



DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA
PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Office of the Chief Academic Officer

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A Plan to Create an Inclusive School Community

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Office of Youth Engagement

Table of Contents

Section	Page
Introduction	3-4
LGBTQ School Liaisons	5
Capacity Building for School-Based Administrators and Staff	
• Principal Engagement	5-6
• Leadership Development of Key Staff	6
• School-based professional development	6-7
School-wide Promotion of Positive Behavior	
• Safe Space campaign	7
• Gay-Straight Alliances	7
• Improving access to resources	8
• Advisory	8
• Unisex Accommodations	8
Maximizing Community Resources	8-9
Creating an Inclusive Work Environment	9
Family and Community Engagement	
• Awareness Campaign	10
• Skill Building Campaign	11
Evaluation and Sustainability	11
Steering Committee	12
References	12

Introduction

According to the 2009 National School Climate Survey conducted by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), nearly 9 out of 10 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students reported experiencing harassment in the past year. Nearly 19% reported being physically assaulted in the past year because of their gender expression. We know that harassment affects students' academic performance, with GLSEN reporting that LGBT students experiencing more harassment had lower grade point averages than students less often harassed. We also know that nearly nine percent of high school students in the District of Columbia self-identify as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey). Thousands of youth each day must face risks to their physical and emotional well-being at a much higher rate than their straight peers.

According to DC's 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS), 31% of high school students who identified as lesbian, gay, or bisexual reported being bullied at least once on school property in the previous year—nearly twice the percentage of their heterosexual-identifying peers. That same year, 8.4% of all high school students reported being threatened or hurt because someone thought they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual. In DC high schools in 2007, the proportion of gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth who said they attempted to commit suicide in the past year was nearly four times larger than heterosexual youth (32.6% compared to 8.6%, 2007 YRBS). Recent research in the *Journal of School Health* indicates that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender-related bullying or victimization at school puts students at greater risk for mental health issues and STDs later in life (Russell et al., 2011). Questioning students, those youth who are going through a process of questioning their or are unsure of their sexual orientation, are also at risk for harassment at school.

In response to these data, as well as to the recent suicides of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ) students across the country, the District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS) has developed this plan to ensure that lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning students, teachers, staff, and families are safe, happy, welcomed and respected in our schools. The plan is inclusive of LGBTQ-identifying staff and families, as they also contribute to the diversity of DCPS. Through limited surveying, school staff members identified a need for greater inclusivity, and LGBTQ parents and guardians of DCPS students need to feel that their voices are heard and they are part of a welcoming and safe community in their child's school.

DCPS LGBTQ Steering Committee

In January 2011, DCPS's Office of Youth Engagement formed the LGBTQ Steering Committee of school administrators, school staff, parents, community and national experts, and students to guide DCPS's develop of this plan. DCPS's Central Office contributed representatives from the Office of Youth Engagement, Office of Human Capital, Office of Transformation Management, Office of Special Education, Office of Teaching and Learning and the Office of Family and Public Engagement. Schools were represented by students, administrators, teachers, social workers, counselors and parents/guardians from several DCPS schools. Additionally, experts from national and local organizations participated in the committee to offer a broader perspective to our work and offer identified best practices. This committee met originally in January to begin planning this initiative and review previous feedback from informal, stakeholder listening sessions DCPS held with administrators, school staff, DCPS students and LGBTQ parents. The committee has met as a whole monthly since January in order to identify needs and gaps in current DCPS programming, make recommendations and

prepare action plans to be incorporated by DCPS into this plan. The work of this Steering Committee should be brought to the broader DCPS community for additional feedback. A complete list of the Steering Committee can be found at the end of the plan.

Incorporating Best Practices for Schools Into Current Initiatives

The Society for Research on Child Development outlines four practices to address LGBTQ health and safety in schools which we have incorporated into this plan; including:

- development of school anti-bullying and discrimination policies that address actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity or expression;
- train staff to build their capacity to address and intervene when harassment occurs;
- presence of school based support groups or clubs such as Gay Straight Alliances; and
- presence of LGBTQ role models in school curricula and other resources (Russell et al., 2010).

Through administrator capacity building as well as capacity building of school-based staff, DCPS will create a critical group of adults in every building who understand the needs of LGBTQ students and families and will establish an inclusive school culture. We have begun by training our school-based counselors, social workers, and health teachers on sensitivity, gender roles and identity and sexual orientation. This training occurs as part of capacity building assistance targeted to specific schools on sexual health issues affecting sexual minority youth. To address bullying, we have worked to provide consequences for inappropriate behavior through the discipline policy and to provide interventions to change the overall climate in the school. We have worked to train teachers to identify, prevent and act quickly to stop bullying and to support students who experience it. With the support of the Steering Committee, this work has been incorporated into the development of this comprehensive plan to build on our current work in order make each school environment healthy and safe for every member of the school community. DCPS will work with school teams individually to implement this plan and tailor it to their school's strengths. The Steering Committee will monitor and evaluate the plan's implementation.

DCPS is committed to welcoming all families into our schools, to foster a strong sense of community among families, and to help families engage fully in their children's education. We have a responsibility to ensure that every one of our students feels safe, accepted, and nurtured and that all of our staff work in a safe and inclusive environment at all times. Through these efforts, we can truly ensure that students not only feel supported, but that they develop into the healthy, happy young adults they all have the potential to become.

In order to support this work, DCPS will begin to explore opportunities for additional resources and funding as a key part of this plan. Some of these initiatives will require additional funding to implement.

School Champions: Investing in LGBTQ School Liaisons

At the middle and high school level, DCPS should explore designating LGBTQ school liaisons to implement components of the plan at the school level and maintain a consistent level of activity. This program would first be piloted in a limited number of secondary schools, with further implementation across all secondary schools later. Through an application process, LGBTQ school liaisons would be school staff who:

- Attend regular professional development that includes discussions of policy, health awareness, resources and upcoming events
- Disseminate educational information
- Inform staff and parents about upcoming activities
- Coordinate LGBTQ school-based events regularly

As a part of this plan, DCPS will recruit school staff on a voluntary basis, develop the application and job description, and begin recruiting liaisons. Long term, DCPS will explore funding to provide compensation to liaisons for their work.

Capacity Building for School Based Administrators and Staff

Creation of a positive and inclusive school culture is essential to the success of this plan, and we know that at the school level the tone is set at the top. Leadership support of our LGBTQ community and of school-based programming and trainings is therefore vital in order for our schools to be welcoming and inclusive, as well as mindful of the requirements of the DC Human Rights Act and DCPS's non-discrimination policy. The plan includes capacity building for school-based staff, starting with the principals and other school administrators. DCPS should plan to develop a comprehensive professional development plan addressing the needs of students in all grade levels in all DCPS schools. The focus at the elementary level will be general bullying and gender issues, and the focus at the secondary level will be anti-LGBTQ bias.

Principal Engagement

In order to encourage administrator participation and investment in LGBTQ programming, DCPS should engage principals through large and small group professional development. Engagement of principals will begin with a screening of the *Bullied* documentary during scheduled professional development, such as the Summer Leadership Academy. Given the importance of education for and advocacy by school leadership, this screening will serve as a way to set the expectation for administrator support and initiate discussions around LGBTQ bullying and school culture both within and between schools. *Bullied* is a documentary that will be particularly useful to initiate conversations with DCPS principals and administrators. Chronicling the near daily harassment experienced throughout middle and high school by a gay Wisconsin student, the film documents the actions he took to fight for his right to be safe at school and the consequences faced by both his principals and the school district for allowing the bullying to continue. This film is published by the Teaching Tolerance program at the Southern Poverty Law Center, and more information can be found at www.tolerance.org.

Administrators will be led in a discussion by key national educators about their school environments that will include an assessment of their school climate. It will also guide principals through the creation

of an action plan for their schools around use of the documentary with their staff as well as in their classrooms. Implementation of action plans will be followed up via smaller-group skill building sessions with principals at cluster meetings or meetings with instructional superintendents. DCPS will conduct regular follow ups with schools to ensure that action plans are being implemented, and offer continued and as-needed professional development for principals and technical assistance to schools implementing their action plan.

Leadership Development of Key Staff

School-level professional development should begin as a training of trainers (TOT) model for DCPS central-office staff and school-based designees, including the LGBTQ School Liaisons. DCPS and the training participants will then provide professional development workshops to teachers and other school staff. The objectives of this training are to improve the competency of school-based staff to address bias-based bullying and harassment, to build capacity of staff to understand the components of a safe school, raise awareness of available resources, and to familiarize them with the training modules below.

School-Based Professional Development

DCPS should plan for ongoing professional development on routine basis to members of the school community, building school capacity in the following areas:

1. *Communicating about LGBTQ issues:* This training would address how to communicate with youth around bullying as well as having other difficult conversations with youth around LGBTQ issues. It would include solid directives for staff around appropriate language.
2. *Building Safe and Inclusive Schools:* This training would include incorporating LGBTQ-friendly and diverse materials and educational resources into the schools and libraries and how to use them to their greatest potential. It would also include such topics as how to support students who would like to start a Gay-Straight Alliance or other type of diversity club in their school and how to make schools more inclusive and safe for LGBT-headed families.
3. *Gender 101:* This workshop, which would be offered to school staff and tailored to present to families, would include introducing language and terminology related to gender and gender identity/expression, defining terms related to gender identity and sexual orientation, techniques for breaking down gender barriers and looking at different ways people identify, discussing the use of gender-neutral terminology and language, and other topics as appropriate. The workshop would include how to appropriately address these topics at various age levels.
4. *Question, Persuade, Refer (QPR) Suicide Prevention:* QPR is a joint effort between the Department of Mental Health and DCPS to educate school-based staff about the warning signs of suicidal distress and what can be done to save a life. The objective of this training is for trained “gatekeepers” at each school to understand the nature and signs of depression and suicide behavior, increase staff capacity to identify youth at risk, and to respond effectively to youth in crisis. There is a component of this training addressing depression and suicide among LGBTQ youth, however, more is needed. The Trevor Project has a workshop that addresses the unique risk factors for LGBTQ youth and ways to promote resiliency through addressing the various environments that contribute to those risk factors. DCPS would collaborate with the Trevor Project to train QPR-trained staff on the Lifeguard Workshop, which focuses on reducing the risk of suicide for LGBTQ youth in particular.

5. *Accessing Community Resources:* This workshop would provide an overview of the resources available to LGBTQ youth and their families. School-based social workers would receive training on the resources available, how to refer, etc.
6. *DCPS's LGBTQ Policies and Guidelines:* All school-based administrators and staff should be made aware of the anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies adhered to by DCPS. Training of new administrators and new staff would incorporate these policies.

School-wide Promotion of Positive Behavior

Safe Space Campaign

Safe Space campaigns, such as those developed by GLSEN, provide a program of action for schools to take in order to create a safe and positive learning environment for every school. DCPS should explore training school staff on strategies to support LGBTQ students in their schools, including the use of highly visible stickers, posters and other materials that demonstrate their office or classroom as a safe and inclusive space for all students regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity. The objective of the DCPS Safe Space campaign would be the fostering of more positive relationships between students and teachers, which has been shown to decrease the reported number of school-related troubles.

DCPS should sponsor a district-wide branding contest at the elementary, middle, and high school levels to determine the branding design of the campaign. The winning design would be incorporated into a toolkit for schools and the Safe Space training. Each school principal would nominate one staff member, potentially the LGBTQ liaison, to be a part of this training and to bring the Safe Space toolkit back to their schools. That staff member would be responsible for marketing the Safe Space campaign within their schools, tailoring the campaign to their school's needs, and encouraging coworkers to participate in future trainings. The DCPS central office staff would be available for technical assistance as well as to encourage follow up and other activities within the school around creating a safe environment within the schools.

Gay-Straight Alliances

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) in schools provide a safety net for students during the coming out process, and a Safe Space to raise awareness about LGBTQ issues. GSAs are student-led groups made up of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning students as well as their allies. According to GLSEN, when there is a GSA in a school, there are fewer reported homophobic remarks, less harassment, fewer incidents of sexual orientation or gender identity-based bullying, and students are less likely to miss school due to feeling unsafe.

Additionally, DCPS should develop materials to support any student-led initiative to start a GSA in a school. This may include creating awareness in schools about the possibility of starting a GSA, arranging for students interested in starting one to visit other schools where there is an active GSA, and so on. Through the Principal and Educator Portals and through other direct communication with schools, DCPS Central Office should make clear to schools that students seeking to start GSAs should be encouraged and fully supported.

Improving Access to Resources

Many schools lack information about resources available to LGBTQ youth and how to access them. Often schools simply do not have access to resources or literature around LGBTQ topics, or there is a lack of diverse reading and other materials available in schools that reflect sexual minority youth and families.

Improving access to LGBTQ-related resources and curricula, integrating LGBTQ topics into the school curricula, and including relevant materials in school libraries would all increase the capacity of schools to provide students with comprehensive information. This should include encouraging schools to order publications from the recommended LGBT resources, such as those of the American Library Association, as well as other resources recommended by the Steering Committee. DCPS, then, should create a list of educational resources available to students. DCPS would partner with the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) and the Mayor's Office on LGBT Affairs to design and distribute their resource guide of LGBTQ youth services to DCPS schools (pending completion of the resource guide).

Advisory

Advisory may be an opportunity to forge stronger bonds between students and staff around LGBTQ issues. DCPS's advisory team will work to integrate LGBTQ-specific lessons and workshops into the Advisory curriculum and programming at the secondary level. Topics should include bullying, gender stereotyping, healthy relationships, and healthy decision making.

Unisex Accommodations

DCPS will explore establishing a written policy to guide schools in unisex accommodations that is consistent with the DC Human Rights Act. This may include encouraging schools to designate a unisex bathroom and changing room, and a written procedure for informing school staff and parents that such a space exists. School staff would be introduced to this policy through information sessions developed by DCPS.

Maximizing Community Resources

In order to strengthen the collaboration and support between DCPS schools and community based organizations, maximizing community resources also is an important part of this plan. This work, described above as well, should include working in collaboration with other agencies such as the Mayor's Office on LGBT Affairs and CFSA to create a resource guide that also is useful for school-based staff. This guide would detail resources in the community for school staff to refer and make connections for LGBTQ youth and their families, including information on the current programs and activities implemented by community organizations and the contact person at the organization. School staff would be trained on the use of this resource guide, which will also ideally be accessible online in a youth-friendly format and available in several languages.

Additionally, DCPS should disseminate a list of school liaisons to community based organizations to facilitate communication and explore the use of social networking sites to facilitate communication among school liaisons and the community. Community-based organizations would be given the opportunity to give presentations to schools on their resources and services at Back to School Nights

and other venues; and schools would be given a “menu” of professional development and training opportunities offered by community based organizations that they may choose for their school.

For evaluation purposes, referrals to community-based organizations by the schools would be tracked, ideally via an online tracking system.

Creating an Inclusive Work Environment

The health, wellness and safety of all DCPS staff, including staff identifying as LGBTQ, is also a top priority. DCPS staff identifying as LGBTQ should be able to decide to be “out” in the same manner as their straight colleagues, and LGBTQ-identifying students can benefit from being able to identify role models in school staff. DCPS should develop and implement very specific communications to school staff about the non-discrimination laws and policies already in place, including the consequences of harassment. Additionally, and in collaboration with the branding developed by the Safe Space Campaign, DCPS should initiate Office of Human Capital-sponsored LGBTQ events for the DCPS community.

DCPS should explore advertising events and integrating other information and resources for staff into a special section of the Human Resources (HR) newsletter devoted to LGBTQ issues. This would be part of a broader multi-media plan that should include:

- LGBTQ issues and events should be integrated into the DCPS HR website. In addition, the “I am DCPS” campaign currently on the DCPS website should begin to include LGBTQ staff; this current campaign may be integrated into a broader branding campaign. DCPS would also announce work and provide awareness and educational information through social media and other networking sites (i.e. Facebook).
- DCPS should develop recommended text for school handbooks to address LGBTQ issues. Revisions should include policies for making schools safe for LGBTQ staff. LGBTQ-welcoming and inclusive language, including language addressing gender-based bullying or stereotyping, should be incorporated into new staff orientation, as should information about DCPS policies and procedures for reporting harassment and discrimination. DCPS should implement forums and information sessions for staff to discuss appropriate language and behavior, allowing staff to confidentially express their concerns. A school-based survey of staff should be implemented to gather baseline data for evaluation purposes and to start conversations at the school level.
- For current staff, DCPS should explore developing video vignettes featuring short monologues by staff members; they would also include a review of current policies.

Family and Community Engagement

Parents play a key role in their child's health, development and wellness, and should be involved in making schools safe for LGBTQ students. According to the Family Acceptance Project at San Francisco State University, which studies how the reactions of families may affect their LGBTQ children, the health and wellness of LGBTQ youth should be addressed through the context of their families and not solely based on their individual circumstances or in the context of their peers (Ryan et al., 2010). When families accept their LGBTQ children - support their gender expression, proactively defend them against bullies, and express affection when their child comes out to them - the positive effects on the health and

wellness of their youth are profound. These "family accepting behaviors" by parents, caregivers, or guardians of LGBTQ youth help protect youth against risky behaviors including suicide, depression, and substance abuse. These behaviors are also reflected in higher levels of self-esteem, health, and social support for those LGBTQ youth (Ryan et al., 2010). Even a slight increase in accepting behaviors or decrease in rejecting behaviors can make important strides in decreasing the youth's risks for serious health problems such as suicide or HIV (Ryan et al., 2009). DCPS's focus on families should include building the skills of family members to better support and advocate for their LGBTQ-identifying children.

Another important part of the family engagement process should be targeted engagement of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender-headed families. DCPS schools should be a welcoming environment for all families, and LGBT-headed families in particular. Strategies to ensure that all families are welcomed and supported by our schools at all levels-by administrators, staff, students, and other families- are therefore essential to this plan.

Awareness Campaign

Families often are not aware of the unique risks to health and wellness that adolescents face today. From bullying at school and in cyberspace, to alcohol and drug use, to pregnancy and sexually transmitted disease risk, young people today have unprecedented challenges. Families should be made aware of these risks-including the particular risks to LGBTQ youth and to youth of LGBT-headed families-through various means, including:

- Distribution of relevant, parent-specific materials to families through posting on the DCPS website, distribution to all Family Engagement Coordinators and Parent and Family Resource Centers, distribution to Parent Teacher Associations and other parent groups, etc. They should also be made available to families in schools and meetings (e.g. Parent Teacher Conferences, Open Houses, Community Forums, etc.).
- Development of workshops for families regarding sexual health, inclusive of content concerning the higher risk-taking behavior associated with LGBTQ youth. The presentation would include information about local risk reduction resources available to families, including LGBT-headed families, particularly resources available within their school and by DCPS. The workshops could be offered at DCPS back to school nights, parent-teacher conference days, etc. They would address specifically issues of gender as well as sexual orientation, particularly at the elementary-school level, and will integrate the Family Acceptance Project research. Any part of these workshops could be tailored and expanded to specific audiences.
- As a part of other health education, bullying prevention, and resource development workshops offered to parents, DCPS would include LGBTQ family health and wellness and risk prevention information and data.
- The resource guide, workshops for parents and other community work would be announced on the DCPS website.
- DCPS would also promote events and provide educational information through social media/networking sites (e.g. Facebook).
- Pride Parade: DCPS staff, students, and family members would be invited to participate in the annual Pride Parade to demonstrate our support for our LGBTQ community.

- DCPS would develop a guide for schools to include diverse families in library materials and school curricula, including posting images of those families around the school, statements to the school community, other signage around the school, etc.
- As part of the evaluation component of this plan, DCPS families may be surveyed, particularly around gender stereotyping and inclusiveness in the schools.
- Improving staff capacity around working with LGBTQ-headed families would be a part of the overall professional development plan.

Skill Building Campaign

DCPS should also offer parents a variety of supports to increase their skills and knowledge around issues affecting LGBTQ youth, including:

- Workshops and individual guidance on helping guide parents/guardians through the coming-out process, including referrals to support groups, school mental health supports or other community-based agencies.
- Integrating “communicating with youth about difficult topics” workshops into regularly offered parent workshops.

Skill building and awareness workshops should be offered to families regularly.

Evaluation and Sustainability

DCPS should design an evaluation of each activity in order to track progress and measure outcomes.

The LGBTQ Steering Committee should continue to meet periodically to guide DCPS on implementation of this plan, including planning for beyond the first year of implementation. This should include planning for future funding opportunities and collaborations to further this work.

Steering Committee

- Students from Ballou STAY High School, Columbia Heights Education Campus, Dunbar High School, and Wilson High School
- Parents from Brent Elementary School, Oyster-Adams Education Campus, and Ross Elementary School
- Administrators and school staff from Ballou STAY High School, Deal Middle School, Maury Elementary School, McKinley Technology High School, Oyster-Adams Bilingual School and Wilson High School
- American Psychological Association
- Mayor's Office of GLBT Affairs
- Sexual Minority Youth Assistance League
- The Trevor Project
- U.S. Department of Education
- DCPS Office of Human Capital, Office of Family and Public Engagement, Office of Special Education, Office of Teaching and Learning, Office of Transformational Management, and Office of Youth Engagement

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