School reform efforts for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered students

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Recent efforts of school personnel across the country to implement a variety of initiatives aimed at providing safe and tolerant learning environments for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) students have resulted in inclusion of homosexual identities in school curricula, identification of positive role models, counseling programs, and support groups. However, antigay attitudes and actions of students and teachers continue to persist. The most recent National School Climate Survey, conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN 2003), reports that “violence, bias and harassment directed at LGBT students continue to be the rule - not the exception-in America's schools”. The survey’s results indicate that more than 64 percent of LGBT students reported feeling unsafe at their school due to their sexual orientation, and for good reason: more than 62 percent reported being verbally harassed, almost one-quarter reported being the target of physical harassment, and almost 40 percent reported “relational aggression,” such as personal rumors, gossip, or lies being circulated in the school. More than 70 percent of LGBT youth confronted homophobic remarks (e.g., “fag,” “dyke,” or “that's so gay”) frequently, and although these remarks most often came from other students, almost 20 percent of the youth heard these remarks from school faculty or staff. The majority of students (71 percent) were “bothered" or “distressed" by such remarks. The persistence and pervasiveness of antigay attitudes in schools underscores the importance of recognizing the benefits and pitfalls of the strategic interventions designed to lift the barriers to learning experienced by LGBT students. This article draws from the model of school change proposed by Ouelett (1996) and identifies key reform efforts and schooling practices (or lack thereof) that either support or destabilize antigay school environments. The article also provides school personnel with the tools to identify sites within schools that either reinforce the marginalization of LGBT youth or address their needs and concerns.

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