PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING BULLYING OF LGBT STUDENTS (7/30/12)
NJ Coalition for Bullying Awareness and Prevention (www.njbullying.org/908-522-2581)
Expert Advisory Group

The NJ anti-bullying law (Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights) requires school leaders to focus more intensively on preventing, investigating, reporting, and responding to harassment, intimidation and bullying (HIB) in school. This Expert Advisory Group, consisting largely of college- and university-based experts, was convened to provide guidance and assistance for schools throughout New Jersey to promote successful implementation of the law. This document is the 3rd in a series; you can access this document and other Advisory Group documents at www.njbullying.org.

THE BASICS: WHAT IS "LGBT"?

The acronym "LGBT" encompasses sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression; distinguishing these different types of diversity is important to avoid stereotyping. In the acronym, L=Lesbian, G=Gay, B=Bisexual are terms which refer to sexual orientation. T=Transgender or Transsexual refers to gender identity or gender expression. The letter "Q" for Questioning is often added, representing a youth who is questioning their sexual orientation and/or gender identity and might be *coming out* as L, G, B, or T. Q can also stand for Queer, a term often considered pejorative but which now has a positive meaning among some LGBT youth. The letters "I' and "A" are also sometimes included, with I=Intersex, and A= Ally (Heterosexual) or Asexual. *Sexual Orientation* refers to one's feelings of sexual or romantic attraction to others, *Gender Identity* to one's self-image as a man or a woman, and *Gender Expression* to how one presents one's gender to others. The terms are often confused because of the stereotyped expectation that gay men and lesbians will exhibit cross-gender behavior; e.g., the erroneous belief that boys who exhibit feminine interests or mannerisms are invariably gay.

PREVENTING ANTI-GAY BIAS IS ESSENTIAL TO ANTI-BULLYING

Explicit attention to bias is a necessary aspect of bullying prevention. Students are often targeted because they are different from others in some way. The dynamics of bullying are often, therefore, the dynamics of prejudice toward difference, i.e., bias. Also, as made clear by the case of L.W. vs. Toms River RSD, schools' efforts on bullying must extend beyond a response to incidents to include preventive education addressing bias in the school environment. The NJ Law Against Discrimination (LAD) and the Anti-Bullying Bill of Rights (ABR) explicitly include bias based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, and both laws are applicable to schools.

ANTI-GAY BIAS AFFECTS *ALL* IN SCHOOLS

Anti-gay bias directly affects LGBT students, and students who have parents, siblings, or other family members who are LGBT. However, the impact of anti-gay bias is more far-reaching. Non-LGBT students may feel pressure to participate in anti-gay bias and to conform to gender stereotypes for fear of becoming a target. If a school is not respectful of all members of the school community, then any member of that community – including students, staff, parents - may fear becoming the next victim of disrespect or exclusion. This tends to create a climate of fear, avoidance, and hesitance to speak up for others.

WHY ANTI-GAY BULLYING MUST BE ADDRESSED

According to a nationally representative survey, LGBT students are more than three times as likely as non-LGBT students to feel unsafe at school (20% vs. 6%), two-thirds of LGBT students have been verbally harassed, 16% have been physically harassed, and 8% have been physically assaulted. When asked for reasons students are targeted, students report that the number one reason is appearance, and the second most common reason is the perception that a student is lesbian or gay. A survey of LGBT students in New Jersey found that 21% regularly hear staff make anti-gay comments and 65% of LGBT students who were harassed or assaulted in school never reported it to school staff. Research indicates that New Jersey students begin hearing "gay" used as an insult before fourth grade. The rate of attempted suicide is three times greater among youth who have been victimized by anti-gay bullying than it is among students who have not been targeted by anti-gay bias (23.2% vs 7.1%). These issues need to be addressed, using age-appropriate techniques, at *all* grade levels.

SPECIAL LGBT ISSUES FACED BY YOUTH IN SCHOOL INCLUDE:

- Derogatory language used by students and school staff, including name-calling, use of derogatory terms such as "faggot," use of the word "gay" as a put-down, as in calling someone "gay" as an insult, or use of the phrase "so gay."
- Lack of parental support and understanding. Parents of LGBT students are usually not gay, and therefore might not be able to offer support and understanding and might, in fact, share cultural anti-gay prejudices.
- Many students display crossgender behavior at early ages including, but not limited to, students who will eventually identify themselves as transgender or transsexual. Efforts to break down gender stereotypy in the earliest years of school help create an environment in which all students feel comfortable regardless of gender identity or expression.
- Transgender students face issues ranging from which rest room to use, to social isolation, rumors, and targeting. Additional issues are the accuracy of information in their student record, which gender pronouns (he or she) and names (John or Joan) are used by staff and other students, barriers to school sports participation, and whether other students and parents know the nature of their birth sex vs their gender.

KEY ACTIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS AND STAFF

- *Be aware that language is important.* Terms such as "faggot," and the use of the word gay as an insult, as in "that's so gay," are offensive. All staff members should intervene to correct such language with age-appropriate techniques, regardless of whether or not the language is directed at a specific individual. The response "I'm not talking about gay people" does not make derogatory language acceptable.
- *Address bias issues at all grade levels.* Addressing LGBT issues should start in the early elementary grades, both to prevent the use of "so gay" as an insult in elementary school, and to prevent more virulent forms of hostility from manifesting by the time students reach middle school. In elementary grades, students should learn to respect diversity in gender expression, including family structure; as students mature, they should learn to respect diversity in romantic expression and self-expression.
- *Establish a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA).* A GSA is a student organization for LGBT students and heterosexual allies. Some students who need the support of a GSA will be unable to join because of personal fear, parental prohibitions, or fear that their parents will find out that they are LGBT. However, the very existence of a visible GSA in the school will help provide support to these students even if they never contact the organization. GSAs are open to all students interested in creating a school climate that is respectful toward LGBT students. GSAs are not discriminatory; the clubs are open to all students who want a respectful school environment.
- *Do not "out" students to their parents.* In a variety of circumstances, staff members might have occasion to discover that a student is LGBT. This information should be treated with respect and confidentiality. Never assume that a student's parents already know. If an incident of bullying involves anti-gay bias, procedures followed by the school should not "out" a student to their parents. The law protects students on the basis of actual *or perceived* characteristics; if a student experiences anti-gay bias, whether or not the student is actually gay is irrelevant.
- *Train staff on LGBT issues.* All staff and administration need basic information and understanding of LGBT issues to fulfill their responsibilities for creating a school that is safe for all students. Staff should be able and expected to recognize and respond to anti-gay language and behavior. The beliefs of staff who hold religious views about the morality of homosexuality should be respected, but such staff members are still accountable for ensuring that all students feel safe and respected.
- *Include LGBT issues in the curriculum.* Similar to information about the histories and cultures of various racial and ethnic groups, information about LGBT issues should be integrated across the curriculum, not only present as an aspect of health education. A good curriculum resource is www.safeschoolscoalition.org.
- *Make LGBT issues and the LGBT community visible.* Ensure that the school library includes books with LGBT themes. There should be posters, rainbow stickers, and other visible indicators that the school is a place where everyone is safe and respected, including LGBT individuals. This helps create a positive school climate and identifies sources of support for LGBT individuals within the school. A good resource is the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network at www.glsen.org. Another important resource for LGBT support is Garden State Equality at www.gardenstateequality.org.