# Building Support for Schools that Openly Affirm the Diversity of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity

A Communications and Community Organizing Guide

### Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit is for parents, students, educators, researchers, and advocates who want to ensure broad community support for school programs and policies that address stigma or bias connected to sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. It is useful for anyone who may need to convince others of the merits of Gay-Straight Alliances, gender-neutral restrooms, and school lessons and bullying prevention programs that include people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

### What will I find in this toolkit?

In the following pages, you can share in the lessons that others like you have learned about influencing important decision makers and building public support for schools that openly affirm and support people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. It builds on research, public polling, and experiences from on-the-ground situations in communities where public attention has been focused on safe schools efforts. The first half of the toolkit is dedicated to communications and messaging, the second half to community organizing and building alliances.

### Who created this toolkit?

This toolkit was compiled from interviews and documents provided by many people and organizations committed to creating more positive, nurturing schools. With funding from the Gill Foundation, this guide was compiled and written by messaging and communications strategist Ryan Schwartz with editing and oversight by Debra Chasnoff, president of GroundSpark and its Respect for All Project.

This toolkit was developed as the culmination of a multi-year coordinated effort by some of the organizations listed below to leverage support for school district personnel facing opposition to school policies, programs, and lessons that are inclusive of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. This organizational network has provided on-the-ground communications and organizing advice, and helped cultivate allies to create more inclusive and supportive school learning environments. The strategies suggested in this toolkit are drawn from our experience in school districts across the United States and Canada.

Materials from the following organizations helped shape this toolkit:
Advocates For Youth
American Civil Liberties Union
Basic Rights Education Fund
Breakthrough Conversations Project
Center for Media Justice
Center for Story-based Strategy
Frameworks Institute
Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation
Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network
Goodwin Simon Strategic Research
GroundSpark's Respect for All Project
GSA Network
Human Rights Campaign's Welcoming Schools
Movement Advancement Project
The Task Force
Our Family Coalition
People For the American Way
Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States
Southern Poverty Law Center
The Trevor Project
Western States Center

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# Process: Building Support from Day One

Most school initiatives that openly affirm issues of sexual orientation and gender identity happen with broad support, but occasionally they can promote tension among community members. Every time such initiatives have sparked a backlash, it was because parents were not fully informed or aware of the programs. A lack of understanding acts like a vacuum and allows for the spread of misinformation, stereotypes, and fear that will motivate people to fight against safe schools efforts.

There is also a recipe for success. From day one of planning a school program or policy that affirms people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, include these four tactics to develop relationships and community support. Consider them just as important for long-term success as the content of lesson plans or policies.

**Collaborate**. There are many allies in your community, including school administrators, educators, faith leaders, parents/guardians, and members of the PTO/PTA. Strong collaborations can be formed by simply taking the time to sit down and talk together about why you are working to create an inclusive school. And remember that collaboration is a two-way street: ask questions and show that you are learning from diverse people and perspectives.

**Gather information and stories.** Parents and educators often don't know the realities of a school environment, and can be quick to dismiss safe schools efforts as not relevant to their families. You can help them develop a better connection to the issues by sharing real stories from your school. As part of collaborating, speak with teachers, parents, students, and guidance counselors about what they have observed and experienced. You may find it handy to keep a running list of stories and data that you can pull from at a later date.

**Build on shared values.** We all want our young people to be healthy, kind, accepting, loved, seen, and appreciated. Yet many people don't immediately associate these values with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender concerns. Use the messaging tools in this toolkit to make sure people see your work as an extension of their own values and interests.

**Communicate clearly and consistently.** When inclusion of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender in schools has been attacked, it has been fueled by misinformation—not by blind hate or bigotry. Be consistent with how you talk about your work and be concise. Paint a clear picture of what people can expect from your work, making any proposed lessons or materials available for everyone to view. The most successful advocates have treated the questions, doubts, and fears of people in their communities as opportunities to foster dialogue in respectful and inclusive ways.

# Words Matter

Human beings are by nature pattern makers; we are not blank slates. People evaluate new options by comparing them to similar concepts that they have logged in their memories and emotions. These mental structures shape how human beings understand reality, and do so in largely unconscious ways. We feel them as gut instincts.

If people get a gut instinct that evokes fear, distrust, or anger, no amount of logic, data, testimony, or information will change their minds. Underlying emotions drive people to vote in a certain way or support a certain policy. Clinical psychologist Drew Western says, "the political brain is an emotional brain," because gut instincts and the feelings they instill guide political decisions and judgments. Reason takes a back seat, serving to logically validate what people feel.

The following pages will help you build a strong emotional bridge with people who are undecided about their support for creating schools that openly affirm people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

# Connect to What People Care About

Efforts to create schools that openly affirm the diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity are often easily dismissed as being relevant only to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Most people do not identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Even for allies, it is difficult to articulate a strong personal investment in such concerns; policies that harm people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender may be unfair, but ultimately they appear to affect "someone else."

The strongest support for inclusive schools comes when people personally connect to the issue by seeing it as an extension of their own hopes and interests. You can make that connection by focusing on the common, deeply held values most people share. Since that connection has to be felt as a gut instinct, every word matters.

Here's a real-life example. These two quotes are from the same national news article concerning a California law that ensures the state's history lessons include people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender:

> *"History should be honest," the governor said in a statement Thursday. "This bill revises existing laws that prohibit discrimination in education and ensures that the important contributions of Americans from all backgrounds and walks of life are included in our history books."*
>
> *"The governor has trampled the parental rights of the fathers and mothers who don't want their children to be sexually brainwashed at school," said Randy Thomasson, president of SaveCalifornia.com, a conservative family group.*

Both quotes evoke a strong feeling and gut instinct; Governor Brown and Mr. Thomasson are smart communicators. What the governor said appeals to deeply held values shared by nearly everyone: honesty in history and non-discrimination in education. It evokes a gut instinct that is validating, sparking hope that the new law corrects a current injustice. Mr. Thomasson's quote, however, is designed to evoke fear and anger, associating history lessons with sex and indoctrination.

The good news is that research shows people react to hope and optimism with more long-term support than when they feel fear and anger. Use the governor's quote above as a guiding example of how to focus on commonly held values that create a strong feeling of affinity and hope.

# What Themes Have Successfully Built Support for Inclusive Schools?

Some themes have been particularly successful in building community support for safe schools. In addition to highlighting shared values, these themes also create a sense of urgency by talking about something negative that is happening now. Research shows that people are more likely to support a course of action if they feel that the status quo needs fixing.

- **Holding students back from success** – Putting students on a path for success is the essence of what school is supposed to be about. School environments where students can't learn, don't feel included, or feel threatened hold young people back from the participation and opportunities they need to be successful.

- **Exclusion** – Most people want to prevent excluding others from fully participating in school activities. This means making sure that students feel comfortable in class discussions, that families feel welcome at school events, and that facilities feel safe for everyone. Social science research shows that people have a strong negative reaction to actively excluding others in their community, a much stronger reaction than they have to the alternative message of thoughtfully including everyone.

- **Threat to well-being** – We all want our students to be healthy, safe, and appreciated. This means that nobody should be afraid to go to school. School environments that are full of harassment are dangers to the physical and mental health of everyone in them. Few students actually tell their parents about school harassment, so it is critical to help parents understand the realities of your school's environment with stories and observations.

- **Inaccurate information** – Ultimately, schools have a responsibility to teach the facts that are going to prepare students to have a productive life and contribute to society. Inaccurate or incomplete information keeps students from being prepared for their adult lives, threatening their health, jobs, and families.

# What Themes Have Threatened Work for Inclusive Schools?

Efforts to create schools that are inclusive of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people and issues have been thwarted by divisive messages that position the interests of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender in opposition to the interests of everyone else. These themes have historically created the most misunderstanding and tension:

- **Indoctrination** – Indoctrination is a word that implies two things: introducing a new topic to students and doing so in a way that some parents are morally opposed to. It builds on people's distrust of public institutions and activates the "sexual brainwashing" fear seen in the quote on page six. You can prevent this message from being salient by highlighting how young people are already being exposed to information about people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. What you seek is to address misinformation that already exists by factual education from a trusted adult.

- **Sex** – Here's an unfortunate fact: most adults can't describe what it means to be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender without talking about sex. That is why lessons that include families with two moms or two dads often get referred to as "sex-ed." When parents think you are going to talk to their students about sex, they get defensive, stop listening, and prepare to argue. You can prevent this by demonstrating in concrete ways any lessons or conversations that might happen in a classroom.

- **Rights** – Misinformation is spread when actual people—friends and neighbors—are erased from the picture. Talking about "rights" does exactly that by putting the focus on something abstract. It is much easier to be comfortable arguing against rights than it is to knowingly hurt someone you know and love. Furthermore, "rights" puts the focus on only people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender instead of the common values that we all share.

- **Silencing the religious** – Support for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender is sometimes portrayed as interfering with the rights of religious students and teachers. This evokes a gut instinct about a war on religion that activates a very passionate group of people ready to fight back. Help show how safe schools work benefits religious students by including allies from faith communities and stories about the harassment of religious students.

# Create Your Core Message

Use this worksheet to create a core message about creating schools that are more inclusive and affirming of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Remember that the strongest approaches highlight shared, deeply held values, identify something negative happening in the status quo, and promote a hopeful, optimistic solution.

1. What are the common, deeply held values people care about and how are those valued by your school?

   *(e.g. Hamilton Elementary's mission is to be a place for all students to grow together with pride and respect as they learn the skills they will need to be successful adults.)*

2. What is the problem that is currently preventing your community from realizing those values?

   *(e.g. We are currently excluding some of our friends and neighbors. Students who have two moms or two dads say they are ashamed to talk about their family in classroom discussions and are not participating in school lessons.)*

3. What should happen to solve the problem, put in the most concrete, visual way possible?

   *(e.g. Our teachers already talk about students who have been adopted or who have stepparents. Let's add students with two moms or two dads to those lessons.)*

4. What's the ideal outcome of taking those steps?

   *(e.g. Then no student or family would feel excluded from our school community.)*

**Now put it all together in this format: #1, but #2. #3, so that #4. This is your core message to be repeated often.**

*(e.g. Hamilton Elementary's mission is to be a place for all students to grow together with pride and respect, but we are currently excluding some of our friends and neighbors. Students who have two moms or two dads say they are ashamed to talk about their family in classroom discussions. Our teachers already talk about students who have been adopted or who have stepparents. Let's add students with two moms or two dads to those lessons so that no student or family would feel excluded from our school community.)*

# Refine Your Core Message

Research in strategic communications has shown that building an emotional bridge with potential supporters can be undermined when people have to stop listening with their hearts and begin reasoning with their minds. When people *feel* messages, they are more likely to embrace and trust what is being said. When they *think* about messages, they are more likely to play devil's advocate and resist what they hear.

Consider these two statements:

- **Students who feel threatened and ashamed at school aren't being given a fair shot at opportunity and success.**
- **Students who report feeling unsafe at school are more likely to drop out or not go to college.**

Ultimately, these statements are talking about the same thing but one speaks to the heart with simple, emotionally compelling words and the other speaks to the head by sounding technical and exact.

Remember that the political brain is an emotional one; people decide what to support based on what they feel, and no amount of logic can influence those emotions. The following tips help ensure your core message has the emotional impact that is intended:

**Lead with values.** The first thing you say should be about values and emotions, the big-picture aspirations such as respect, access to opportunity, healthy people and communities, wellbeing, success, and integrity. If you've got data or technical policy language to share, save it until well after you've spoken to the heart.

**Stay positive.** While it is important to point out the problem, you want people to feel positive and hopeful. For every minute you talk about the problems and your concerns, spend at least three talking about the solution and what is possible. When speaking about problems, be concrete and put a human face on complex issues. Avoid being hostile or putting people on the defensive.

**Refer to the commitments and values of your school.** Most schools have core values, mission statements, or policies that speak to the values you want people to connect to your work. Refer to them as a way to set the tone of the conversation and keep the focus on your specific community.

**Avoid jargon.** You may use a term—such as LGBT or academic achievement—so much that you don't have to think about what it means, but others might not be so familiar. Instead, they might stop listening and start thinking in an attempt to digest your words. If you're not sure if a word is jargon, try running it by a relative far removed from the situation to see if it distracts them from your emotional message.

# Words to Use

The words and metaphors we use trigger specific gut instincts and feelings. For example: when told that "crime is spreading like a virus," people are more likely to support a public health approach to crime that includes social supports and education. When told that "crime is taking over the streets," people voted for a policy of police force and tough sentencing.[1]

Many of the words often used in safe schools campaigns promote very specific ways of thinking For example, think about a classroom full of "kids." Now picture a room of "students." Which group seems more likely to have a mature conversation?

| AVOID: | USE INSTEAD: |
|---|---|
| **Children, kids** | **Students** |

The words "children" and "kids" can imply youth, naivety, and immaturity. In the past, opponents to schools affirming of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender have intentionally used the word "children" to exploit concerns that very young students may be exposed to sexual content "before they are ready." Using the term "students" in place of "kids" or "children" emphasizes the age-appropriate nature of inclusive instruction.

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| **"LGBT," trans, bi** | **People who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender** |

While LGBT is a widely understood shorthand, it is insider language that is confusing and alienating to people outside the movement. As such, it is a barrier to establishing common-ground. Saying LGBT also takes the humanity out of our discussions and turns people into an alphabet soup of initials. It's important to emphasize that we are talking about real people—people who aren't just defined by their sexual orientation or gender identity.

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| **Requires, mandates** | **Ensures, guides** |

In tense political climates, many people respond to "government mandates" and requirements with immediate rejection. Requirements are burdensome, overwhelming, and associated with laws and top-down directives. Parents want control over what's taught to their students. The word "ensures" keeps people focused on the solution, and "guidance" can be perceived as helpful.

[1] Thibodeau PH, Boroditsky L (2011) Metaphors We Think With: The Role of Metaphor in Reasoning. PLoS ONE 6(2): e16782. doi:10.1371/journal.pone.0016782

| AVOID: | USE INSTEAD: |
| --- | --- |
| **Curriculum** | **Lessons, materials** |

Similar to mandates, government agencies create "curriculum." On the other hand, educators create lessons and materials. Parents are connected to their students' teachers and are far more trusting of them than they are of government bureaucracies or those they perceive as having a political agenda.

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| **Accurate** | **Factual** |

Parents want their students to have the real facts, but when we start talking about accuracy they become suspicious—who is going to decide what's accurate? The government? A teacher with an agenda? Facts are facts. Accuracy is about perspective and can be manipulated to suit a particular perspective or motivation.

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| **Achievement Gap** | **Barriers to success based on... (race, sexual orientation, gender identity, etc.)** |

Gaps are naturally occurring phenomena with no easy fix. There are gaps in concrete, gaps in landmasses, gaps in teeth. On the other hand, barriers are often constructed by real people, and can be removed with the right course of action.

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| **Bullying** | **Harassment** |

Many parents react to the word "bullying" by imagining their schoolyard days. Some associate the word with harmless teasing, a rite of passage that students have experienced since the beginning of time. What the word "bullying" does not convey is the incessant, traumatizing, and often violent harassment that some students experience.

**Revisit your core message. Do you want to change any of the words you used?**

# Stories Turn Your Message Into an Experience.

Stories can help people embrace your message at a gut-instinct, emotional level by offering a short, emotional journey in which listeners learn, empathize, and form an opinion. Good stories are connective, not creative; they help people relate more than they wow them with an over-the-top adventure.

You can tell a story about anything that helps people understand why and how we should create schools that affirm people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. You can tell stories about people that you know, things that you've seen, or examples from neighboring districts. No matter the topic, powerful stories from across social change movements all share a common structure:

**Start with a person.** Start by introducing a main character, describing them in a way in which your audience can relate. Help others see themselves in the story by describing values and aspirations of the main character instead of focusing on technical details of their life. If the main character identifies as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, discuss other aspects of their life that are more universal before including their sexual orientation or gender identity. If the story is about you, build trust by describing how you fit into the conversation and why people should listen to you.

**Hold the person back with a problem.** Talk about the problem you want to address as a barrier preventing the main character from reaching a goal. For example, what keeps the main character from being happy, enjoying school, or making good grades? Describe the problem in a way that triggers empathy without exaggerating or being hostile. People are more likely to validate positive, hopeful information so pivot to the solution as soon as you communicate the negative part.

**Focus on the solution**. Up to this point, a good story has an audience emotionally identified with the main character and hoping for a change. Offer the solution, and then reinforce it. Use visual, concrete words to show what the solution will do; paint a picture of the world you want to see. Give an example of a similar place where your solution has worked.

**Pivot from past to future, from the main character to "us."** This last step is what differentiates stories told in the movies from stories that lead people to take action for social change. The story you told happened in the past, but the bigger story—the story of building allies for safe schools work—hasn't ended yet. Close the curtain on the first story and then remind the audience of their role to play in changing the future. Use words such as "us" and "we," and ask your audience to take a specific action.

# Hone a Story to Deliver Your Message.

1. Introduce the main character.

*(e.g. My friend's daughter Sue is sixteen and loves playing guitar and soccer. She isn't sure what she wants to study in college but is really interested in teaching.)*

2. What does the main character aspire to?

*(e.g. Sue has her sights set on college, but knows she'll need to get a scholarship to attend some of the places she wants to go. She has committed to making all A's this year, and even gave up playing soccer to focus on studying.)*

3. What is holding the main character back?

*(e.g. Every day in two of her classes last semester, Sue was surrounded by a group of students who constantly whispered slurs and put-downs to her. They teased her about her weight and called her a lesbian. The hurtful words made her feel ashamed, and she couldn't pay attention to the lessons. She tried talking to her teachers, but nothing happened. Sue's grades in these classes were terrible, even though she was making A's in her other classes.)*

4. What is the solution?

*(e.g. A month ago, Sue went to a meeting of the Gay-Straight Alliance that was devoted to harassment in the school. There, she learned that her teachers were violating school policy by not interrupting the harassment Sue was experiencing. The teacher sponsor of the club talked to Sue's math teacher, and provided some advice about stopping that harassment. Sue's teachers began addressing the insults when they happened, so that Sue could focus on learning.)*

5. Resolve the first story and pivot to the action your audience can take.

*(e.g. Now Sue is back to making B's in those classes and has just applied for her first full college scholarship. And all that changed because she had a Gay-Straight Alliance club to go to one day during lunch, and that club invited all students to talk about harassment at school. All of our students need to be able to get good grades if they dedicate themselves, but some cannot because of harassment that goes unaddressed. Gay-Straight Alliances help create schools where every student can be successful, and we need to see them as part of the answer. Come to the meeting Tuesday night in the cafeteria at 7 and tell the school board not to ban the clubs that are helping our students.)*

**A note about tone:**

Stories are most successful when people want to listen and open themselves up to doing so. If a storyteller seems angry, hostile, or offensive, the audience will listen with doubt and defensiveness. Take a moment to calm yourself with a deep breath before starting a story.

# Use Research/Data Carefully

Lead with common values and shape how people *feel* about creating a school that affirms people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Once you have that emotional bridge, use research and data to lead the rational part of the brain to logically support your work as well. Talking about data shifts people from *feeling* to *thinking* (after which it's difficult to return to feeling) so be sure that you've created the emotional connection before moving on to research and data.

If you can find statistics specific to your school or community, they will have more weight than numbers with a national scope, which often get dismissed as not being representative of local communities. Counselors and other school leaders may be able to provide data about harassment, violence, and bullying.

**Use numbers that are easy to grasp and visualize.** You can picture five students. Even fifteen. But what does 180,000 students look like? When communicating data, turn large numbers into more concrete comparisons that people can picture. For example, 180,000 students may be described as three full Super Bowl stadiums or the entire population of Little Rock, Arkansas. Similarly, $200,000 might be described as more money than our district has spent on textbooks in the past five years.

**Resources for relevant research:**

**GLSEN research** documents the extent of harassment in schools and other measurements of the experiences of students, parents, and staff who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. The research is often broken down by state.

**GSA Network** has documented the positive effects of Gay-Straight Alliances, inclusive classroom lessons, and enumerated harassment and discrimination policies.

**HRC's Welcoming Schools** has compiled research about lesbian and gay families and prejudice among elementary school age students.

The Washington-based **Safe Schools Coalition** has compiled research from organizations across the country on a number of relevant topics.

The **American Psychological Association** keeps a list of research relevant to the wellbeing of young people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

**"Research" to watch out for:**

American College of Pediatricians—What sounds professional is really an ultra-conservative group of anti-gay leaders. The American Academy of Pediatrics—the respected professional group—routinely debunks the college's "research," especially its *"Facts About Youth"* document. Other groups that may provide biased research include: Alliance Defending Freedom, Focus on the Family, Pacific Justice Institute, PFOX, and Family Research Council.

# Additional Talking Points

If you've shared your core message, provided an emotional experience through stories, mentioned any data or research to back you up, and still have the attention of an audience, consider incorporating additional talking points to help people overcome any remaining hesitations they might have to supporting an affirming, inclusive school for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

**Give specific examples.** Most Americans have no idea how students will learn in their classrooms about people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Without other information, many people automatically assume that these guidelines will involve instruction about sexuality or sexual practice. Providing real-life examples of what students will learn helps adults fill in the blanks, connect to their own experiences, and ease their concerns.

**Reinforce parental control.** Parents are understandably concerned about—and many feel increasingly powerless over—what their students are learning in school. Reassuring parents that they can always talk to teachers and local educators about what will be taught in their students' classrooms helps to ease those concerns. In addition, it helps to remind parents that, while students learn many important things at school, they learn their most important values at home from their parents—and nothing at school will change that.

**Highlight how your solution has worked in other schools.** There are thousands of schools across the country that are proactively working to affirm the diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity. And they are doing so with overwhelming support from their communities. Talk about successes from similar schools and communities in your area.

# Issue-Specific Messaging

The following sections offer strategies related to common policies or programs that exist in schools that are inclusive of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

If you are building community support for a specific approach, use these pages to hone your message and the stories you tell.

# Talking About: Family Diversity Lessons

Classroom lessons for young students often involve families and the activities or traditions of one's family. It is important that all families—including families with two moms or two dads—are reflected in these lessons.

**Common-ground values to reference:**

Students need to know their families matter. Feeling reflected in classroom discussions is necessary for students to connect to their school and peers. Families are one of the first places through which we view our world, and it is important that all students see themselves included in what they are learning.

Students who are ashamed or hesitant to talk about their families are excluded from the many lessons about families in our school. Including all types of families in classroom discussions helps ensure our students can participate in all of the activities they need in order to be successful.

For our school to be a great place, all parents and guardians must feel like they belong here. Excluding some families sends the message that they aren't welcome to participate in our community and prevents them from contributing to the success of our school.

**Be sure to:**

Be very specific and transparent with what actual lesson plans will look like. Many adults have no idea how to talk about people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender without talking about sex. Give examples of what students will experience in the classroom and how those conversations have happened in other schools.

Focus on how the materials will impact all students to help parents and guardians understand why they should be personally invested in the lessons. Help parents understand why including all types of families is good for their own students and families, as well as the entire school community. Avoid talking about rights or equality, as these topics cause people to narrowly focus on a small subset of their community.

Highlight how young people already use the words gay and lesbian, although they do so in hurtful, misinformed ways. Talking about families with gay and lesbian parents is not presenting new information, but is only helping young people understand the words they use.

Highlight parental control. Reassure parents that they can always talk to teachers and local educators about what will be taught in their students' classrooms. Remind parents that, while students learn many important things at school, they learn their most important values at home from their parents—and nothing at school will change that.

## TERMINOLOGY:

| AVOID: | USE INSTEAD: |
|---|---|
| **Gay or lesbian families** | **Families with two moms or two dads** |

Most parents do not easily recognize how to talk about people who are gay or lesbian without talking about sex, and will assume sexuality will be discussed in a classroom lesson about family diversity. Model how to talk about families in age-appropriate ways by talking about families with two moms or two dads.

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| **Children, kids** | **Students** |

The words "children" and "kids" can imply youth, naivety, and immaturity. In the past, opponents to schools affirming of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender have intentionally used the word "children" to exploit concerns that very young students may be exposed to sexual content "before they are ready." Using the term "students" in place of "kids" or "children" emphasizes the age-appropriate nature of inclusive instruction.

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| **Curriculum** | **Classroom lessons** |

Similar to mandates, government agencies create "curriculum." On the other hand, educators create lessons and materials. Parents are connected to their students' teachers and are far more trusting of them than they are of government bureaucracies or those they perceive as having a political agenda.

**Example message:**

For years, students at Judy Bloom Elementary have learned about the different types of families everyone comes from. But we are excluding some of our neighbors from these lessons even though we know it is important for all students to feel appreciated and reflected in what they are learning. Simply letting students know that some of their peers come from families with two moms or two dads helps create the community we want, while still ensuring that students learn their most important values at home. By updating our lessons, Judy Bloom Elementary can be a place where all students and families feel welcome and able to succeed.

# Talking About: Inclusive Social Science Lessons

Including in school lessons people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender often means referencing historical figures and events. Many school districts and states require representation of women and people of color in textbooks and history lessons, and may update these standards to include people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender.

**Common-ground values to reference:**

Discrimination doesn't belong in the classroom. Unfortunately, history lessons have often unfairly portrayed negative images and stereotypes about different kinds of people. When students learn about leaders like Martin Luther King Jr. and César Chávez, as well as leaders who are gay and lesbian, it helps teach students to respect each other's differences and break down negative stereotypes.

We want students to get an up-to-date, honest education. Students should have social studies lessons that present a factual view of history—one that does not exclude people just because of who they are. Updating social science lessons will ensure that students have the skills they'll need to be successful in the workplace as adults.

All students need good role models. Teaching students about different historical figures who have overcome hardships to contribute to society gives students the role models they need to learn that they, too, can make a difference.

**Be sure to:**

Be very specific and transparent about what actual lesson plans will look like. Many adults have no idea how to talk about people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender without talking about sex. Give examples of what students will experience in the classroom and how those conversations have happened in other schools.

Highlight parental control. Reassure parents that they can always talk to teachers and local educators about what will be taught in their students' classrooms. Remind parents that, while students learn many important things at school, they learn their most important values at home from their parents—and nothing at school will change that.

Put these lessons in context of other materials that past generations have worked to ensure were included in school lessons, including the social struggles of women, people of color, and immigrants. States have guidelines to ensure classroom lessons reflect the diversity of their communities; this is just continuing those updates for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

## TERMINOLOGY:

| AVOID: | USE INSTEAD: |
|---|---|
| **Children, kids** | **Students** |

The words "children" and "kids" can imply youth, naivety, and immaturity. In the past, opponents to schools affirming of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender have intentionally used the word "children" to exploit concerns that very young students may be exposed to sexual content "before they are ready." Using the term "students" in place of "kids" or "children" emphasizes the age-appropriate nature of inclusive instruction.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Curriculum** | **Classroom lessons** |

Similar to mandates, government agencies create "curriculum." On the other hand, educators create lessons and materials. Parents are connected to their students' teachers and are far more trusting of them than they are of government bureaucracies or those they perceive as having a political agenda.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Requires, mandates** | **Ensures, guides** |

In tense political climates, many people respond to "government mandates" and requirements with immediate rejection. Requirements are burdensome, overwhelming, and associated with laws and top-down directives. Parents want control over what's taught to their students. The word "ensures" keeps people focused on the solution, and "guidance" can be perceived as helpful.

**Example message:**

Education guidelines are updated over time to make sure that the roles and historical contributions of women and members of other racial, ethnic, and cultural groups aren't left out of history and social studies lessons. Students currently learn about César Chávez and the farm workers' rights movement, Susan B. Anthony and how women won the right to vote, and Martin Luther King Jr., who worked and died for civil rights. Now they could also learn about Harvey Milk and how he worked to advance equality for people who are lesbian and gay, and that he was also assassinated. Teaching students about different historical figures who have overcome hardship or made tremendous sacrifices to contribute to society gives students the role models they need to learn that they, too, can make a difference. Students should have social studies lessons that present a factual view of history—one that does not exclude certain kinds of people just because of who they are. That kind of education helps give students the skills and understanding they'll need to be successful in the workplace as adults.

# Talking About: Policies Related to Gender Identity

Policies that support students who are transgender or gender non-conforming often ensure these students feel they are respected and honored by school staff, are safe and comfortable in gender-segregated facilities, and can access and fully participate in all activities including sports or gym class.

**Common-ground values to reference:**

Everyone should be able to take advantage of all the opportunities at our school. This policy would help make sure students who are transgender have a fair chance to graduate and succeed. Students who are dedicated and hardworking should not be excluded from the requirements needed to graduate.

We need our school to reflect our community, and not exclude students just because of who they are. This policy will help teachers honor all of our students, setting an example of the skills and understanding that young people will need in order to be successful in the workplace as adults.

**Be sure to:**

Help people understand the concept of "gender identity" as deeply held feelings that have been experienced (and often struggled with) for many years. Many adults are not familiar with the experiences of people who are transgender and don't immediately understand that transitioning genders is an involved and serious process. People opposed to supportive policies often leverage this unfamiliarity by saying that students could just pretend to take on a gender in order to sneak into a bathroom or locker room. Highlighting the seriousness with which students, parents, and school leaders understand issues of gender identity can help refocus the conversation away from such arguments.

Broaden your message by talking about access to success instead of transgender rights. Most people won't feel personally connected to transgender issues. Talking about rights makes it seem like someone else's concern, while talking about access to success is the concern of the entire school and community. Having a diverse set of allies can help all people trust and relate to these issues.

Highlight how similar policies have worked in other similar schools without incident and with broad community support. Highlight how opponents' arguments are rooted in fear and not fact. In all the schools that affirm transgender students, those fears have never become reality.

## TERMINOLOGY:

| AVOID: | USE INSTEAD: |
| --- | --- |
| **Trans, transgender** | **People who deep down know they are transgender, or people who deep down feel they are a gender different than the one assigned to them at birth** |

Just as with references to sexual orientation, put the person first in your messaging. Leading with "people who…" reminds your listeners that you are talking about the real people—friends, family, neighbors—in their community. Referring to the deeply held feelings associated with gender identity helps people recognize the earnest ways schools approach the issue and helps prevent arguments about young people claiming a gender identity simply to gain access to gender-segregated facilities for deceitful reasons.

| | |
| --- | --- |
| **Bathrooms, locker rooms** | **School facilities** |

Opponents of school policies that affirm students who are transgender or gender non-confirming try to keep parents focused on bathrooms as a way to insert sexual predators into the conversation and promote fear and distrust. Keep the focus on the entire school climate by referring instead to school facilities.

**Example message:**

This policy ensures that no student is excluded from the school activities they need to graduate simply because of who they are. Hundreds of other school and districts have already passed similar policies and implemented them successfully. Those schools did not experience any of the things that opponents of this policy claim would happen, and neither will we. We should follow in their footsteps to make sure all of our students who work hard can graduate and be successful as adults.

# Talking About: Enumerated Harassment Policies

Enumerated laws and policies specifically identify actual or perceived characteristics that historically have been targets of bullying and harassment. For a recommended model policy on bullying, visit **http://glsen.org/learn/policy/state/modelschool.**

**Common-ground values to reference:**

Enumeration makes bullying policies effective by helping people understand what harassment looks like. Sometimes students and teachers don't associate certain behaviors—like slurs—as harassment, even though they are hurtful.

Enumeration is crucial to ensure that anti-harassment policies are effective for all students. According to research, students in schools with enumerated policies report a higher frequency of staff intervention and hear fewer anti-gay slurs in school than students in schools with no policies or non-enumerated ones.[2]

Enumerated laws help protect a district from liability. The Office of Civil Rights of the US Department of Education has told school administrators that harassment based on gender identity or sexual orientation may violate federal civil rights and sexual harassment laws.[3] In the past, school districts found liable of not ensuring a safe environment have paid large court settlements.

**Be sure to:**

Talk about a broad group of traits, including race, religion, and ability, that are included in enumerated harassment policies. Make it clear this policy is not just about people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. Have a broad range of spokespeople who reflect the diversity of traits in the policy advocating for it.

[2] National School Climate Survey, http://glsen.org/nscs

[3] http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/letters/colleague-201010.pdf

## TERMINOLOGY:

| AVOID: | USE INSTEAD: |
|---|---|
| **Bullying** | **Harassment** |

Many parents react to the word "bullying" by imagining their schoolyard days. Some associate the word with harmless teasing, a rite of passage that students have experienced since the beginning of time. What the word "bullying" does not convey is the incessant, traumatizing, and often violent harassment that some students experience.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Requires, mandates** | **Ensures, guides** |

In tense political climates, many people respond to "government mandates" and requirements with immediate rejection. Requirements are burdensome, overwhelming, and associated with laws and top-down directives. Parents want control over what's taught to their students. The word "ensures" keeps people focused on the solution, and "guidance" can be perceived as helpful.

**Example message:**

This policy is needed because it sets a clear standard for what is to be considered harassment, and includes slurs like racial put-downs that many educators have ignored in the past. Guidelines like this in other schools have been proven to improve school for all students, who report less harassment and more support from teachers when there is such a policy in place. Other districts without enumerated harassment policies have been found liable for the harmful school climates they've fostered, and adopting this policy can help protect our district from liability, in addition to ensuring the wellbeing of our students.

# Talking About: Inclusive Sexuality Education

Often any lessons inclusive of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender are lumped under a category of sex education, even they are actually talking about families or historical events. Correct such misinformation by highlighting concrete examples of what will be discussed in classrooms. If you *are* talking about sexuality education, **http://www.advocatesforyouth.org** provides additional resources and guidance.

**Common-ground values to reference:**

Young people can make informed choices about their health only when provided with factual information. Just like adults, students can only consider what they know, and myths about sexual health are commonly spread at school. Factual information provided by a trained adult can help ensure that young people act in their best interests now and as adults.

Honest conversations about health can bring families and classrooms together when led by a trained educator. By giving students vocabulary and a supportive space to learn the facts about health, we can build better communications between students and their parents as well as their peers.

Excluding any group of students or families from our health lessons puts lives at risk, in addition to sending a hurtful message to people in our community. Some of our students are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, and they should be reflected in school lessons that will keep them healthy and on the path to success.

**Be sure to:**

Reassure parents that teaching facts important for making healthy decisions does not change parents' roles as the ones to teach their students about morality and what is right or wrong. Remember that many parents are concerned that they are losing control over the values their students are taught, so help them understand how school lessons can improve communication between parents and students.

Support young people as spokespeople at public hearings, private meetings, and in interviews to reporters. Make space for young people to show they consider the outcomes of their actions and make decisions in their best interest when they are provided the right information and support.

Lead with important common-ground values and save public health data or statistics for after you have built an emotional connection with your audience.

## TERMINOLOGY:

| AVOID: | USE INSTEAD: |
|---|---|
| **Accurate, appropriate** | **Factual** |

Parents want their students to have the real facts, but when we start talking about accuracy they become suspicious—who is going to decide what's accurate? The government? A teacher with an agenda? Facts are facts. Accuracy is about perspective and can be manipulated to suit a particular perspective or motivation.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Teachers, school staff** | **Trained educators** |

Surveys show that parents are more supportive of sexuality education when it is delivered by an educator that has been specially trained to facilitate vulnerable and difficult conversations. You can highlight that this will be the case in your school by referring to the adults who teach sexuality education as trained educators. Just saying "teachers" or "staff" misses an opportunity to cultivate trust.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Bad decisions, risky decisions** | **Uninformed decisions** |

The phrase "bad decisions" puts the focus on the individual and erases the context in which they act. Instead, saying "uninformed decisions" zooms out to the environment in which students learn (or don't learn) about their health and sexuality. Bad decisions can be changed only if students change; uninformed decisions can be changed through community-wide policy and education.

**Example message:**

Students are able to make informed choices about their health only when provided with factual information. Excluding a group of students from our lessons puts health and lives at risk, and sends a hurtful message to people in our community. Parents should always be the ones that teach their families' values, while schools are responsible for providing the facts that students need to be healthy. Having a trained educator lead these conversations at school can even spur greater communication at home between students and their parents.

# Talking About: Student Clubs and Gay-Straight Alliances

Gay-straight alliances and other student clubs are extracurricular groups, open to all students, that provide support and a safe environment in which to learn about homophobia, transphobia, and other forms of bias and oppression. They often run activities that benefit their community, from coat drives to anti-harassment campaigns.

**Common-ground values to reference:**

The presence of these clubs has been shown to benefit all students, who report witnessing less harassment in schools where these clubs exist.[4]

School clubs form a critical part of high school education. Restricting clubs keeps students from important educational opportunities and limits students' chances of getting accepted to college since participation in school clubs plays a key role in many college admissions decisions.

Banning these clubs would open our district up to an expensive legal battle that we neither want nor can afford. The federal Equal Access Act requires that schools treat *all* clubs equally, and plenty of legal precedent exists that shows that excluding clubs such as Gay-Straight Alliances is illegal[5].

**Be sure to:**

Make space and provide support for students to tell personal stories about why such clubs are needed and what impact they have on the school.

Give specific and concrete examples of what might be discussed at a Gay-Straight Alliance meeting and what activities the club might undertake. If left to imagine it themselves, some parents might assume that sexual or crude topics might be discussed in a school-sponsored activity.

[4] (learn more at: http://glsen.org/sites/default/files/Gay-Straight%20Alliances.pdf).

[5] (learn more at http://gsanetwork.org/files/resources/GSA.QA_.ACLU_.pdf)

## TERMINOLOGY:

| AVOID: | USE INSTEAD: |
|---|---|
| **Children, kids** | **Students** |

The words "children" and "kids" can imply youth, naivety, and immaturity. In the past, opponents to schools affirming of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender have intentionally used the word "children" to exploit concerns that very young students may be exposed to sexual content "before they are ready." Using the term "students" in place of "kids" or "children" emphasizes the age-appropriate nature of inclusive instruction.

| | |
|---|---|
| **Include** | **Exclude, ban** |

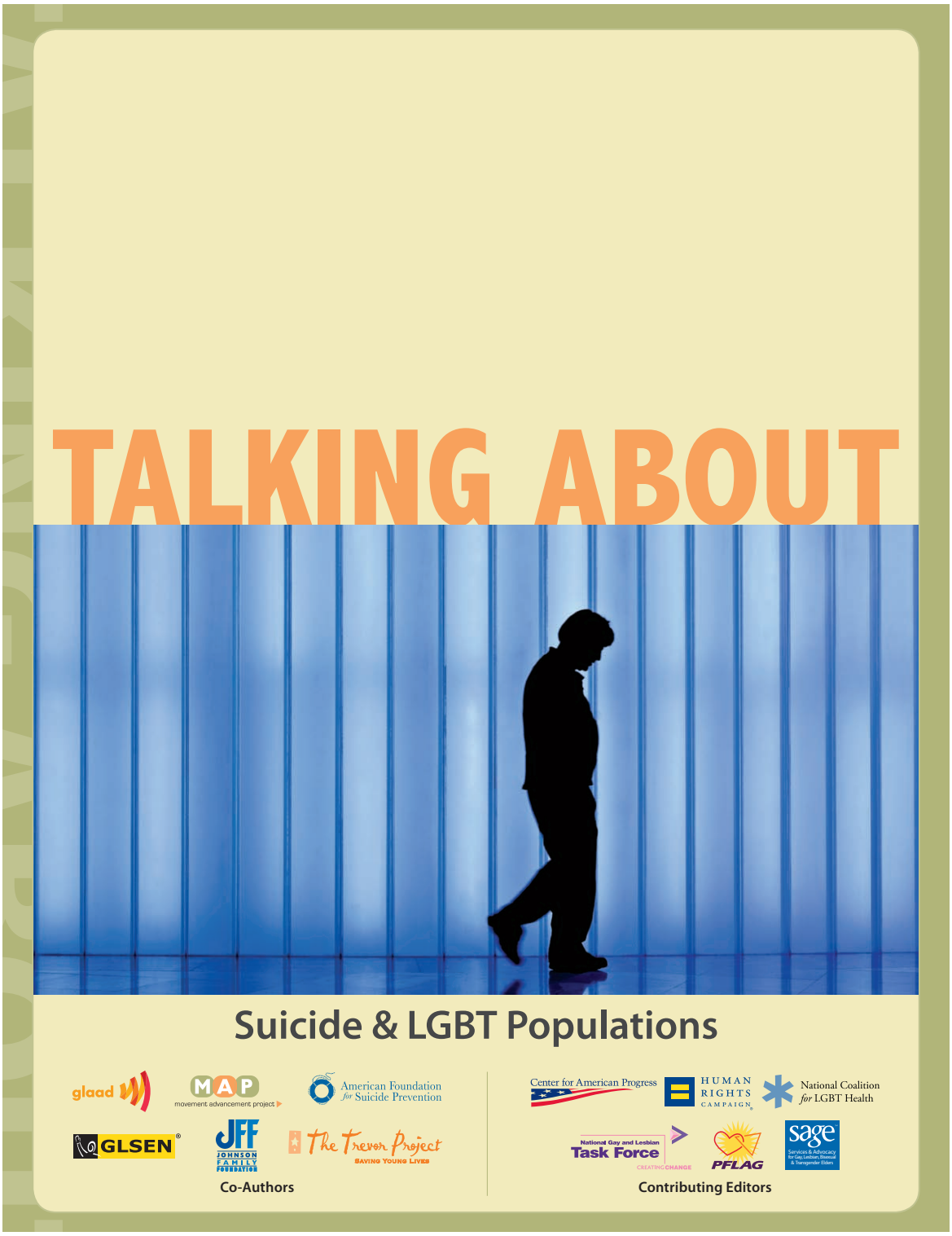
Polls consistently show that people react more strongly to the idea of excluding some than including all. They are related concepts, but people are usually more motivated to stop an injustice (exclusion) than to work for an ideal (inclusion). Use words that show how some policies regarding student clubs can actively exclude and promote bias.

**Example message:**

This Gay-Straight Alliance would benefit everyone in our community. Similar clubs in other neighboring schools have sponsored food drives and raised funds for homeless shelters. In those clubs, they hold discussions about making school a more affirming place and offer a safe space for students to talk about how harassment is affecting them. Restricting clubs keeps students from important educational opportunities and may affect their chances of being accepted to college. Banning this club would not only hurt our students, but would be illegal and open our district up to a lawsuit that we neither want nor can afford.

# Talking About: Suicide

Use caution when talking about suicide, or what can prevent suicide. Some ways of talking about suicide can oversimplify the underlying issues and the wrong words can even create the potential for others to see suicide as a good choice for them. If suicide is part of the story you want to tell, review the following pages to make sure you do so accurately and responsibly.



## INTRODUCTION

Expansive news coverage of several recent suicide deaths of youth known or believed to be gay has resulted in an unprecedented national discussion about suicide risk among lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people. Some of that coverage, however, has oversimplified or sensationalized a number of the underlying issues, and in some cases may have created the potential for suicide contagion risk (see below).

This guide provides ways to talk about suicide safely and effectively, while advancing vital public discussions about preventing suicide, helping increase acceptance of LGBT people, and supporting their well-being.

The recommendations that follow were adapted in part from existing research and media education materials developed by leading suicide prevention organizations, including the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention and the Suicide Prevention Resource Center. To access some of these original resources, please visit www.lgbtmap.org/talking-about-suicide.

## WHAT IS SUICIDE CONTAGION?

**Research has shown a link between certain kinds of public visibility and media coverage about suicide, and increases in suicide deaths—a phenomenon known as *suicide contagion*.** Suicide contagion is most likely to occur among persons who are already seriously depressed or contemplating suicide.

Contagion risk has been observed when:

- The number of stories about individual suicides increases.
- A particular death is reported in great detail across many stories.
- Coverage of a suicide death is placed on the front page of a newspaper or at the top of a newscast.
- The headlines about specific suicide deaths are framed dramatically (for example, "Bullied Gay Teen Commits Suicide by Jumping from Bridge").

However, research also shows that risk of suicide contagion can be reduced when media report on suicide in a responsible way.

## TALKING ABOUT SUICIDE IN SAFE & ACCURATE WAYS

The need for safe public discussions about suicide cannot be overstated. They are a critical part of protecting the health and safety of individuals at risk for suicide. The following 12 recommendations can expand these important conversations while helping ensure that public discussions about suicide avoid inaccuracies and minimize risk for vulnerable LGBT people:

1. **DO emphasize individual and collective responsibility for supporting the well-being of LGBT people.** Remind people that individuals, families, communities and the whole of society have a responsibility to promote a culture that welcomes, accepts and supports LGBT people for who they are.
2. **DO encourage help-seeking by LGBT people who may be contemplating suicide, and emphasize the availability of supportive resources.** Young LGBT people, in particular, don't often hear that there are adults who care about them and to whom they can go for help.

### Bullying & Suicide

Research shows that LGBT youth report higher rates of anti-LGBT harassment and bullying than straight youth. But not every person who is the target of anti-LGBT bullying is LGBT. Many who are bullied are targeted because of their perceived sexual orientation or because they do not conform to someone's expectations about gender.

The relationship between bullying and suicide is complex. Research indicates that persistent bullying can lead to or worsen feelings of isolation, rejection, exclusion and despair, as well as to depression and anxiety, which can contribute to suicidal behavior.

However, it is also important to note that the large majority of people who experience bullying do not become suicidal. Suggesting that suicide is a natural response to bullying can lead media to emphasize details that could increase contagion risk. If at-risk people see their own experiences of bullying, isolation or exclusion reflected in stories of those who have died, they may be more likely to think of suicide as a solution to problems they are experiencing.

**Whenever possible, focus discussions on the need to systemically address anti-LGBT bullying—but do so in ways that don't increase suicide contagion risk.** Avoid taking shortcuts (for example, avoid saying "bullying causes suicide") or using terms like "bullycide." Instead, connect the need for bullying prevention back to the responsibility of individuals (like parents, family and friends), institutions (like schools), laws and society to ensure and promote the health, safety and overall well-being of people of all ages.

3. **DO emphasize the vital importance of family support and acceptance—not just as a factor that can help protect against suicide, but also as a crucial part of nurturing the emotional and psychological well-being of LGBT and questioning youth.** Family acceptance builds and supports the health and well-being of LGBT youth. Discussions that follow youth suicide deaths present an important opportunity to remind people—and families of LGBT youth in particular—of how important it is to love, embrace and accept their entire child for all of who they are.

4. **DON'T include details of a suicide death in titles or headlines.** Headlines are often the only things people read, and the need to make them short and attention-grabbing can lead to an emphasis on messages that can increase contagion risk. Also, headlines are often the only things that appear on social media outlets like Facebook, where contagion risks can also be elevated (see *Talking About Suicide in Social Media*).

5. **DON'T describe the method used in a suicide death.** Research shows that detailed descriptions of a person's suicide death can be a factor in leading vulnerable individuals to imitate the act.

6. **DON'T attribute a suicide death to experiences known or believed to have occurred shortly before the person died.** The underlying causes of most suicide deaths are complex and not always immediately obvious. Making hasty assumptions about those causes, even when based on comments from family or friends or media reports, can result in statements that are later proven to be inaccurate. Don't risk perpetuating false or misleading information by jumping to conclusions about the reasons for a particular suicide death. Also, directly attributing a suicide to bullying or another negative life event can increase contagion risk among vulnerable individuals who have similar experiences.

7. **DON'T normalize suicide by presenting it as the logical consequence of the kinds of bullying, rejection, discrimination and exclusion that LGBT people often experience.** Presenting suicide as the inexplicable act of an otherwise healthy LGBT person—or drawing a direct, causal link between suicide and the bullying or discrimination that LGBT people often face—can encourage at-risk individuals to identify with the victim (or the victim's life circumstances) and increase risk of suicidal behavior.

8. **DON'T idealize suicide victims or create an aura of celebrity around them.** Research shows that idealizing people who have died by suicide may encourage others to identify with the victim or seek to emulate them.

### Research Findings on Suicide

Discussions about suicide deaths often rely heavily on numbers and statistics. The following research-based findings may be helpful in understanding the complexities of suicide ideation and behavior.

- A suicide attempt is not a strong predictor of completed suicide. Four out of five people (80%) who die by suicide are male. However, three out of every four people (75%) who make a suicide attempt are female.
- Suicide rates generally increase with age, with the highest rates among those in the midlife years.
- There is very little solid information available about suicide deaths among LGBT people. For this reason, be careful not to misrepresent data on suicide attempts by LGBT people as indicative of LGBT suicide deaths. The two are not the same.
- In U.S. surveys, lesbian, gay and bi adolescents and adults have two to six times higher rates of reported suicide attempts compared to comparable straight people.
- Surveys of transgender people consistently report markedly high rates of suicide attempts.
- Two key suicide risk factors for LGBT people are individual-level factors such as depression and experiences of stigma and discrimination, including anti-LGBT hostility, harassment, bullying and family rejection. There is growing evidence that the two factors are linked.

9. **DON'T use terms like "bullycide."** This inaccurate word suggests the murder of a bully, not a suicide death. It can also elevate contagion risk by suggesting that suicide is a natural response to bullying.

10. **DON'T talk about suicide "epidemics."** This can encourage at-risk individuals to see themselves as part of a larger story and may elevate suicide risk.

11. **DON'T use words like "successful," "unsuccessful" or "failed" when talking about suicide.** It is extremely dangerous to suggest that non-fatal suicide attempts represent "failure," or that completed suicides are "successful." Instead, simply talk about a *suicide death* or *attempted suicide*. Also avoid the phrase "committed suicide." The word "committed" is usually associated with a criminal act and can re-victimize surviving family. Say *died by suicide* or that the death was a *suicide death* instead.

12. **DON'T say that a specific policy (or its absence) will in and of itself "prevent suicide."** Instead, talk about how anti-LGBT laws or policies have been shown to negatively impact the well-being of LGBT people (for example, the American Psychological Association has noted many negative health effects of excluding gay and lesbian couples from marriage).

## TALKING ABOUT SUICIDE IN SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media are a vitally important vehicle for expanding public conversations about the well-being of LGBT people, promoting the need for family support and acceptance, and encouraging help-seeking by LGBT people who may be contemplating suicide. The first three recommendations in the *Talking About Suicide in Safe & Accurate Ways* section can provide a strong foundation for talking about these issues in social media.

However, because of the nature, reach and speed of social media, platforms like Facebook, Twitter and blogs can also elevate contagion risks associated with unsafe media discussions about suicide.

In an age of increasingly rapid and dense information, brevity is often the currency of social media. But that brevity can make it difficult to communicate complexity and nuance in social media, and as a result, social media can present unique risks and challenges when talking about suicide.

Everything from re-tweeting to "liking" or "sharing" a Facebook post gives social media a speed and uncontainability that, while not necessarily problematic in everyday contexts, can quickly spread misinformation about a suicide death or endanger at-risk individuals who may be contemplating suicide. For those reasons:

- **Don't use Twitter or Facebook to announce news of suicide deaths.**
- **Don't give details of a suicide death** (for example, details about means of death) **or the ages/personal details of the victim on Twitter or Facebook.**
- **Don't re-post problematic mainstream media headlines** (for example, "Student, 15, Commits Suicide Over Bullying") **on Facebook or Twitter.**
- **Don't talk about suicide "epidemics" in social media.**
- **Be careful how you phrase things on Facebook.** Because Facebook users routinely "Like" posts that interest them or that they want to follow comments on, a post titled "Suicide Claims Life of Another Gay Teen" could be painful for surviving family and/or create a public backlash if people start to "Like" it. Similarly, a suicide-related post titled "Bullying Is Killing LGBT Teens" could increase contagion risk by suggesting that suicide is a natural response to bullying.

MAP movement advancement project

**ABOUT THIS SERIES**

This is one in a series of documents on effectively talking about LGBT issues, also including: Overall Approaches, Marriage & Relationship Recognition, Inclusive Employment Protections, Inclusive Hate Crimes Laws, Adoption & Gay Parents, Ending Don't Ask, Don't Tell, Talking About LGBT Equality with African Americans, Talking About LGBT Equality with Latinos, an Ally's Guide to Talking About Transgender-Inclusive Non-Discrimination Laws, and an Ally's Guide to Terminology. For downloadable versions, visit www.lgbtmap.org/talking-about-lgbt-issues-series or www.glaad.org/talkingabout. 

# Growing Your Numbers

Before you start organizing people around your issue, evaluate why you want to be more public or perceived as being on the offensive. Publicly working to get people to take action can be seen as confrontational to people who disagree with you, encouraging them to harden their positions and invest in being more visible in their own opposition. Sometimes, when you are concerned about a few loosely connected individuals, the best approach is just to listen and affirm their concerns. In the past, potential backlashes have been diffused by working quietly and behind the scenes with important decision makers.

However, if there are signs that people are organizing together to oppose affirming the diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity at school, then it is time to do the same. If you notice that such opposition does any of the following, it is time to get a team together to plan being more visible:

- Creates a name for their group, such as "concerned parents of district 14"
- Advertises a meeting
- Involves local churches or places of worship in their leadership
- References the materials of an established anti-LGBT advocacy organization, such at Family Research Council, Pacific Justice Institute, or Alliance Defending Freedom.
- Coordinates testimony for a school or school board meeting.

When reaching out to build a bigger team of people to take action, start by organizing your contacts in an outreach list.

Brainstorm potential allies who:

- Are **Able** to help
- **Believe** in the issue you are supporting
- **Can** be reached to have a live conversation.

Start by reaching out to people who openly share a belief in the issues you care about. Start with people you know and then eventually work your way to strangers whom you believe care about your issue. If someone does not care about or is opposed to the issue you are working on, don't call them. Now is the time to build a team, not persuade others about your position.

***Be careful:*** One of the biggest misconceptions about building a list of potential volunteers is to reach out to the folks who seem like they have the greatest *availability* first. Don't do that. Just because someone has time because they are retired or unemployed doesn't automatically mean they will just show up to help you. Folks show up because they care, not because they have a light schedule. **BELIEF drives action!**

# Create an Outreach List

All core members of your team should complete this worksheet to identify an initial outreach list of potential supporters. Consider only people who are part of your school community because they live, work, or have students enrolled in your school/district.

**Who would you call if you need a ride from the airport?**

1. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
2. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
3. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
4. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
5. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____

**Who would you have over for a birthday party?**

1. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
2. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
3. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
4. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
5. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____

**Whose house could you stay at if you had a fire?**

1. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
2. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
3. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
4. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
5. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____

**Who could pick your child up at school if you had to stay late at work?**

1. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
2. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
3. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
4. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
5. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____

**Whose children would you babysit?**

1. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
2. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
3. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
4. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____
5. Name:_____ Phone number(s):_____

**Now, highlight those on this list who: are able to help; likely believe in you and the issue you are supporting; and can be reached to have a live conversation.** Use the following pages to begin outreach to your highlighted list. As you enlist new supporters, have them complete the same process.

# How to Ask for Support

Fill in the following sections to create a script to guide your conversations with potential supporters. Each section is here for a reason, so complete them all.

1. **Intro:** Explain who you are (if necessary) and what you are working on. Use the core messages you created earlier, starting with the big-picture, commonly held values and current problem.

   *(e.g. Hi John, it's Sarah from the PTA. From our work together, I know you believe that Hamilton Elementary should be a place for all students to grow together with pride, but I am concerned that we are currently excluding some of our friends and neighbors from our school. I've heard students who have two moms or two dads say they are ashamed to talk about their families in classroom discussions so they are not participating in school lessons.)*

2. **Filter Question:** A "filter" question helps determine if someone cares about the issue you are working on. If they don't care or don't agree with you, thank them for their time, filter them out of your pool of potential volunteers, and move on to the next person.

   *(e.g. John, does it concern you that these students say they don't feel comfortable participating in classroom discussions?)*

3. **Good News:** Share a positive update from your project, illustrating hope and excitement.

   *(e.g. I spoke with Principal Wallace and she said they could easily add families with two moms or two dads into the regular family diversity lessons as a way to help all students feel reflected in their classrooms.)*

4. **Dig Deeper:** Share why you care about this issue, and ask them why they care. Determine if they care enough to get involved.

   *(e.g. I really care about making sure our family diversity materials reflect our community so that none of our students or families feel excluded. Do you also think we should add families with two moms or two dads to our lessons about families?)*

**Bad News:** Share a challenge the project is facing so the person you're talking to understands why it is urgent that **they** get involved **now**.

*(e.g. Another parent heard about these plans but misunderstands the lessons and incorrectly thinks they would include discussions about sex instead of families. He's complained to Principal Wallace and now I hear she might be reconsidering this idea.)*

**Solution and 1st ask:** Share the solution to the problem so they know there is a plan for success. Then make an ask for a specific action on a specific date for a specified amount of time.

*(e.g. If the PTA hosted a parent night to show all of the family diversity materials, including the proposed lessons about families with two moms or two dads, everyone will get a chance to understand the actual plans for classroom instruction instead of being left up to their own assumptions and misinformation. Would you be willing to join me at next Tuesday's PTA meeting and suggest to the event committee that we hold a family night with these materials?)*

*If needed,* **Problem Solving:** This section is for people who say they care, but who do not immediately agree to help. They might say, "No" outright, or they might say, "Maybe," "I'll try," "Let me check," or "It might work." It is important to ask questions to figure out why someone is reluctant to volunteer, and then to problem-solve by offering solutions to the barriers that are holding them back.

*(e.g. I understand next week is busy for you. If you're worried about food and childcare, I can bring dinner to the meeting and have already booked a babysitter. Do you want to drop your daughter off at my house and we can go together?)*

**Closing + Questions:** Give people an opportunity to ask questions so they feel more prepared to actually show up to the action they signed up for. Clearly repeat back what they just committed to. Thank them.

*(e.g. Thanks John. Is there anything you would like to know about what to expect at next Tuesday's PTA meeting when you and I request that the event committee hosts a family night for the family diversity materials?)*

# Use Social Media to Stay Connected

Social media is a great way to organize your supporters and grow your reach. Here are some tips to help you think through how to make the most of social media.

**Facebook page** – Creating a Facebook page for your campaign is a great way to get people motivated and engaged in your work. But don't forget that pages are public and anyone can see them. Don't give away inside strategy or other confidential communications. Similar to your core messaging, your Facebook posts should be positive, grounded, and calm. Follow other organizations and people, reposting relevant content and learning about your supporters (and decision makers) through what they post about. If people post negative comments on your page, see them as an opportunity to engage and test your messaging. Only delete comments when they are overtly hurtful and not from people in your community. Remember that you can inexpensively promote your page or posts to new potential supporters. Advertising usually costs only cents per person it reaches, and you can target your promotion to people who live in your area, who are parents or a young person, or who care about LGBT issues, education, or social justice. **Learn more about boosting your reach here.**

Another great tool to build your numbers through Facebook is a free-for-the-first-time application called **ActionSprout**. You can create an action (such as tell School District 14 to stop excluding gay families), which is likely to be taken by people who support your work. As the action spreads through Facebook, you can get the email addresses of people who have taken action and can send a follow-up email asking them to get more involved with your campaign.

**Facebook group** – Unlike a page, you can control who joins a Facebook group and thus who can see its posts. It is a great option to organize meetings, plan strategy, or discuss any other sensitive details of your work. Only allow people in your group who you know and are certain of their support. You can also create a closed Google Group to operate as an email list if some of your supporters are not on Facebook.

**Online Petition sites** – **Change.org** or **The Petition Site** are two great examples of free petition sites. Before starting a petition, make sure there is not a similar one already being shared. Create a strong headline and introduction that are emotionally compelling and concise. Use your core messaging and do not overload the reader with too many details or acronyms. Share the petition through email, social media, at in-person events, and through allied organizations.

**Twitter** – Requiring multiple posts a day to stay active, Twitter is a bit time-intensive and is usually not an option for small groups. However, it is a great tool to learn more about the decision makers you need to influence; follow their posts. You may also wish to live Tweet regular updates from important meetings to keep those who are not able to make it (including journalists) updated with the latest developments.

# Organizing within Communities of Color

People opposed to schools that affirm the diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity often have tried to position such issues as being in opposition to issues of concern to people of color. In the past, these strategies have worked to divide communities and create an "us versus them" mentality. Much work has been done to highlight the common ground and frequent overlap of communities of color and communities of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender.

These "wedge" strategies have the potential to work because people of color may distrust organizations focused on issues of concern to people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender because such organizations have often had predominately white membership and leadership. In the past, some of these groups have alienated people of color by making inaccurate comparisons between the struggle for marriage equality and movements for civil rights and racial justice.

The primary way to prevent such divisive strategies is to build a broad and diverse base of support, showing the interconnectedness of addressing bias and disparities of all kinds. If your group is predominantly white, be sure to invite leaders of communities of color to the table early. Ask questions, listen to their concerns, and find ways to work together to transform school climates. Waiting until the last minute to reach out to people of color—or doing so in ways that just ask something of others without building long-lasting relationships—leaves your work vulnerable to the divisive wedge tactics of anti-gay conservative groups.

Basic Rights Education Fund and Western States Center in Oregon have created a comprehensive toolkit to help you integrate a racial justice lens into your efforts. Their guidance can help you create foundations for building support and mutual cooperation between movements for racial justice and equality for people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. Complete a few activities in their toolkit to better understand how your work can also advance priorities of communities of color and how you can spark new, powerful alliances: **http://www.lgbtracialequity.org/publications/StandingTogether.pdf**

# Influencing Decision Makers

Change often happens because a single person makes a decision or casts a vote. The foundation of a successful organizing strategy is a map of the specific changes you want to see and who has the authority to make those changes. Remember that decisions are made by specific people so every target should have a name; school boards do not decide policy, individual school board members do.

Some decision makers are motivated by votes and reputation. Others are motivated by doing their job well and want to help young people grow into their fullest potential. Still others are more interested in the bottom line: how do we save money? Decision makers often have different motivations and people they trust, so it's important that you carefully choose your message—and the person delivering it—depending on whom you want to influence.

Describe the change you would like to see, such as a new policy or classroom lesson. Be as specific as possible.

How have similar changes happened before? Who was involved in making those changes in the past?

What are the names of the specific people who currently have the authority to make the change you want to see?

For each person, answer:

- What has motivated previous decisions that they have made? What do those decisions show they care about?
- Whom do they trust?
- What else do you know about what they care about? What do they read? How do they spend their spare time? What organizations or associations are they a part of?
- How might you tailor your message to move this specific person to action?
- How will you engage with the decision maker? Who is most likely to convince them of the need for change?

# Working with School Boards

Elected school board members often have the final say about decisions in a district. When working to convince school board members to support schools that affirm people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, keep the following tips in mind:

**Remember that school board members are people.** Engage board members in a dialogue the same way you would engage a friend or neighbor. Have a conversation with them and listen to their concerns. Avoid being hostile, flippant, or hyperbolic. Instead of making threats or putting school board members on the defensive, try to connect with their humanity. Stay calm, and always be positive and affirming.

**Tell your personal story.** Personal contact and stories help elected officials better connect to issues of diversity and inclusion. Make connections between the issues at hand and real people in your community. Doing so will help ground the conversation, making it more relevant and approachable. If using data or research, be sure to double check your facts so you can share them with confidence.

**Research board members and their motivations.** School board members have diverse interests and it is worth researching their individual motivations. What does the board member do professionally? What associations are they a part of? Do they volunteer? In one instance, a board member who volunteered at the local YMCA changed their position on an enumerated bullying policy after hearing from the director of the YMCA. In another case, a board member was swayed by hearing the personal stories of peers in her local restaurant association, of which she was a member. Who will your board members trust?

**Meet one-on-one.** Try to sit down and engage school board members in a conversation. You can usually just ask them to take a few minutes to talk about the issues that you care about. Official board meetings are not usually two-way conversations, and it is difficult to make a genuine connection when you are just one of many who are offering testimony. Use your answers to the previous worksheet to guide your strategy of which supporters should meet with each board member and how they can tailor your core message to best match the interests of that board member.

**Understand board dynamics.** Research the dynamics of the school board, between individual board members, and between the board and the community. What other issues have been hot topics? What have board members been passionate about in the past? Try to avoid falling into established divisions, which are often revealed only in closed sessions. You may wish to ask another educational leader, such as a principal or superintendent, about the dynamics of the board before approaching individual members.

**Connect your issue to other school initiatives.**
What has your school board been championing this year? How can you connect your campaign to those other initiatives? Tie your concerns to the bigger picture and priorities of the school board.

# Public Hearings

Decision makers will often schedule public hearings to discuss potential policy changes related to affirming people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. The hearings allow school board members to gauge public opinion and hear from those who care most about the issue.

Meet with decision makers one-on-one before the hearing, and use the hearing as an opportunity to solidify support for your campaign. In the past, some public hearings have become unruly. A chaotic public hearing could convince decision makers that the issue at hand is too controversial to support.

**When the hearing is announced, meet one-on-one with representatives of the school board. As part of your meeting, suggest the following measures to ensure an effective, orderly hearing**:

- Keep the hearing to 90 minutes; otherwise, the debate could go on for days.
- Have security available in case people become disorderly.
- Ask speakers to sign a roster to keep track of who wants to speak.
- Allow each speaker only one opportunity to speak.
- Allow only people who live in the district to speak. In the past, fanatics have driven hours to influence policies in another community.
- Give each speaker a maximum of two to three minutes. Establish a time limit before the hearing and allow no exceptions to it.

**After your one-on-one meetings, prepare for the public hearing by:**

- Asking a diverse group of influential community members (including leaders of community groups, students, religious leaders, and PTA officers) to speak.
- Meeting as a group to develop messaging and identify who will be speaking. Practice staying calm and prepare signs and stickers to add to your visual impact at the hearing.
- Asking supporters to all wear one color. It is a great way to make a big visual impact and doing so looks great on the local news too.
- Printing 1-pagers of information and quotes for reporters at the hearing.

**Arrive early to the hearing**. In the past allies have been shut out of public hearings by opponents who arrived hours before the scheduled start and filled available space. Arrive early and fill the front rows, saving seats for other supporters if possible.

**Avoid off-the-cuff remarks and hostile tones.** Stick to your message and stay calm and relatable. Describing opponents as enemies, bigots, or haters creates an "us versus them" mentality, alienating those who are honestly wrestling with the issue. Let the other side come off as angry, fearful, and negative.

**Follow the meeting with a letter to the editor of your local paper** that repeats your core message and shares your perspective with people who were not at the meeting itself.

# Staying Calm

Heated public meetings can often push buttons, sometimes leading advocates to say or do things they wouldn't normally consider saying or doing. Plan and prepare for these situations so you feel cool and confident when they happen.

Anticipate when you might experience these situations (such as at public hearings, meetings, and in front of reporters). Some statements that have been known to trigger heated reactions include:

- Are you teaching that homosexuality is an acceptable lifestyle?
- Homosexual behavior is a sin.
- This is just part of the homosexual agenda.
- You are confusing children about what is normal.
- Gay people live shorter lives than straight people.
- Gay people are more likely to abuse drugs and get AIDS.
- This isn't San Francisco or New York.

After taking a nice, calming deep breath, respond to such situations through a 4-step process:

**First, acknowledge the concern in a way that re-focuses the conversation.**

*(e.g. I know you care about the wellbeing of your children.)*

**For the second and third sentences, get to the heart of your response by pivoting to your own message.**

*(e.g. We should all care about the wellbeing of our students. That is why we are suggesting the same approach that many other school districts have used to create a school in which all students can thrive.)*

**If your opponent quotes data, now is the time to challenge the validity of what they are quoting.**

*(e.g. What was said contradicts the research provided by many reputable organizations such as American Psychological Association and the national PTA.)*

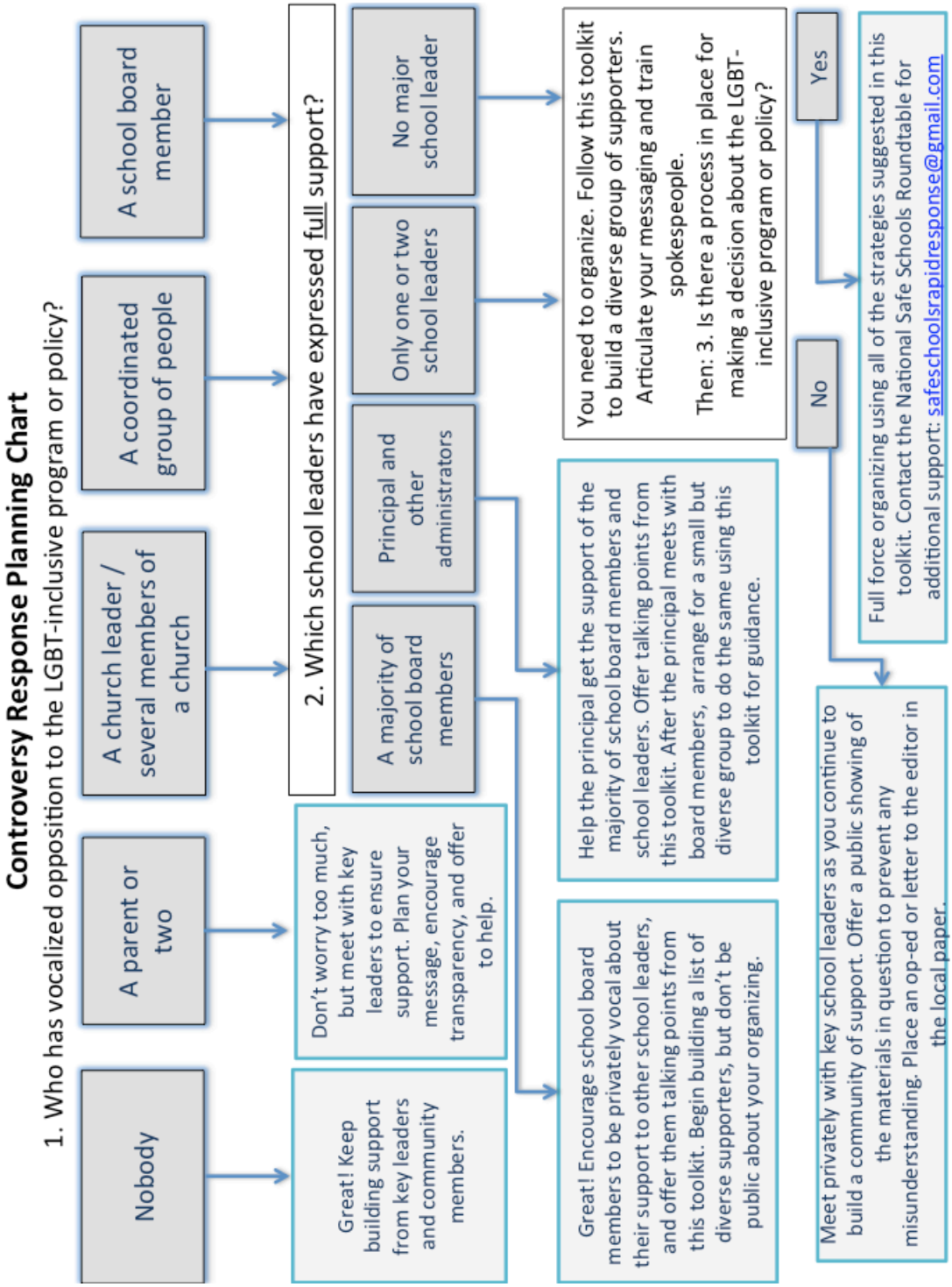
**Finally, close the conversation by pointing out the big picture.**

*(e.g. It hurts all of us when students at our school are excluded from the classroom activities they need to graduate and be successful.)*

Practice answering these hot-button questions in front of a mirror or with peers so that you will be confident, clear, and effective when they happen when you're in the spotlight.

# Should Opposition Arise...

Remember that going on the offensive can often escalate an issue and harden divisions. Sometimes the best approach to concerns about creating schools that openly affirm diversity of sexual orientation and gender identity is simply to acknowledge and listen to concerns. At other times, you may need to publicly organize to prevent a backlash. Use the following flow chart to determine how much time and energy you should be investing in building your numbers and organizing in your community.



# Working with the Media

Media coverage can help set the tone of the conversation for your entire community. Whether it's a major newspaper, a community bulletin, or a local TV news program, media can share your message (and your perspective of the issue) to thousands of people. Use the following pages to plan your media strategy so that you leverage one of the best tools available for building public trust and support.

**Working with media happens in three steps:**

1. **Prepare.** Before reaching out to reporters, make sure you've developed your key messages and have identified spokespeople who are available for interviews. To start, research who has been writing about similar issues. Education reporters for major newspapers, local news reporters for smaller newspapers, and public affairs producers for radio stations are the reporters who will most likely be interested in efforts to create more welcoming and affirming school climates.

   Once you know who might cover the issue, write a short, persuasive pitch. Your pitch should be a 30-second rap crafted to convince the reporter you have a hot story item they shouldn't pass up. See top pitching do's and dont's at **http://centerformediajustice.org/wp-content/files/PitchingDosDonts.pdf.**

2. **Pitch.** Practice and deliver your pitch. When you pitch, make it fast and efficient, but casual and conversational. Reporters are usually burdened with many distractions and hate feeling like someone is wasting their time. If they aren't engaged with your pitch, try to keep opportunities open by asking permission to follow up: Can I send you more information? Can I check back with you tomorrow or at another time? Is there someone else at your outlet I should talk to? Can I leave you my cell phone number in case you have questions?

   To help you pitch, you may want to write a press release that contains all of the important information a reporter may need to know. For a template press release, visit **http://centerformediajustice.org/2011/06/05/press-release-template/.**

3. **Follow up.** Call until you talk to a live person. If you get a reporter's voicemail, leave an initial message with your phone number and a quick description of your story idea. Then continue to call back (but don't leave any more messages) until you reach the reporter or editor. Remember, your role is to be a credible resource to reporters, not to strong-arm them into covering your story. Consider your interactions with a reporter as an ongoing relationship. Even when you don't have a specific story to pitch, email new developments on your issue. Most reporters appreciate this kind of ongoing community-based information.

**If a reporter calls you:** Do not take an interview if you are not prepared. Instead, gather important information, including the reporter's name, outlet, phone number, email address, what the story is about, when is the deadline, and whom else the reporter is speaking with.

Then prepare, even if you have only five minutes to print out and review your messaging notes. If you have a longer time, consider the audience and determine who the best spokesperson might be. Review the interview tips in this toolkit. Get back to the reporter in a timely manner so you don't miss the opportunity.

**After the story runs:**

1. If the story helps advance your campaign, share it through social networking: email it, blog it, put it on Facebook, etc. Comment on the online version of the story with your approval and encourage others to do the same. Drive traffic to it so the reporter knows their article got people's attention. Articles that receive comments and web traffic will encourage the reporter to cover the issue again.

2. Thank the reporter and let them know you are sharing their article. Let them know you would be happy to speak with them again or help them find additional people to interview for a follow-up story.

3. If you find the article problematic, call the reporter and tactfully express your concerns. Be reasonable and calm. Approach responding to bias as you would settling an argument with a neighbor. Be very specific about what you found inaccurate and offer to provide more factual information. If the reporter does not respond in positive ways, consider writing a letter to the editor. Reporters do not often write their own headlines, so if the headline is problematic but not the article, call the paper's editor and ask them to make a change to the online version.

If an outlet routinely runs articles with misinformation or negative portrayals/stereotypes of people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, contact GLAAD for additional assistance: **www.glaad.org.**

# Giving an Interview

You hold the power in an interview with a reporter. An interview is not like a normal conversation. You can steer the direction it takes, decide what gets said, and in turn, what people will see in the news. Consider every question asked an opportunity to share your message.

**Preparation is crucial.**

- Before any interview, write down 3 - 5 core messages that you want to share and a story for each message that highlights the personal side of that message. Be concise, avoid jargon, and focus on the positive solution. See the messaging guides in this toolkit for examples.
- Remember that your audience is not the reporter; it is the people that will be seeing the story! What do those people care about? What do you want them to do after they learn about the issue?
- If you are being interviewed for print or radio, keep your notes in front of you. Spend extra time memorizing and practicing if the interview is for TV.

**Stick to your message.**

- Have your notes in front of you if you are not being filmed!
- Respond to the question asked with one of your messages. The conversation should not feel like a normal dinner table conversation. No matter what question is asked, you can pivot to your message by using phrases such as "The important thing to remember is…," "If we are saying one thing it is that….," or "That is an interesting question because…."
- Pause before responding to a question. Look at your notes and think about how you will link the question to one of your main messages. Take a deep breath before answering.
- Once you say your message, either stop talking or start another message by using phrases such as "But that's not the only thing parents should care about…" or "What's even better is…."
- Avoid rambling and repeat your core messages instead of saying something off-message. The more you say, the more you stray.
- Let people know how to get involved.
- Remember that there is no such thing as "off the record;" anything you say to a journalist can be published, even if it is not during a formal interview.

**Be yourself!**

- Stick to what you know without speculating or exaggerating.
- Remain levelheaded, animated, and confident. If you fumble through a sentence or make a mistake, it is okay to take a deep breath, start over, and restate things more clearly.
- If on camera, choose an outfit without patterns and accessories that would distract the viewer from listening to what you are saying. Focus on looking at the reporter and nothing else.

# Strategic Interview Skills in Action

**Reporter:** Tell us why you are at the school board meeting tonight.

**Interviewee:** As a parent in district twelve, I'm concerned that the school board is discouraging students who are passionate about making their school a safe, more welcoming place. We should be supporting extracurricular opportunities, not banning them.

**Reporter:** But what about parents who don't think schools should be teaching about sexuality?

**Interviewee:** The proposed Gay-Straight Alliance would sponsor a food drive, help teachers stop harassment, and create a supportive space where all students can go when they feel like they need a friend. I think all of us agree that those are values we should be teaching students. But that's not the only thing parents should care about…. School clubs form a critical part of high school education. Restricting clubs keeps students from important educational opportunities and limits students' chances of getting accepted to college since participation in school clubs plays a key role in many college admissions decisions.

**Reporter:** Why do you care so much; is your child gay?

**Interviewee:** The important thing to remember is that the presence of a Gay-Straight Alliance has been shown to benefit all students, who report witnessing less harassment in schools where these clubs exist. This club would benefit everyone in our community. Another thing to remember is that banning these clubs would open our district up to an expensive legal battle that we can neither afford nor win.

**Reporter:** Board members expressed concern about the upcoming vote on a bond for the school district. How might this decision affect that vote?

**Interviewee:** What parents here tonight realize is that restricting clubs keeps students from important educational opportunities. Banning this club not only hurts our students, but is illegal and would open our district up to an expensive legal battle that we can neither afford nor win. That is why we are hosting a pizza party Tuesday night in the high school cafeteria for any families that want to learn more about the Gay-Straight Alliance and how it would help all students and families in our school.

# Preparing Students to Give Interviews

Many young people may get excited about the idea of speaking with a reporter. If they are under the age of eighteen, they will usually need permission from a parent or guardian, although each news outlet has its own rules. Interviews cannot happen on school grounds without permission of the school or district.

If a student is going to give an interview to a reporter, supportive adults should help that student think about why they want to be interviewed and what might happen as a result.

**Provide guidelines for what they can expect.** Give students a thorough understanding of what it means to be in the media. Remind them when someone does an internet search for their name, their quote and the article will appear for many years to come. They will not be able to see what the reporter chooses to use from their interview until the article is published. What might they regret saying if it was quoted? What might they regret five or ten years from now?

**Ask the student what their goal is.** A great way to ground students is to ask about their desired outcomes for sharing their experiences. Why would they share their story with a Gay-Straight Alliance? Why would they want to share it with their government class? Why would they share it to the entire student body at an assembly? Talking to news media is a different way to share their story; why would they want to share it with the whole world?

**Support students in developing their story.** Together, define the activist story that they might want to share with their entire community. This story is probably different than their personal story that they might share with a trusted friend. Unlike their personal story, their activist story is the story for public consumption. It should have a goal, be meant for a broad audience, and lead people to an action they can take.

**Screen the reporter.** Have an adult call the reporter and ask about their intentions. Look out for problematic questions or a desire to be hyperbolic or gossipy. Why does the reporter want to speak with a student? Will they be asking questions that might make the student vulnerable or put them at risk? For example, will they be asking about suicide, mental health, or sensitive identities such as sexual orientation or gender? Will they encourage the student to speculate about the actions of other people?

**Set ground rules for both the student and the reporter.** What topics can be discussed? What is off the table? What does the student want to talk about and what do they want to avoid? If possible, observe the interview to help the reporter and student stick to the agreed-upon guidelines.

**Follow up with the student to ask what they learned.** After everything is done, students should treat the interview as a learning experience. Help them reflect after the interview is finished and again after the story is published. What did they learn? What would they have done differently?

# Letters to the Editor and Op-Eds

Writing letters to the editor (LTEs) or op-eds to your local newspaper is a great way to help your neighbors understand the importance of schools that affirm people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender. LTEs are short (only a few sentences), while op-eds can be longer (500-600 words) and more thought out.

Newspapers offer space for LTEs and op-eds to help them continue the conversation started in an article they recently published. Most newspaper websites have an opinion/editorial page that will contain submission information. If not, the person answering the newspapers' phones will be able to tell you how to submit your piece.

The basic anatomy of an opinion piece follows the following template:

1. Reference the article that has been published, referring to the article's title and date in parentheses.
2. State the problem.
3. Offer the facts. Be visual and concrete, offering well-framed statistics to support your case.
4. Share a solution. Be positive!
5. Say what's at stake. Why should your neighbors care about this issue?
6. Sign the letter with your name, city, and phone number. Your phone number won't be printed, but editors will call you to make sure you actually authored the piece. Submissions without verifiable authors are usually ignored.

**For example:**

When our school board meets next week to decide if students can learn about historical figures who are gay or lesbian ("Who belongs in history class" Feb 16, 2013), I hope they don't forget that discrimination doesn't belong in the classroom. Students should have social studies lessons that present a factual view of history—one that does not exclude people just because of who they are. When students learn about leaders like Martin Luther King Jr., and César Chávez, as well as leaders who are gay or lesbian such as Harvey Milk and Bayard Rustin, it helps teach students to respect each other's differences and break down negative stereotypes. Updating social science lessons will ensure students have the skills they'll need to be successful in the workplace as adults.

Fred Rogers
Topeka, Kansas
785-413-8312

# Additional Resources

Any of the organizations that provided materials for this toolkit are available to provide additional resources and advice. Please visit each group's website for contact information.

A collaborative **online discussion group** about creating schools that affirm people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender is coordinated by the National Safe Schools Roundtable. For more information about joining, please email **nationalsafeschoolsroundtable@gmail.com** with more information about you and your work. The National Safe Schools Roundtable also hosts an annual convening to share skills and foster collaboration. Learn more at **www.safeschoolsroundtable.org.**

The Breakthrough Conversations Project was designed to help people have personal conversations with friends and families about issues of concern to lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender communities. Their conversation model and toolkit can help guide you through additional exercises to plan for and initiate the conversations that create social change.
**http://breakthroughca.com/sites/default/files/Breakthrough_Workbook%20final.pdf**

For a comprehensive list of **curricula, lesson plans, research, and multi-media resources**, visit the Safe Schools Coalition: **www.safeschoolscoalition.org.** The Safe Schools Coalition also publishes regular news from the movement and can help you identify the most promising practices for transforming school climates.

If you are a member of the **National Education Association** or **American Federation of Teachers**, first contact your local chapter for support. If you need additional help beyond your local chapter, contact each union's office of human rights.

For information about adding LGBT-related questions to **student surveys**, visit **http://amplifyyourvoice.org/allstudentscount**.