

Vital to LGBTQ students

Creating healthier school environments

In every public school today, some students have well-developed or emerging LGBTQ identities (LGBTQ stands for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer or Questioning).

Sometimes navigating this identity is clear, supported and comfortable. Sometimes the identity path includes confusion and fear.

Based on recommendations by the Massachusetts Commission for LGBTQ Youth, the State Board of Education voted unanimously last month to adopt updated best-practice guidelines to support LGBTQ youth in schools. This is the first guideline update in 22 years; all comments were persuasive about its importance.

A grieving parent — a school nursing supervisor — said her son was transgender and recently took his life. She felt compelled to speak up so those in leadership positions would do more for LGBTQ youth. As a trained professional she did not see signs of her son's suicidal thinking. There are not always visible or spoken warnings.

The state commissioner of Elementary and Secondary Education, Mitchell Chester, stressed how important it was for school systems to address new recommendations for LGBTQ youth, which include having resources and supports available for staff, students and parents. New guidelines also recommend schools locate a staff member who is informed and can be assistive in helping the school address issues.

One long-time college educator on the State Board of Education said he thought this was the most important advisory the board has voted in all his years in education.

Donald Willyard, a student member of the board, said he was "astounded," in a positive sense, by the work of the state's LGBTQ Youth Commission, which developed and promoted the new guidelines. "We are close to a time when all students in Massachusetts can be coming to school with a smile on their faces without feeling tormented because of sexual identity," said Donald, who is in high school. His extemporaneous choice of words — "without feeling tormented"— prompts this article because it forces us to face and address a troubling reality.

My Turn

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Susan Hollins

It isn't news that differences among youth sometimes generate stigma, taunting and torment. Whether it be religion, gender identity, body size, race or aptitude, there is likely not a person among us who, during our school years, did not see this, feel this, or participate. Today's schools are required to be proactive in prevention of students from experiencing mean-spirited teasing, or feeling excluded or afraid. We are obligated to keep trying to influence youth culture and create healthy school communities.

Fortunately, there are proven interventions. Among these is the Gay Straight Alliance (GSA), essentially a club, usually in high schools but it could be any school. GSAs provide a forum for discussion and to plan school events related to having a supportive and emotionally-safe school. Research shows that all students feel safer in schools with GSAs, not just the LGBTQ students.

School GSAs often participate in PRIDE parades to show the public their schools have programs to create a safe, supportive climate for LGBTQ students. At the Northampton PRIDE parade, school groups march down Main Street along with the mayor, health providers, religious organizations, businesses, associations, city leaders, politicians, and LGBTQ groups. Thousands of people attend Northampton's upbeat PRIDE event (this Saturday, May 2).

The last few years I've watched the increase of participating schools and colleges at the Northampton

PRIDE parade — even some pre-schools march — but rarely have I seen a school from Franklin County except for the spirited Greenfield Center School. We should make more effort to publicly show that Franklin County schools are supportive.

We do not need more tragedies to motivate us. Today's high schools and the families they serve need a visible school GSA, which shows, at the least, that schools strive to have a safe culture for LGBTQ students and adults. Our education commissioner and the state Board of Education unanimously recommend this.

The nine recently-approved best practice recommendations provide guidance and direction for schools (the full text of the explanations of the recommendations can be found at www.doe.mass.edu/boe/docs/2015-03/item6.html). If followed, schools have the best chance of providing a safe, supportive climate for LGBTQ students. New guidelines stress having information and resources about LGBTQ issues available in school libraries and in student and faculty resource centers. The learning curve for families, faculty and students sometimes requires consultation and training.

These supports are available throughout the state.

Anyone can begin a discussion on this topic by raising three questions:

- 1) Does our school have a GSA?
- 2) Does our school have current resource and reading materials for students and staff?
- 3) Has our school taken a survey about school climate and student safety?

Why, we might ask, is so much attention so important for such a small percentage of our youth? One answer is that our LGBTQ youth are disproportionately at risk. And when we address school culture to meet the needs of our most vulnerable youth, we create a growing-up school environment that is healthier and safer for everyone.

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