boys & Men of Color in California convened the first of several hearings yesterday. The effort, supported by The California Endowment, aims to advance innovative solutions to the barriers facing young men of color.

I was honored to testify at this historic convening about the unique challenges facing gay, bisexual, and transgender young men of color. I appreciate that the Committee is committed to including the needs of gay, bisexual, and transgender young men of color in the broader discussion about boys and young men of color in California. I was also inspired to hear so many courageous young men speak about the difficulties they have faced. Watch the hearing here [1] (my testimony starts about 30 seconds in), or read my testimony below:

Testimony by Carolyn Laub
Assembly Select Committee on the Status of Boys and Men of Color
August 17, 2011
Sacramento, CA

Good afternoon, Chairman Swanson and members of the Committee. My name is Carolyn Laub, and I'm the Founder and Executive Director of Gay-Straight Alliance Network. GSA Network operates a network of more than 850 Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in California high schools and middle schools, representing more than ten thousand students, the majority of whom are young people of color.

I want to thank you for the opportunity to address the committee today on such an important topic, and I will be focusing my remarks on the unique needs of gay, bisexual, and transgender

(GBT) boys and young men of color in California in our schools. **These young people are growing up in a culture that stigmatizes them, peers who harass them, families who often reject them, schools that fail to protect them from harassment and violence, and a set of policies and systems that discriminate against them. Yet they are also incredibly resilient with enormous potential to be leaders in California. Our vision for a California in which all young people can thrive and succeed must include gay, bisexual, and transgender young men of color.**

All youth need strong, effective, and safe schools. For gay, bisexual, and transgender young men of color, the barriers to learning and success in school are often compounded by experiences of pervasive bullying and violence based on sexual orientation and gender identity. This has serious consequences on students? health, mental health, and academic achievement. Data from the California Healthy Kids Survey found that students who are harassed based on actual or perceived sexual orientation are more than three times as likely to carry a weapon to school, more than twice as likely to report depression, more likely to report low grades and more than three times as likely to report missing school in the last 30 days because they felt unsafe.

The California Safe Schools Coalition?s research found that LGBT students of color who are harassed based on both race and sexual orientation are more likely to report feeling unsafe at school. **Gay, bisexual, and transgender boys of color, specifically, were more likely to report being bullied at school for not being ?as ?masculine? as other guys? compared to their white counterparts.**

Tragically, we?ve lost many youth to suicide after suffering relentless bullying in their schools. Of the many high profile stories of such tragedies in the past year, the vast majority have been young men of color who were openly gay or perceived as gay or gender non-conforming. **Perhaps the most horrific reminder of the cost of unsafe schools and rampant bullying is the story of Ventura County 8th grader Larry King, an openly gay and gender non-conforming young man of color, who was shot in the head during 1st period by a classmate. The trial of Larry?s killer is wrapping up this week, and much of the testimony offered has implied that Larry was to blame for his own death because of the way he dressed and behaved.**

The experiences of bullying and violence that leave GBT young men of color at an increased risk of not graduating or surviving high school are further compounded by harsh and punitive school discipline practices which disproportionately push young men of color out of the public education system and into the juvenile justice system. An analysis of the national Add Health Survey found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth were significantly more likely to be suspended from school or face other punitive sanctions from school officials or law enforcement, compared to heterosexual youth. Thus, GBT young men of color are most likely to be pushed out of school. Furthermore, if they face disciplinary action from the school, they may be outed to their parents or guardians and face the additional risk of family rejection, which could land them on the streets.

In terms of health disparities, the CDC reports that sexual minority youth face challenges such as stigma, discrimination, family disapproval, social rejection, and violence that put them at

increased risk for certain negative health outcomes such as HIV, syphilis, and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). For example, between 2006 and 2009, HIV incidence increased 34% among young MSM and 48% among young, black MSM.

The good news is that all of these barriers to young men?s health and success can be removed. So, how do we start?

1. Support the growth of GSA clubs

First, we know Gay-Straight Alliance clubs make schools safer and give youth leadership opportunities. GSA Network supports GSA clubs in more than 55% of the state?s public high schools in urban and rural parts of California. For many GBT young men of color in rural parts of the state, this is the only positive affirmation of LGBT people for many miles around. We need the support to expand access to GSA clubs to all students throughout the state.

2. Enact, implement, and enforce anti-bullying policies

Secondly, strong anti-bullying policies are essential, but they must be implemented and enforced. They need to be supported by an investment in professional development of teachers and school staff, including school counselors and mental health providers. And we need the state to invest funds to increase the California Department of Education?s oversight and enforcement of California?s safe schools laws.

3. Address the push-out crisis and school-to-prison pipeline

But our anti-bullying policies in California need to break the cycle of punitive school discipline that pushes young men of color, and especially GBT young men of color, into the juvenile justice system. Schools need to teach students how to improve their behavior without resorting immediately to suspension or expulsion. A return to such common-sense discipline will help young people learn from their mistakes and remain part of a nurturing school community.

4. Protect the FAIR Education Act

Additionally, research shows that when students learn about LGBT people in the classroom, rates of bullying decrease by half. California recently enacted the FAIR Education Act, which requires contributions of LGBT people be included in social studies and history, alongside the contributions of people of color and women. But the law has come under attack and we need to protect it so that all young people, including GBT young men of color, see themselves reflected in history classes.

5. Ensure schools provide access to comprehensive and non-biased sexual health prevention education and health services

Furthermore, we need the state to increase funding for the California Department of Education?s oversight of our state?s comprehensive sex education law, which requires schools to provide sexual health education that is unbiased and medically accurate. Schools must end heterosexist bias in our sex ed classes. GSA Network recently received funding from the CDC for our Safe &

Healthy LGBT Youth Project, which will pilot a model program for helping school districts such as SFUSD and LAUSD create safe spaces for LGBTQ youth and improve access for LGBT youth, especially youth of color, to sexual health services.

6. Collect data about sexual orientation and gender identity

Most of what is known about the educational and health disparities facing GBT young men of color comes from community surveys, and frankly, we don?t know that much. We need state-funded surveys such as the California Healthy Kids Survey, Youth Risk Behavior Survey, and California Health Interview Survey to include demographic questions about sexual orientation and gender identity so our public education and public health systems can adequately identify and then address education and health disparities based on sexual orientation and gender identity that compound racial inequities.

Students have a right to be safe and supported at school for exactly who they are. And parents deserve to know that their kids are going to school in a respectful environment where they are nurtured to reach their full potential, have the tools and resources to thrive academically, and have the information and access they need to remain healthy. Hopefully, the solutions I?ve outlined will help California take a step in the right direction for improving the lives of gay, bisexual, and transgender young men of color. Thank you.?

Source URL: http://www.gsanetwork.org/news/blog/health-and-success-young-men-color/08/18/11

Links:
[1] http://www.calchannel.com/channel/viewVideo/2926