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# Study Finds Anti-Gay Harassment in Schools Rampant

## *Offers Ways to Help Stop It*

by Josh Friedman

Anti-gay harassment has reached epidemic proportions in California's schools, according to a recent study by the California Safe Schools Coalition (CSSC). The study, entitled *Safe Place to Learn*, was released in January. For California's children, 27.4 percent of whom experience some form of bias-related harassment, the problem is indeed dangerously prevalent.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, the study offers several tried-and-true solutions to policymakers, school administrators, teachers, parents, and students that can help reduce harassment and improve school safety.

The study, the largest statewide study of its kind, documents what has been suspected for some time but never fully confirmed – the playground and classroom continue to be crucibles of intolerance and abuse. Despite passage of the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act, which was meant to put a halt to bias-based bullying in schools,<sup>2</sup> such harassment poses a potential danger to virtually

every child in school. And for more than 200,000 of these children, the study found that the ongoing threat of injury, both physical and psychological, was real.<sup>3</sup>

“When 200,000 students are suffering the devastating consequences of harassment each year, schools can't ignore the problem any longer,” Molly O'Shaughnessy, CSSC director and report co-author, said in a press release. “This is an epidemic in California schools that needs immediate attention from state and local school officials.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Anti-Gay Harassment Strikes Broad Range of Students**

Among the study's most startling findings, 7.5 percent of students of practically every ethnic and racial demographic group reported being the target of harassment because they are gay or lesbian, or because they were thought to be. For about half of those students, the mistreatment was a repeat occurrence, recurring at least four times for 32 percent of them.<sup>5</sup>

What's more, the study found that the scholastic, psychologi-

cal, and physical harm done by such harassment was grave. Those who encountered verbal or physical attacks were at a greater risk for academic, health, and safety concerns. They often performed significantly lower academically than non-harassed students, and were three times more likely to skip school because they felt unsafe. Harassment victims also reported weaker ties to their schools, supportive adults, and their communities.<sup>6</sup>

More alarming still was the finding that abuse drove 55 percent of harassment victims into depression, and feelings of hopelessness, with almost half of them having seriously considered suicide. The report also found increased rates of drug abuse and drunken driving among those subjected to this abuse. Further, a troubling 19 percent of students bullied on the basis of their sexual orientation reported bringing a weapon to school.<sup>7</sup>

The study reported that teachers and school administrators with the most day-to-day influence over the problem often failed to take action to halt the harassment. While 81 percent of students harassed for their actual or perceived sexual orientation reported that they sometimes or often heard negative, bias-based comments, only 32 percent said that staff members intervened to stop

*(continued on p. 34)*

*The study found that large numbers of students are subjected to harassment and that school officials often fail to halt the abuse*

<sup>1</sup>Molly O'Shaughnessy et al., *Safe Place to Learn: Consequences of Harassment Based on Actual or Perceived Sexual Orientation and Gender Non-Conformity and Steps for Making Schools Safer*, Cal. Safe Schools Coalition & 4-H Center for Youth Dev., Univ. of Cal., Davis 6 (2004), available at [www.casafeschools.org/SafePlaceToLearn-Low.pdf](http://www.casafeschools.org/SafePlaceToLearn-Low.pdf).

<sup>2</sup>California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000, Cal. Stat., tit. 1, § 220-221.1. (1999).

<sup>3</sup>O'Shaughnessy et al., *supra* note 1, at 7.

<sup>4</sup>Press Release, California Safe Schools Coalition, Largest Ever Study of Anti-Gay Harassment in Schools Shows the Problem Is Widespread, Dangerous and Preventable (Jan. 12, 2004) (on file with author), available at [www.casafeschools.org/20040112.html](http://www.casafeschools.org/20040112.html) [hereinafter Press Release, CSSC].

<sup>5</sup>O'Shaughnessy et al., *supra* note 1, at 6, 7.

<sup>6</sup>O'Shaughnessy et al., *supra* note 1, at 8, 10.

<sup>7</sup>O'Shaughnessy et al., *supra* note 1, at 8, 9.

(continued from p. 33)

## School's Anti-Gay Harassment

the remarks. Besides failing to appropriately address the issue, staff members at times exacerbated the problem by making negative comments themselves, according to students who had been harassed.<sup>8</sup>

### Other Studies Confirm New Findings

Regrettably, the study's findings echo those of other regional and statewide surveys.<sup>9</sup> For instance, the National School Climate Survey, an annual, nationwide anti-gay behavior documentation project by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, reported similar findings from 1999 through 2003.<sup>10</sup> "Violence, bias and harassment of LGBT [lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender] students continue to be the rule – not the exception – in America's schools," the 2003 report stated. "And this survey demonstrates that this hostile school climate has a direct and measurable link to LGBT students' ability to learn, their sense of belonging in school, their academic performance

<sup>8</sup>O'Shaughnessy et al., *supra* note 1, at 16, 14.

<sup>9</sup>Molly O'Shaughnessy et al., Appendix 2 to Safe Place to Learn: Consequences of Harassment Based on Actual or Perceived Sexual Orientation and Gender Non-Conformity and Steps for Making Schools Safer, Cal. Safe Schools Coalition & 4-H Center for Youth Dev., Univ. of Cal., Davis 27-28 (2004).

<sup>10</sup>Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, *The National School Climate Survey, 1999-2003* GLSEN, available at <http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/library/index.html>.

## The problem is widespread but can be confronted by committed officials and students

and their educational aspirations."<sup>11</sup>

A King County, Washington study in 2002 of harassment and bias-based bullying in 2002 found levels of these problems that were similar to other studies. Moreover, the incidence of harassed students being more likely to engage in self-endangering, harmful, or risky behaviors, such as drug abuse, suicide, or carrying weapons to school, also matched other studies.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, *The 2003 National School Climate Survey, 2003* GLSEN 1, available at [www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN\\_ATTACHMENTS/file/274-1.PDF](http://www.glsen.org/binary-data/GLSEN_ATTACHMENTS/file/274-1.PDF).

<sup>12</sup>Michael Smyser & Beth Reis, *Bullying and Bias-Based Harassment in King County Schools*, 5 Pub. Health Data Watch, Aug. 2002, at 8-10, available at [www.metrokc.gov/health/datawatch/bullying.pdf](http://www.metrokc.gov/health/datawatch/bullying.pdf).

One sadly ironic highlight of both the Washington and CSSC studies was that heterosexuals, not homosexuals, were most often the targets of anti-gay harassment. Though the CSSC study does not quantify the finding,<sup>13</sup> the Washington study found that heterosexuals accounted for 70 percent of all sexual orientation-based harassment reports.<sup>14</sup> This fact poignantly illustrates the risk that all students, regardless of sexual orientation, face daily; no student is sufficiently out of the reach of the dangers posed by this problem.

These localized sketches paint a larger portrait of a nation in

<sup>13</sup>"[S]ubstantial numbers of straight students experienced harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation." See O'Shaughnessy et al., *supra* note 1, at 16.

<sup>14</sup>Smyser & Reis, *supra* note 11, at 6.

which the problem of anti-gay harassment is more widespread than previously supposed. In California, legislation has seemingly done little to curb such harassment in the schools.<sup>15</sup>

"Based on these findings, it's clear that generic anti-bullying programs just aren't enough," O'Shaughnessy stated in the CSSC press release. "Schools need to address the specific forms of bias that are behind the harassment, or it won't stop."<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Recommendations [from the State Superintendent of Public Instruction's April 2001 task force on implementing the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act] included adopting and enforcing policies prohibiting discrimination and harassment, training all school personnel to prevent and respond to harassment and discrimination, providing guidance for students on how to report harassment and discrimination, and developing anti-bias education programs for students, among many others. To date, almost none of these recommendations have been implemented." See O'Shaughnessy et al., *supra* note 1, at 4.

<sup>16</sup>Press Release, CSSC, *supra* note 4.s



Marilyn Nolt

## Fixes Can Be Effective and Easy to Implement

The immense scope of the issue, as revealed by this study, may provide the impetus for real reform. Moreover, the study itself proves the efficacy of various remedies that schools can administer to counter this bullying behavior.

Among these are implementing, posting, and enforcing a school-wide anti-harassment policy, which explicitly mentions bias-based bullying; training staff to stop harassment when they see it taking place; helping to form gay-straight alliance student clubs on campus; ensuring that students have helpful resources available; and implementing a positive, tolerance-based curriculum.

Safe Place to Learn demon-



Marlene Desautels

strates that any of these measures can help to reduce incidents of harassment, increase feelings of safety at school, and strengthen students' supportive bonds at home, in school, and in their

communities. These measures also can help combat the hopelessness and isolation that so many harassed students feel.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>17</sup>O'Shaughnessy et al., *supra* note 1, at 17-26

Creating conditions that support children in realizing their full potential is a real possibility, as the CSSC study attests.

"Every student deserves to learn in an environment that helps them reach their full potential," stated O'Shaughnessy in the CSSC press release. "This study proves that schools can take these specific steps to reach that goal."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Press Release, CSSC, *supra* note 4.