

Michigan

Creating Safe Environments for Sexual Minority Youth

PROBLEM OVERVIEW

Many educators and administrators in Michigan school districts request information and technical assistance on creating school environments that are physically and emotionally safe for all students including sexual minority students i.e., students who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ).

Sexual minority youth often experience harassment, disapproval, social isolation, and sexual violence which can make them more likely to use substances, engage in risky sexual behaviors, and attempt suicide; and less likely to seek health care or see their own long-term health as a priority. HIV prevention activities are more likely to be effective if they take into account the context in which risk behaviors occur, which for youth means confronting the challenges they face at school.

When 6,000 middle and high school students around the U.S. were asked about their experiences at school, almost all gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender students said they were harassed at school, more than half felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and almost a third skipped a day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe. Sex education programs that exclude information about sexual orientation or ignore issues in the lives of sexual minority youth may not be effective in preventing HIV transmission among those students. HIV infection rates in Michigan are increasing at an alarming rate, particularly among young black men who have sex with men.

PROGRAM/ACTIVITY DESCRIPTION

In direct response to requests from school districts the Michigan Department of Education convened a statewide workgroup, Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth, supported by research documenting the connection between unsafe school environments and risk of HIV. The workgroup includes individuals representing intermediate and local school districts, parent organizations, community-based organizations, homeless and runaway agencies, AIDS service organizations, higher education, young people, and other key stakeholders.

Using the model created by Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth, training and support for school personnel in the district is provided. The Michigan Creating Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth statewide initiative is sustained with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Division of Adolescent and School Health.

PROGRAM/ACTIVITY IMPACT

This project addresses the specific needs of school staff and students to give and receive culturally competent HIV prevention messages.

Training has been provided to over a thousand participating teachers and staff in 196 schools. A fifth revision of the guide *A Silent Crisis: Creating Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth* which is the basis for the training course is nearly complete. The guide has been disseminated to more than 1750 people across Michigan and in twenty one other states.

A workshop provided at the state homeless conference in September 2009 reached many liaisons with needed knowledge about sexual minority youth issues and how to connect young people to supportive resources and services, widening the reach of this important effort.

To communicate the important initiative message to school administrators, Michigan Department of Education staff wrote an article, *School Climate and Educational Achievement: Why Addressing Anti-Gay Bullying is Good for All Students* which appeared in the October 2009 Michigan Association of School Administrators' Journal disseminated to all Michigan school superintendents.

Training participants confirm that this presentation is relevant to their work and highlight the value of continuing to offer the workshop. High demand for the workshops and consistently strong attendance indicate that the training is meeting a need. Many participants identified specific steps they plan to take as a result of the training, such as reviewing and changing internal policies to assure inclusion of sexual orientation and gender identity, advocating for an existing school LGBTQ group and developing an action plan to address this issue in the school district.

Comments on the value of the training by participants:

- **From a transgender youth & member of the Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth work group**, *"I want to thank the Michigan Department of Education for all the work you've done to protect kids like me. It really means everything to know that there's someone out there fighting for us."*
- **From Kathleen Straus, President, Michigan State Board of Education**, *"Too often sexual minority youth face bullying and harassment in the school setting which is a significant barrier to their academic achievement. As a member (and president) of the Michigan State Board of Education, it is a part of my responsibility to adopt policies to assist schools in creating a school climate that is welcoming and challenging for all students. The Silent Crisis resource guide provides educators with valuable information to assist them in working with sexual minority youth and ensuring a positive school environment for all students."*

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