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It Doesn?t Inevitably Get Better: Implement the FAIR Education Act

On Jan. 10, a 16-year-old in Kern County brought a gun to his school and shot a student who had been bullying him. According to several reports, the bullied student had been suspended the previous year for making a ?hit list? of his tormentors.

It?s time to admit that for the young people in Kern County?or anywhere else?it doesn?t inevitably get better.

In fact, our reactionary efforts to curb bullying and school violence often make it worse, particularly for students in under-resourced schools. When something terrible happens, we look for quick and easy answers. ?Zero tolerance for violence.? ?Lock the bullies up.? ?Throw the bad apple out.?

But what kind of lesson does that teach young people? Do we really want students learning that their peers are merely problems that can and should be thrown away? And when students are lashing out violently after enduring relentless abuse themselves, the ?one bad apple? approach is not going to work. Simply suspending or expelling a student who snaps and skips a class or throws a punch or even makes a ?hit list? just further isolates that student?and allows administrators to ignore the factors that contributed to the student?s behavior.

Creating safer schools is a complex puzzle that requires a variety of strategies at every step along the way. Once the conversation narrows down to selecting punishments for rule-breakers and harsher school discipline, it?s already too late. But just because school bullying and violence can?t be solved by a single slogan, law or promise to ?get tough? does not mean that we ignore the problem. It means we pick a puzzle piece and get started now, because there?s a lot to do. We need adequate school funding, trained school staff to intervene when bullying occurs, mental health support. And we need to create a school culture of respect and safety to end the institutional marginalization of students because of their race, gender identity, sexual orientation or disability.

In particular, that last point?ending school exclusion of certain groups of people?gets at one of

the key issues we need to address if we?re going to end bullying: the lessons we teach our young people. We cannot expect youth to treat each other as equal if the school system itself does not. Bullying starts with what young people are taught, so if they?re taught to value some groups of people more than others, that shows up in their behavior towards their peers.

That?s why California has long required schools to teach about the contributions of women, people of color and other historically underrepresented groups. In 2011, California updated those education guidelines to ensure that along with those groups, social studies classes do not exclude the roles and contributions of LGBT people and people with disabilities.

LGBTQ students and students with disabilities face some of the highest rates of bullying. They?re also disproportionately suspended and expelled from school, along with students of color, showing that punitive discipline is not the solution to bullying and often hurts the youth it seeks to protect. Excluded from history, tormented by classmates and disproportionately kicked out of school, LGBT students and people with disabilities are often taught at school to feel worthless.

With the enactment of California?s FAIR Education Act, students can learn that these marginalized groups have actually made incredible contributions to this country?s history. They can learn that an openly gay man, Bayard Rustin, played a key role in the African-American Civil Rights movement?but that because of his identity, he was kept out of the spotlight and out of the history books. Students can learn that Americans with disabilities courageously fought for rights and protections under U.S. law, marking an important chapter in legislative history.

The FAIR Education Act gives California a tremendous advantage in the struggle to curb bullying. We just need to use it.

The student stories in GSA Network?s newest research report, Implementing Lessons that Matter: The Impact of LGBTQ-Inclusive Curriculum on Student Safety, Well-Being and Achievement, give a youth voice to the sobering statistics we all know. Stories such as this: ?There are four boys who keep making lesbian jokes and they ridicule her to an extent where she can hear but the teacher can?t. They know it hurts, and she doesn?t want to go to that class anymore, and she might not graduate because she can?t focus, she can?t do her work.?

Students who are or are perceived to be lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender face increased harassment and hostility at school. They are more likely to report being in a fight in school, being threatened or injured by a weapon in school, missing school due to feeling unsafe, lower grades and a number of mental health disparities and other challenges.

Slurs, verbal harassment and exclusion are so common that students in focus groups seemed to view them as a normal, expected part of their everyday school experience?while still describing their schools as ?safe.? One student describes her school as ?pretty liberal and good about these things,? but talks about her friend needing to transfer and be home-schooled because he faced such extreme bullying.

These same youth believe that education is the key to changing this violent reality. The problem isn?t just one or two bullies assaulting LGBTQ students; it?s an entire student body that is unaware and uneducated.

?The majority of the student body probably does not consciously make an effort to accept everyone and to include?to think about everyone individually?and so they don?t [accept or include them],? a student said in the report. ?It?s not necessarily that they are trying to make it an unsafe place, it is the fact that they are unaware, and the fact that they are uneducated about those things, so they don?t realize what they say offends and hurts other people.?

Research backs these students up. Studies show that inclusive lessons?factual lessons of the historical roles played by diverse groups of people?make schools safer. Students, research and common sense all tell us that school climates improve when students know more about their peers? identities than the stereotypes learned in the hallways.

The research for Implementing Lessons that Matter primarily took place in California after the passage of the FAIR Education Act. Using a mix of quantitative and qualitative research, the report lifts up the experiences of students, documents various paths to implementation of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons and their subsequent impact on student feelings of safety in three different schools and examines lessons learned from earlier efforts to implement ethnic studies curricula.

The report confirms: LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in schools contribute to safer school climates. But, for the most part, these lessons are not being taught.

Even after the FAIR Education Act passed, and even working with teachers who were eager to comply with the new law, researchers found barrier after barrier preventing the implementation of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons. Teachers lack the resources, professional development and administrator support they need.

Many of these barriers connect to the larger puzzle of school safety?teachers who have not been trained in how to respond to bullying and anti-LGBTQ slurs feel unprepared to bring up LGBTQ historical figures in their classrooms. Districts that are underfunded and understaffed cannot provide the guidance and resources that teachers need.

The report translates these findings about barriers to LGBTQ-inclusive lessons into a roadmap for successful and effective implementation. Above all, a school-wide approach to curricular inclusion is the most successful. When students have LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in multiple classes, they are more likely to feel that the school as a whole is safe and supportive.

While lack of administrator support was a key barrier for some, the presence of clear administrator support in one school made a big, positive difference at several points in that school?s implementation.

It doesn?t all come down to administrators, though. Interviews with advocates involved in the push for ethnic studies taught us that community collaboration with stakeholders can be key.

Every member of the school community has a role to play, and implementation works best when all are engaged.

Since the research was conducted, we?ve seen implementation of the FAIR Education Act move forward in several schools, often through the paths the report found successful. But there is still significant work left before LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are a reality in every California school.

How can all of us make sure LGBTQ-inclusive lessons happen in our schools? The report includes an implementation action guide that contains clear steps for state policymakers, state education administrators, local district officials, teachers, students and community members.

For teachers, FAIREducationAct.com contains a great selection of curricular resources put together by Our Family Coalition, GSA Network and other organizations. GSA Network has also created a FAIR Education Act hub for youth, teachers and others looking to take action. This includes downloadable presentations that youth can use to educate their GSA or their administrators about the law, LGBT lesson guides, data and research, advice for talking to teachers and a survey. Through the FAIR/unFAIR survey, students, teachers and administrators can report whether or not their school is in compliance with the FAIR Education Act. With that information, we can lift up successes for other districts to follow and determine the schools that need more education.

Of course, LGBTQ- and disability-inclusive lessons are not the sole solutions to bullying or violence in schools. Bullying is an incredibly complicated issue, and we need a variety of strategies to honestly tackle it. From investing in our schools to training staff to intervene when bullying occurs, school safety is a large and complex puzzle.

But we can?t be stymied by that complexity. It must inspire us to take action where we can, to seek out every resource available to us. And when we find a strategy that works?as we have in California?we have no excuse not to use it.

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