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Susan M. Swearer Napolitano
University of Nebraska - Lincoln, sswearernapolitano1@unl.edu

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Commentary

Safe Schools Policies

Necessary but not Sufficient for Creating Positive School Environments for LGBTQ Students

Susan M. Swearer
University of Nebraska—Lincoln

In this issue of *Social Policy Report*, authors Russell, Kosciw, Horn, and Saewyc review the research on LGBTQ youth and illuminate a fundamental challenge facing researchers, educators, students, families, and policymakers. They write that "homophobia and LGBTQ prejudice are daily experiences" (p. 3) and that the challenge facing educators is to "design supportive school climates that promote the positive development of LGBTQ and all students" (p. 3). There exists in this country and in many countries around the world a huge gulf between acceptance of LGBTQ individuals and creating supportive school and work environments for all individuals. The reality is that in many communities and schools there is a profound intolerance for LGBTQ youth, in particular, and for people who are perceived as different from the normative culture (Swearer, Turner, Givens, & Pollack, 2008). The question of the day becomes, can safe school policies really change the climate that promotes and supports homophobic beliefs?

> Tolerance implies no lack of commitment to one's own beliefs. Rather it condemns the oppression or persecution of others.
>
> —John F. Kennedy

In the past decade research on bullying has exponentially increased in the U.S. and world-wide. Currently, forty-three states have passed anti-bullying legislation that ranges from mandating prevention and intervention programming, assessment of bullying, and consequences for bullying (Espelage & Swearer, in press). The proliferation of anti-bullying policies is a result of the increased evidence-base regarding the association between bullying and negative mental health, health, and academic consequences (Swearer, Espelage, & Napolitano, 2009). However, will increased legislative attention translate to better protection and support for LGBTQ and all students?

In 2003, we asserted that bullying should be examined "within special populations such as GLBT youth, students in special education, and ethnically diverse youth" (Espelage & Swearer, 2003, p. 378). In the past decade research on bullying has focused on consequences of bullying and forms of bullying. Less research has addressed bullying among and toward specific groups of students. A paucity of research has examined the complex social-ecological influences on bullying. Research has suggested that individuals are bullied because they are different from the norm. These differences are idiosyncratic to the norms of the community and the school. How do educators rise to the challenge of teaching tolerance and respect for differences when perceived differences fuel engagement in bullying behaviors? Will these federal policies trickle down to the individual school level and help change the climate that supports the oppression and harassment of LGBTQ students and students who are perceived as different?

The hope is that federal policies will provide the foundation that will change homophobic beliefs, increase support toward LGBTQ students, and influence state and local policymakers. Hopefully, this social policy report will serve as a catalyst

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for research on the complex relationship between homophobia and school and community environments. Social mores and norms in communities and schools influence policies, programs, and the culture of neighborhoods, schools, and communities. Research on bullying, harassment, and LGBTQ students has guided policy makers to provide specific protection for LGBTQ students in schools. This is vital for creating safe schools for all students. Future research can guide our understanding of the complex relationship between policies and attitudinal change and behavior. Creating safe and supportive schools for all students is critical for the well-being of future generations.

Federal, state, and local policies are necessary for changing the culture of bullying toward students; however, they are not sufficient for changing the culture of homophobia that pervades many schools and communities. In the final analysis, bullying toward LGBTQ students and all students will only cease when we as a society have successfully educated a generation of youth who truly accept, support, and respect differences.

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Susan M. Swearer, Ph.D., is an Associate Professor of School Psychology at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She is the principal investigator on the Target Bullying: Ecologically-Based Prevention and Intervention project (www.targetbully.com) and has a long-standing track record working with schools and districts nationwide to reduce bullying behaviors. Over the past decade she has collected data and conducted staff training in elementary, middle, and high schools, with the goal of helping school personnel establish cost-effective and data-based strategies to reduce bullying behaviors. She has authored over 100 book chapters and articles on the topics of bullying, depression, and anxiety in school-aged youth. As a licensed psychologist, she is the co-director of the Nebraska Internship Consortium in Professional Psychology and is a supervising psychologist in the Child and Adolescent Therapy Clinic at UNL.