

A culturally proficient response to **LGBT** **communities**

Our students take cues from school leaders in observing how to respond to LGBT students, staff and others. It's time to break the silence that contributes to students being marginalized.

What are we waiting for? How many more LGBT students will leave school because they are tired of being harassed on campus and in cyberspace? How many more suicides will it take? As responsible educators and citizens, we must address the educational needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) communities as we do other cultural groups in our communities. As leaders we must see this as our responsibility, not as a problem to blame on the LGBT students. Our students take cues from school leaders in observing how administrators respond to their LGBT colleagues, parents, guardians, community members as well as straight educators and staff who advocate for LGBT students.

Each of us has a sexual orientation and gender identity. Some of us are heterosexual while others of us are lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender. Sexual orientation and gender identity can no longer be unmentionable topics in our schools. Rather, they are diversity, equity and cultural topics that must be

openly addressed. Viewing sexual orientation and gender identity as in the context of culture is about all of us, including our students, our fellow employees, and the diverse communities we serve.

Since 1964, schools in the United States have struggled to embrace students' race, national origin, gender, exceptionalities and languages, while most often rendering invisible sexual orientation and gender identity. In this early part of the 21st century, sexual orientation and gender identity have emerged as topics too long denied; they won't go away. Nor should they.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender communities are too often viewed only in terms of perceived sexual behavior and rarely as cultural groups with norms and values that shape the lives of its members. Since confusion and misperceptions exist

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about who is identified in what group, the different groups are often referred to as the LGBT community.

This article underscores the importance of knowing and understanding diverse LGBT cultural groups and the need for proactive leadership directed toward breaking a silence that too often contributes to students being marginalized in ways that cause them to be denied access to education and dropping out of schools. We all are aware of news reports where, in extreme cases, the marginalization of LGBT students gave rise to bullying that led to deadly consequences of suicide and murder.

Our context

Our society is making unprecedented social and political progress in responding to the needs of LGBT communities in employment, military service and survivor benefits. This emerging and expanding awareness makes it incumbent on schools to demonstrate a value for the cultural groups within the LGBT communities. To meet these needs many schools must change. The existing culture of schools that regards sexual orientation and gender diversity as taboo topics greatly impedes needed change.

Although most change efforts are not easy, we know also that change is inevitable and natural. When properly understood and implemented, the change process can be led in ways that meet the educational needs of LGBT students and, at the same time, benefits all learners in our schools. Proactive school leaders must be able to recognize and acknowledge personal and institutional barriers to creating supportive conditions for teaching and learning while advocating for practices that benefit all students, schools and communities.

Proactive approaches

Proactive leadership expresses values of inclusion for all students, educators/staff, parents and community members in our school community. Allowing sexual orientation and gender identity to be unmentionable topics perpetuates a silence that stigmatizes everyone and often condones bullying and other forms of discrimination and marginalization.

When sexual orientation and gender identity are deemed unmentionable topics for open discussion in schools and in our general society, the result too often is LGBT members become targets for bullying and intimidation. The consequence of being LGBT is typically some form of bullying, physical abuse and ostracism. These behaviors seem to be commonplace in our schools.



Name-calling directed toward LGBT students is too often accompanied by whisper campaigns about the perceived sexual orientation of students, faculty and staff.

Acts of discrimination often go beyond verbal abuse and lead to people in the LGBT communities being targets of vicious physical attacks. Reports of these negative acts, along with statistics on negative experiences of students while in school, have been compiled and reported with increased frequency. Data abound that provide a graphic picture of the day-to-day reality that many LGBT persons confront.

All students' education is compromised when LGBT students and faculty are objects of physical and psychological intimidation and abuse. Not only is the education of targeted students compromised. Those students, faculty and staff who commit these acts of bullying and discrimination compromise their own moral authority as responsible citizens in a democratic society.

We are now at a point in our development as a country and profession that we may no longer hide under the cover of silence. Time

has run out for ignoring the problem. School leaders must step forward to assert our individual and collective responsibilities. Our silence carries tremendous consequences.

The effects of silence

Too many of us simply remain silent when hearing slurs or observing bullying. The effect of our silence can promote feel-

ings of powerlessness within us as well as in the targets of our behavior – be they our students, our educator colleagues, or the parents/guardians of our students. The resulting feelings of powerlessness by those affected limit their ability to participate fully in their own education and careers.

Let's make illustrations personal for a moment. If I am a member of an LGBT community and people act like they don't see me or they talk about me in ways that are not who I am, then I feel like I don't exist in the context of this school or district. Being rendered invisible may lead to issues of low esteem and poor academic performance for me. I'll remove myself from those who talk negatively about me. I'd rather be alone. I find that no one really understands or even wants to help. Now, I'm just lonely and often intimidated.

LGBT adults, too, often feel they are working in a hostile environment in much the same way that other cultural groups have been historically marginalized. LGBT persons report, "When no one talks to me or acknowledges my sexual orientation, it leaves

me feeling powerless.” Similarly, assuming I am a heterosexual educator who is aware of the surfacing of negative behaviors and attitudes toward LGBT communities and choose to remain silent, I, too, may experience a sense of overwhelming powerlessness. Through personal reflection and cross-cultural dialogue in faculty study groups or in professional learning sessions, perhaps I can help break the silence to which I and we have silently agreed.

Creating safe and healthy conditions

So where do we begin, you might ask? When LGBT students do not see accurate portrayals of themselves in the curriculum, they can experience an invisibility that mirrors their daily existence. Over the last two generations, women, African Americans, Latinos and other historically marginalized groups have demanded that school curricula accurately represent our social, economic and political history.

We now have available textbooks, literature and arts that more accurately represent

society and provide authentic role models as major contributors to society. Literally hundreds of notable LGBT persons in all fields of endeavor represent the widest diversity of



ethnic and racial groups. Yet young students who are struggling with their sexual orientation and gender identity are provided few models of success they can admire. In fact, the culture of the school can often become one where it seems that members of the LGBT community are despised. Hence, bullying, poor academic performance, and even increased suicide rates manifest themselves.

Concurrently, when heterosexual students are denied an authentic representation of LGBT members in our history and present society, they have a skewed vision of their own prominence, reminiscent of the whitewashed curriculum of the pre-civil rights era. Not knowing what one doesn't know about persons who are different from us leads to the formations of myths, beliefs in negative rumors and ostracism. Basic information, reflection, dialogue, and interaction have the potential of helping us to dispel myths and stereotypes about LGBT persons.

We have learned of many instances in schools and other public settings where homophobic slurs are made, sometimes with malice and oftentimes through ignorant unawareness. We also observe bystanders who do not challenge the negative remarks. In these instances, silence implies consent and reinforces the offender. In some situations, students have won hard-fought battles to have gay-straight alliances certified as after-school clubs, only to encounter difficulty getting a faculty sponsor. Faculty members

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indicated they were afraid of being stigmatized as being gay or of having their sexual orientation questioned if they stepped up to support the students' organization.

Would you be willing to serve as an adviser for a Gay-Straight Alliance organization at your school? As a school administrator, are you aware of the laws that protect students who want to begin an LGBT-Ally organization on your campus? Have you had these legal and social/moral discussions with the faculty?

Taking action: Policy and legal approaches

Across North America, widely different protections are afforded people based on their sexual orientation and gender identity. In the province of Ontario, the home to one-third of Canadians, protection from discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation is derived from the U.N. Universal Declaration of Human Rights, asserting that "recognition of the inherent dignity and the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world" (U.N. Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2012).

By early 2012, 22 states and the District of Columbia had enacted laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Ontario's actions are policy and legal approaches to equity regarding sexual orientation. The development of such policies and practices is preceded by uncovering personal and moral issues related to creating a safe and supportive school culture for all cultural groups, inclusive of LGBT communities. Confronting personal and moral issues is the action of effective leaders. Breaking unofficially sanctioned silence takes bold action from leaders willing to face the moral imperative to "do the right thing."

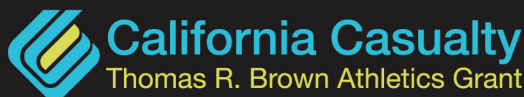
This type of leadership goes beyond holding a one-time training or information session on bullying or sexual orientation. Each of us as leaders must determine how we understand sexual orientation and gender diversity and embody that understanding into how we lead all aspects of our lives.

A question to ask of ourselves is this: "Is my seeking to understand the different groups a technical problem, a transaction

to be negotiated, or is this an equity issue?" All issues of diversity require leaders who know, understand and use adaptive processes. Adaptive processes require changes in values, beliefs and behaviors. This type of change often requires people to experience feelings of discomfort, loss, uncertainty and disloyalty to basic cultural and/or prior learning.

In the same vein as having conversations

about race, we find that breaking the silence and moving toward an equitable environment for LGBT communities also requires courageous conversations. These conversations require skillful facilitation because breaking silence involves ensuring that the voices of LGBT members, as with all members, are present and heard. Each member must speak for himself or herself. Each reality is different.



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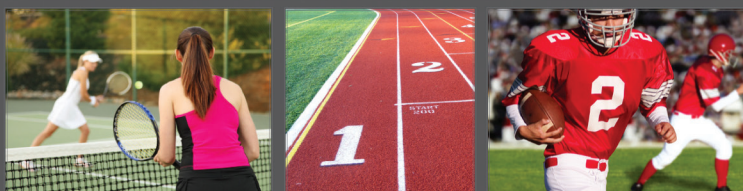
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Culturally proficient approaches with LGBT communities: Using the Essential Elements of Cultural Competence

■ **Assess culture:** Listen to yourself to accurately assess what you know about yourself in relation to LGBT communities. Next, listen to your colleagues to hear their personal stories, concerns and attitudes about sexual orientation and gender identity. The ability to assess your own, your colleagues' and your school's cultural knowledge provides important information about the extent to which you facilitate or impede inclusivity.

■ **Value diversity:** Model inclusive language and practices as a way to let people know that your organization is a safe environment. Use terms that reflect your knowledge of and comfort with LGBT and straight communities.

■ **Manage the dynamics of difference:** Proactively address all levels of conflict as natural and normal events, including micro-aggressions and micro-assaults. State clearly that when personal beliefs clash with the organization's commitment to diversity and equity, the organization's core values are paramount.

■ **Adapt to diversity:** Provide professional development for educators that meets the academic and social needs of LGBT students, faculty/staff and community members. Develop a culture of holding one another responsible for appropriate language and behavior. Assist colleagues as they adjust to new ideas and ways of supporting LGBT communities.

■ **Institutionalize cultural knowledge:** Engage yourself and lead colleagues in examining personal beliefs and organizational values that support justice for and equity with LGBT communities. Engage colleagues in conversations to deepen understandings and attitudes of being a diverse and inclusive learning community. Review professional development curricula to ensure inclusivity of topics and issues that affect LGBT colleagues, students and community members.

Anti-bullying messages are becoming commonplace in our schools and, of course, we cannot assume that all bullying is focused toward LGBT communities. Furthermore, many anti-bullying posters/campaigns are focused on generalized, student-to-student bullying that exists in too many of our schools. Within that context of bullying, many anti-bullying campaigns have emerged in response to the all-too-frequent suicides, killings, beatings and harassment experienced by our LGBT colleagues, parents/guardians and students.

However, we must realize that as tragic as acts of bullying are, they are evidence of a deeper set of issues that, when ignored and avoided, at minimum lead to marginalization of individuals. Marginalization, in turn, leads to acts of aggression and violence. To counter these acts, anti-bullying programs

are developed and presented as intervention programs.

Anti-bullying messages are substantiation that the school and the neighborhood it serves have yet to:

- develop knowledge of LGBT communities,
- display a value for being inclusive of the diverse community the school serves,
- develop mechanisms for broaching differences, to become familiar with LGBT communities, or
- learn about LGBT communities that reside in their midst.

Cultural proficiency provides standards, expressed as essential elements, to guide school leaders and their schools in learning healthy and safe ways that are responsive to LGBT communities and, in doing so, better serve the total school community.

Actions for culturally proficient leaders

“Look fors” and “listen fors” have become familiar phrases to educational leaders. When observing instruction or participating in decision-making, we have become practiced in what to look for and what to listen for.

The Essential Elements of Cultural Competence serve as standards, or actions, for our personal leadership practice as well as the development of school policies and related practices. Information in the box at left describes the four Essential Elements as “actions” for culturally proficient leaders to take as they develop and sustain a safe and productive teaching and learning environment.

Reflective practice

A time-honored way to develop adult learning in schools is through well-crafted professional development. School communities provide opportunities for you and colleagues to learn about yourselves and one another in a supportive, professional environment.

We believe the growth and sustainability of professional learning requires leaders to participate in reflection and dialogue on the personal and organizational levels. Reflective practice as part of a systems thinking approach viewed through the lens of cultural proficiency engages learning community participants in the following four practices:

- Examining your own personal beliefs and values,
- Examining the policies and practices of the school/district,
- Examining the culture of your community, and
- Examining disaggregated data to create an instructional plan focused on improving achievement of all demographic groups of students (Lindsey, Jungwirth, Pahl & Lindsey, 2009).

These activities occurring in a learning community context will enhance the possibility of institutionalizing culturally proficient practices that meet the needs of all students, intentionally members of LGBT communities who have been isolated and intimidated.

One example of a professional learning strategy to enhance shared understanding of a change initiative is a whole-group or community book study. When a faculty engages in a whole-group book study using literature that supports the knowledge and understanding of LGBT communities through reflection and dialogue, leaders have the opportunity to help create a culturally proficient response and a teaching and learning environment in support of all learners.

Across this state and country, schools continue to make progress in identifying and overcoming historical and modern racial, gender, social class and exceptionalism barriers to student success. It is our belief that if our schools can confront successfully the legacies of these “-isms,” then we can also confront the homophobia and heterosexism that marginalizes and penalizes LGBT people and also serves to diminish the humanity of those who actively dominate as well as those who remain uninformed or silent.

Culturally proficient leaders are needed to confront the environments of “isms” and



create supportive teaching and learning environments in which all educators demonstrate their value for all learners through their day-to-day actions in classrooms and schools. ■

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