



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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GSA's Teach Acceptance and Help Save Lives

TORONTO: Bullying of any form and from any motivation must be addressed within our schools. In fact, programs and policies to address racism, ableism, discrimination based on religion and other bias-motivated acts and attitudes have been in place for decades and continue to play a highly important role in making our school communities safer and more inclusive spaces for learning and development. These measures aren't good enough. They need to be expanded and they need to be more effective. The reality, however, is that homophobia, biphobia and transphobia have been systemically ignored in our schools and communities, and only very recently begun to receive any attention at all. The lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) community is playing catch-up, and the price for delaying is fatal.

One need only look at the facts:

- 64% of LGBT and questioning students in Canada feel unsafe at school (Taylor et al., 2011).
- Hate crimes motivated by sexual orientation are dramatically increasing year over year and are severely more violent in nature than any other form of bias-motivated crime. Our education facilities consistently rank among the top two locations for a hate crime to occur, and the majority of both victims and those accused are between the ages of 12 and 24 (Statistics Canada).
- Suicide rates among LGBTQ youth are 4-7 times higher than among their non-LGBTQ peers. Rates are higher among youth in environments that are unsupportive of LGBT people, and the correlation between bullying and suicide is higher among LGBT youth (Haas et al., 2010).

It is indisputable that LGBTQ youth in Canada are facing something very unique in comparison to their peers. Unique challenges require unique solutions.

Enter the Gay-Straight Alliance. GSAs are not the panacea. They do, however, demonstrably improve the lives of LGBTQ youth, increasing their safety and improving their self-esteem. This

is clearly shown in a very recent study out of California, which found GSA presence and participation in high school to be highly correlated with decreased depression, substance abuse and lifetime suicide attempts among LGBT young adults (Toomey, 2011). Importantly, while the impacts of GSAs were significant, their effectiveness decreased at higher levels of LGBT school victimization.

The clear implication is that GSAs are one effective tool among many. It is for this reason that the entirety of the Ontario government's *Accepting Schools Act* (Bill 13) must be adopted:

- School policies must be taken into account. Egale's own national survey of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia in Canadian schools demonstrates that in schools with policies that explicitly address sexual orientation and gender identity, students are more likely to feel respected and to feel that they can talk to their teachers, principals, counsellors, coaches and classmates about LGBT issues, they are less likely to be exposed to homophobic and transphobic comments, and their teachers are more likely to intervene.
- Teachers must be trained to recognize and effectively intervene in homophobic, biphobic and transphobic incidents.
- Curricula must reflect the lived realities of the LGBT community, in addition to the many other communities in Canada. Canada's commitment to equality demands it.

Our youth are dying. We have a tool available to us that helps to save their lives. A GSA is a safe space that helps youth to build self-esteem and mitigate the effects of an often hostile world. To deny our youth access to GSAs is not only irresponsible, it makes us culpable for their deaths.

The impact that GSAs have is not because they talk about sex—because they do not. They do not teach people how to be gay; that's impossible. They do not teach people to play Wheel of Fortune with their gender; they teach us to honour individual expression and identity. GSAs work to address the underlying beliefs and attitudes that contribute to harmful homophobic, biphobic and transphobic bullying and violence. They teach acceptance, which is not synonymous with agreement: it is the simple ability to live together peacefully in a world where diversity is the norm. It is a religious principle, it is a secular principle. And it must be our highest aspiration.

FOR MORE INFORMATION:
Helen Kennedy, 416-270-1999

Egale Canada is Canada's LGBT human rights organization: advancing equality, diversity, education, and justice.