Deliberate Practices for a Safe and Inclusive School Climate in Oregon

Abstract:

The 2016 Oregon Safe Schools and Community Coalition (OSSCC) Annual State of Safe Schools in Oregon report analyzed results from the 2015 Oregon Healthy Teens (OHT) survey, national studies from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Southern Poverty Law Center, and the GLSEN’s National School Climate Survey. The goal of the annual OSSCC report is to help Oregon educators, advocates and community leaders identify school safety and resiliency factors for sexual and gender diverse minority youth.

Thanks to a decade of national research, educators and youth advocates now know that inclusive anti-bullying policies improve school climate and reduce risk of suicide attempts in sexual and gender identity minority youth. However, the US Center for Disease Control’s (CDC) historic first national study of health risks for sexual orientation and gender identity minority youth in 2015 along with the GLSEN’s 2015 National School Climate Survey highlight that these youth continue to experience pervasive verbal, physical, psychological and sexual violence at school at more than double the rate of their peers.

The 2016 OSSCC Annual Safe Schools Report maps the way forward for Oregon schools. Advancing on the successful work Oregon school districts have done to establish inclusive anti-bullying policies, the 2016 report offers both a snapshot of the 2016 school climate for LGBTQ youth. This information is followed with actionable next steps along the path toward creating safe schools and communities for Oregon youth.

The 2016 School Climate Context:

Oregonians are independent and fair-minded people who are deeply concerned with providing all children access to a safe and inclusive education. In fact, it was a second-generation Oregon school teacher and U.S. Congresswoman, Edith Green, who presided over the groundbreaking 1963 Title IX Education Act. This revolutionary education act prohibited public education systems from the predominant practice of discriminating against girls and women. In the years since Title IX was passed Oregon has continued to be at the fore of culture wars over inclusive educational practices for gender and sexual diverse youth. Since that time there have been an array of state ballot measures, acts, and legal cases.

A brief history:

Founded in 2003, the Oregon Safe Schools and Communities Coalition is a 501c3 comprised of educators and advocates for Oregon public education. Our work supports community efforts to reduce youth suicide and other adverse behaviors in the often hidden and historically underserved gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender youth population. Although the primary focus of OSSCC is sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, we recognize the harm caused by harassment, violence, and discrimination of any kind.

As early as the 1980’s the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) was linking youth sexual orientation minority status to suicidal ideation. Further studies confirmed that this stigmatized youth identity was also subject to harassment, discrimination, and family rejection. In 2010 education researchers began to evaluate the educational experiences of these youth in Oregon schools and consistently found that a safe and inclusive school climate reduced suicidal ideation and other public health concerns.

In 2008-09, OSSCC joined a broad coalition of organizations to strengthen Oregon’s safe schools’ statutes regarding school bullying. The results were the improved Safe Schools Statutes (ORS 339.351 to 339.364) which strengthened protections for students, specifically students who either identify or are perceived to be sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression (SOGIE) minority youth. In 2012, the statute was further amended to address cyberbullying and require enumerated anti-bullying training for school employees. That same year OSSCC offered the first annual State of the Safe Schools Act report.

The OSSCC report began an annual ranking of Oregon school districts based on compliance with the school safety statutes. Over the course of the subsequent years the OSSCC report found that districts across the state moved into compliance with the inclusive safe schools’ statute. In 2016 the state released additional guidance to districts on addressing gender identity and gender expression. The Oregon gender guidelines now comply with federal Title IX educational protections against sex based educational discrimination for transgender students.
over the rights or exclusions of minority populations. Most recently, Oregonians have elected to strengthen public education policies to increase safe access to education for persons distinguished, or perceived to be distinguished, by race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, marital status, familial status, source of income or disability.

Unfortunately, this ongoing work toward educational access and equity in Oregon remains necessary as Oregon also has a long legacy of educational segregation and discrimination against minority students. This legacy of discrimination dates back to the original racial policies of the Oregon Territory expansion. And these legal barriers yet remain present in our laws and statues as they are slowly identified and removed from public policy. Along with a legacy of devoting laws to protecting citizens, Oregonians have consistently voted for and sought the legal means to discriminate against LGBT citizens and other minority groups more often than they have independently elected to support tolerance and educational inclusion.

The 2016 presidential election season once again presented Oregonians with pervasive rhetoric of conflict over civil rights and a politic of cultural exclusion. In the months leading up to and following the election, the Southern Poverty Law Center (SPLC) collected data on bias and discrimination in the nation’s schools. Following national school climate surveys in March and November, Oregon was found to be one of the top states in the nation for bias based harassment and incidents among and directed at Oregonian youth in school.

These national results illuminate the reason the enumerated Oregon Safe Schools Statutes (ORS 339.351 to 339.364) were penned and continue to be developed as living documents for a better Oregon. The work of advocates and educators alongside the OSSCC continues to be necessary in providing Oregon youth with safe access to education.

The 2016 fifth annual OSSCC report on Oregon’s schools captures a snapshot of Oregon at a pivotal transition time for us as a community. As a state, we have come far in a short time toward increasing safe access to education. In less than a decade we have seen a steady increase in efforts on the part of educators to provide a safe and inclusive learning environment for sexual and gender diverse youth by implementing policies and procedures to address bias based bullying and harassment.

State of Oregon Schools - 2016

Youth from across Oregon are best able to share with us what is happening in their schools related to identity based bullying, harassment, and intimidation. The 2015 Oregon Healthy Teens (OHT) survey of youth in Oregon identifies approximately 12% of 8th grade youth, and 11.3% of 11th grade youth report being lesbian, gay, bisexual, or questioning. The 2015 OHT survey did not capture data on gender identity.

While the new 2017 OHT survey has been modified to capture data on gender identity, we can currently rely on the 2015 National School Climate Survey to offer insight into the experiences of Oregon’s gender diverse youth. The GLSEN National School Climate Survey sampled 10,528 students between the ages of 13 and 21. Approximately half of these respondents identified as sexual orientation minority youth and about a third of them identified as gender identity minority youth.

Hostile school climate

While the overwhelming majority of Oregon school districts now have policies in place which are designed to protect youth from harassment, 2015 OHT survey data indicate LGBQ students are still two to three times as likely as their peers to report being bullied in school.

These findings can be contextualized by GLSEN’s 2015 National School Climate survey. This national study found that 57% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 43% because of their gender expression. Schools continue to be places in which LGBTQ youth can expect to be sexually harassed and cyberbullied. Schools are much less physically safe for LGBTQ youth and they are even much more likely to be sexually assaulted than their non-LGBTQ peers.

Unfortunately we must still report that 8 of every 10 LGBTQ youth in schools continues to hear gay, fag, dyke or other homophobic remarks frequently at school.

Oregon LGBQ 11th graders are TWICE as likely to report being bullied in school

Oregon LGBQ 8th graders are 3X as likely to report being bullied in school

And a full 95% of these students hear negative remarks about gender expression. With 85% of these students reporting hearing negative remarks specifically about transgender people.

And while Oregon schools have implemented harassment policies to address this bullying and hostile school
climate these most recent survey results indicate that LGBTQ students remain unable to fully engage in learning in our states schools. When Oregon students experience such high levels of harassment and bias at school, the results are alarming.

When LGBTQ youth face bias at school they are:

- more than three times as likely to have missed school in the past month than their peers.
- twice as likely to report that they do not plan to pursue post-secondary education.
- have lower GPAs than their peers.
- and report lower self-esteem and school belonging and register higher levels of depression.

And most alarming, the 2015 OHT student survey once again confirm that our LGBQ youth remain far more likely to consider suicide than their non-LGBQ identifying peers. This final disturbing finding is our call to action for educators across the state. We are far from where we need to be in addressing this health and wellbeing crisis among our youth.

The Oregon Youth Development Council put out an outstanding report entitled Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Questioning Youth: Addressing the need for statewide policies and supports xviii. This statewide report provides more in-depth data on LGBTQ youth school related issues as well as risks of health concerns, homelessness, foster care issues, and problems with the juvenile justice system.

And so, while we have committed as a state to put into place safe school policies and guidelines to protect students it is clear that much more must be done.
Promising practices for improving the school climate

As noted at the beginning of this report, an improved school community climate reduces negative educational and health impacts for LGBTQ youth and for all Oregon youth. In this year of cultural tensions and identity based political intimidation, we Oregon educators are once again called upon to increase and diversify our efforts to make schools a safe haven for all of Oregon’s children.

With harassment and bullying policies in place to address identity based bullying, it is now time for schools to become proactive and culturally sustaining for all of our youth.

The following school related resources and deliberate supports have proven to bring about improved school climate:
- Enumerated Anti-Bullying Policies
- Supportive Educators
- Supportive Affinity Groups like Gay-Straight Alliances
- Inclusive Curriculum

The remainder of this report will provide recommendations for these four deliberate educational practices that can increase school safety, improve the school climate, and lead to improved outcomes for Oregon youth.

Enumerated anti-bullying policies:

Oregon is ahead of many other states in addressing identity based bullying through the Safe Schools Act.

The vast majority of Oregon districts have now put into place enumerated anti-bullying policies. However, the 2015 data make clear that Oregon students are still regularly engage in bias language, harassment, and bullying regarding issues of sexual orientation and gender identity.

It is clear that next steps are necessary now that policies have been put in place by a district. This is why in 2012 the statue was expanded to require professional training and oversight of a district’s anti-bullying policy.

It is time to find out what is happening in your district. How does professional training take place? How are bullying and harassment incidents reported? How are they recorded? And what is the follow-up for students on all sides of the scenario.

The U.S. Department of Education provides teacher training resources at stopbullying.gov. This site discusses identity based bullying and gives an overview of bullying of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender students. The information you find here will reinforce the information you have seen in this report, but does not offer a great deal of targeted or specific training information.

GLSEN provides an abundance of resources for educators on this topic at glsen.org/educate/resources. Here you will find educator guides, LGBT-inclusive curriculum, and lesson plans on bullying-bias-and-diversity.

Welcoming Schools, a project of the Human Rights Campaign Foundation, also offers a comprehensive approach to improving school climate and reduce bias based bullying. You can find an array of resources from this project at welcomingschools.com.

Supportive Educators

When Oregon youth were asked about supportive educators, LGBTQ youth were less likely than their peers to be able to identify a teacher or adult in their life that really cared about them.

Advocates for LGBTQ and other underserved youth have identified some critical first steps toward becoming a visible “supportive educator” for vulnerable youth.

Develop your knowledge — Read about these issues and learn about LGBTQ youth. Take on this new learning just like you would with any other professional growth area in your teaching.

Words matter — Speak respectfully about diversity and diverse communities on a regular basis.

Listen — Make space for students to speak and name their own experiences and needs.

Teach — Include LGBTQ and other underrepresented stories, examples, and facts in your teaching.

Respond — When approached about conflict or bias listen to student’s experiences and needs. Help them determine what will improve the situation and guide them in ways to reconcile or restore relationships. The work of becoming a supportive educator is ever evolving.

Supportive Affinity Groups like Gay-Straight Alliances

Unfortunately, as the SPLC report indicated, and as we have seen in the media this year, Oregon school climate is greatly damaged by bias-based bullying, harassment, and intimidation. The need for supportive affinity groups is greater during these times for LGBTQ youth, religious minority youth, racial minority youth, and immigrant youth who have all been targeted in the most recent culture wars.

For me personally at my school we had a club called MEChA. This club helped promote education after high school for Latino/a students. In this club, we organized many fundraisers to help raise money for the local school sparrow, or to go visit different college campuses.

In charge of this club was a local counselor who honestly pushed me so much to work hard and continue on my education. She was such a great and positive influence in my life and helped me in so many ways.

- Oregon Latina high school graduate, Class of 2016

I personally do not think I would have graduated if I didn’t have teachers that cared and were willing to understand what was going on in my life.

I went through a lot of family related issues and I needed extensions. Teachers would listen and help me in any way they could that didn’t crucially violate the district policies about teacher-student relationships.

Honestly, my teachers who listened and were supportive were the best teachers at the school and it is hard because technically they aren’t allowed to get that personal with students....

- Oregon transgender high school senior, Class of 2016

For me personally at my school we had a club called MEChA. This club helped promote education after high school for Latino/a students. In this club, we organized many fundraisers to help raise money for the local school sparrow, or to go visit different college campuses.

In charge of this club was a local counselor who honestly pushed me so much to work hard and continue on my education. She was such a great and positive influence in my life and helped me in so many ways.

- Oregon Latina high school graduate, Class of 2016

Supportive Affinity Groups like Gay-Straight Alliances

Unfortunately, as the SPLC report indicated, and as we have seen in the media this year, Oregon school climate is greatly damaged by bias-based bullying, harassment, and intimidation. The need for supportive affinity groups is greater during these times for LGBTQ youth, religious minority youth, racial minority youth, and immigrant youth who have all been targeted in the most recent culture wars.
While these groups are, student led, they require committed educator support. All too often these student groups are expected to both be run by and serve the needs of marginalized youth.

For affinity groups and clubs to improve the school climate they must be institutionally supported, resourced and readily available to students. You can read much more about establishing and maintaining GSA’s at the GLSEN website: GLSEN.org.

The California based GSA Network also provides an array of resources and leadership opportunities to students in schools with GSA advisors and student groups. You can learn more about them at gsanetwork.org

Inclusive Curricular Resources

Finally, as educators we need to return to our primary professional calling and use teaching as the core tool for improving school climate and reducing bias-based bullying, harassment, and intimidation. Studies continue to confirm that cultural knowledge and inclusive education are highly effective at reducing bias-based bullying and harassment. The California FAIR Education Act of 2011 is the most recent example of education policy to make curriculum that is fair, accurate, inclusive and respectful. This act has resulted in an array of developmentally appropriate curriculum materials to make history and social studies.

Conclusion to the Safe Schools Report for 2016

Oregon has come a long way in our commitment to have safe and inclusive schools for all youth. And we still have a long way to go. Laws and policies are lifeless on paper until you decide to put them into action. Now is the time to learn and lead in making schools safer for our youth.

It is time to make your own Safe Schools Action Plan

What steps will your district take to improve the climate for LGBTQ and other minority youth?

What steps will your school community take to improve the climate and reduce bias-based bullying and harassment in your school?

What steps will you take to become a supportive and inclusive educator or advocate?

Julie Heffernan, PhD.
Co-Chair, Oregon Safe Schools and Communities Coalition
Graduate Director of Curriculum and Teaching
University of Oregon
Co-Director, UOTeachOUT

Tina Gutierrez-Schmich, PhD.
Equity Director
Bethel School District
Co-Director, UOTeachOUT

Inclusive curriculum and additional resources can be found at:

Faireducationact.com
Curriculum from a California public education project

GLSEN.org
An education non-profit to support gender inclusive environments

Rethinkingschools.org
Both a magazine and publications addressing these topics

Teachingforchange.org
A social justice oriented 501c-3 for educating teachers

Welcomingschools.org
A project of the HRC Foundation

---

1 The OHT Survey is an anonymous and voluntary survey sponsored by the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) in collaboration with the Oregon Department of Education (ODE). In 2015, more than 29,674 students in grades 8 and 11 participated in OHT.


3 Oregon Revised Statutes, 659.850 Discrimination in Education prohibited rules http://www.oregonlaws.org/ors/659.850

4 ORS 339.350 to 339.364 In this statute, the term sex is associated with the sex identification of an individual. This statute is aligned with the federal Title IX Act which protects students from sex based discrimination in federally funded education systems. In both the state and federal statutes the courts have upheld protections for the term sex to include transgender or other gender diverse identities.


10 Eller, LaShanda, (2011, 2013, 2015) LGBTQ Youth and Sexual Health Outcomes in Oregon, Oregon Healthy Teens Surveys, Oregon Public Health Authority.


Safe Schools for Young Children: Welcoming Gender Diverse Children and Families

Birth announcements shout, “it’s a girl!” “it’s a boy!” From the moment of their birth, children enter a gendered world. Even before birth, gifts, names, and colors are chosen with a child’s gender in mind. What happens for the young child whose emerging identity does not match the one assigned to them at birth? How does this impact their experiences in their family? In their community?

Children as young as two begin to notice and respond to similarities and differences such as appearance, ability, gender expression, language, and family structure. The way adults in their lives respond to their questions and observations is critical to the development of a positive attitude to their own and others “differences.”

What role can early childhood programs play in welcoming and supporting gender expansive children and LGBTQ identified parents and families? As early childhood professionals, we can create safe and welcoming schools for young children. Schools can be places where children and adults feel that who they are is respected and honored and celebrated. Anti-bias education in early childhood programs involves creating a learning community that supports all dimensions of human differences. Anti-bias educator, Emily Styles, speaks of the power of “windows” and “mirrors” — mirrors to reflect back and validate a child’s own identities and experience; windows to allow them to look out onto the experience of others. Safe schools for young children offer many mirrors that reflect and affirm diverse identities and family structures. Additionally, the educators and caregivers in safe schools intentionally offer opportunities for children to look through new windows.

A persona doll is a powerful teaching strategy in anti-bias education for young children. An early childhood educator (or teacher, or trusted adult) introduces a doll with a developed, defined identity that offers both a mirror and window to the children. In one early childhood program, Logan is a persona doll who is introduced to the children as someone who, along with other attributes, “feels like both a boy and a girl.” The teachers take care to use they/them as pronouns when talking about Logan. After several opportunities to get to know Logan, the teachers overhear a conversation between four children:

Cedar: You like pink?
Nathaniel: Yes!
Cedar: I like pink and purple and blue.
Nathaniel: You’re more like a girl and a boy. You’re like a both and so am I.
Cedar: Yeah, we’re like Logan.
Josh: None of us are like Logan because we’re all boys and girls.

Jacob: No, we’re all like Logan.

As adults, it’s easy to look at this conversation through our own lenses filtered by fear or injustice or uncertainty or pride. This simple conversation might on the surface seem to be about colors and gender. Adults may either want to smile and dismiss it or correct it and say that gender is so much more than what color you like. Or, they may worry that children don’t fully understand gender identity and feel compelled to teach them everything right now.

Early childhood educators and program leaders striving to create and sustain safe and welcoming spaces for gender diverse children and families are invited to consider the following points as possible actions, steps or prompts for reflection.

- Diverse children and families are reflected in the classroom/program. Photos, books, dolls, and curriculum materials show varied gender roles, family forms, gender expression.
- Explicit statements of inclusion such as posters, printed mission/vision statements are publicly displayed.
- Open support for gender diversity is demonstrated by displaying community resources prominently and advertising LGBTQ community events and organizations.
- Programs offer gender neutral restrooms for adults and children.
- Programs use “they” rather than “him” or “him/her” in written materials and remove gender boxes on enrollment and employment forms or include additional options e.g. “non-binary,” or ask for “preferred pronoun.”
- Programs strive to employ staff who represent diversity across the gender spectrum. Staff are supported to step “outside the box” with their own gender presentation to provoke questions and observations.
  - It is important to provide the same physical and emotional safety to staff that we do for children and families, acknowledging that staff may have experienced bias and discrimination based on their gender expression and being conscious of the role all staff can play in supporting gender diversity.
- Teachers and other staff work to avoid unnecessarily gendered language and language that promotes a gender binary - e.g. “Boys and girls, it’s time for lunch” “All the girls can line up now.”
- Teachers/staff work to become self-aware and reflective—do we compliment girls for their clothing/appearance? Boys for their actions/attributes? Staff notice and critically reflect on which adjectives they use to describe children.
- Teachers plan environments and activities that provoke and challenge children’s thinking.
- Using teachable moments, teachers respond promptly to bias, name-calling and exclusion. Teachers seek out further teaching opportunities related to the misconceptions and misinformation children may hold that are revealed in these uncomfortable and hurtful moments.
Thoughts from Oregon Department of Education Civil Rights Specialist

I want to express gratitude to many of you who are making a difference in Oregon. We have made some wonderful gains over the past year, including our state’s Transgender Guidelines for School Districts. Many of these gains have come from your willingness to stand up and be recognized, while demanding that dignity and respect are given to each and every person. This is an enduring battle that continues. There are many in our schools who may worry for the future, or who worry for safety because of where they were born, how they look, who they love, or how they pray. The most basic of requirements for our children to learn and thrive in our schools, is a safe and inclusive environment.

The Oregon Department of Education works closely with the US Department of Education Office for Civil Rights and other organizations committed to equal opportunity, nondiscrimination and respectful environments. We provide Technical assistance, training, and alternate dispute resolution opportunities for students, schools, districts, parents, and interested parties regarding civil rights and equal opportunities.

You can and do have an impact on what happens in your schools. If you see a need for change, or if you are aware of discrimination taking place, you have a voice. Your school is required to have complaint procedures that are readily accessible to students, staff, and third parties. They are required to investigate complaints that are received, and to prohibit retaliation. You can also file a complaint with the Oregon Department of Education or with the Seattle Office for Civil Rights. Please know that we are here for you. I thank you for what you do, and for the safe and supportive experiences that you provide to those you are with.

Inter-Relationship by Thich Nhat Hanh

You are me,
And I am you.
Isn’t it obvious that we inter-are?
You cultivate the flower in yourself
so that I will be beautiful.
I transform the garbage in myself
so that you do not have to suffer.
I support you. You support me.
I am here to bring you peace.
You are here to bring me joy.

Thank you for the peace and joy that you bring!

Karin Moscon
Civil Rights Education Specialist, Oregon Department of Education
karin.moscon@state.or.us
Task Force Gatherings: Outreach in 2017

Supported by grants from the Pride Foundation and the Equity Foundation, OSSCC will begin hosting Task Force Gatherings in 2017. The purpose of these Gatherings is to promote conversations about safe schools in Medford, Bend, Pendleton and Enterprise. Working with local planning committees, OSSCC Board members will help facilitate meetings to discuss:

1. Current (and/or past) Challenges: What is happening now in the schools? Do students feel safe?
2. Area Strengths and Successes: Are there any special efforts happening in the local area to make a classroom or school safer?
3. Solutions/Outcomes/Barriers — brainstorming: What will it look like when schools and communities are safe for all students, families, and teachers? What do Task Force members want to see in local schools?
4. Next Steps: What is needed in the local area to make schools safer for students, teachers and families? What are some concrete steps we can take in the next 6 months to work towards this outcome?

The four Task Force Gatherings in 2017 are only the first step in actively engaging rural communities in this conversation. We hope to sponsor four more Gatherings in 2018 around Oregon.

News

OSSCC no longer has a phone number. We encourage those with questions, concerns and complaints about bullying and harassment to use our e-mail address: info@oregonsafeschools.org. Please let everyone know of this change. We want anyone with a complaint about bullying to contact us via e-mail.

OSSCC Board Members
Ben Bowman, Co-chair
Brett Bigham
Cindy Surendorf
Ellie Justice, Secretary
Joy Wallace, Co-chair
Eric Overby
Julie Heffernan, Co-chair
Julie Houston
Lindsey Kennedy, Treasurer
Sally Stevens
Lindsay Ray
Dan Adams
Minna Kim

PO Box 80604
Portland, OR 97280
info@oregonsafeschools.org
www.oregonsafeschools.org

2016 Report Working Group
Julie Heffernan, University of Oregon, Education Dept., OSSCC Co-chair
Ben Bowman, Director of Policy & Outreach, Seeds Training, OSSCC Co-chair
Karin Moscon, Title IX Coordinator, Oregon Dept. of Education
Ellie Justice, Director, Helen Gordon Child Development Center, PSU
Julie Houston, Director of Early Childhood and Family Services, Impact NW
Minna Kim, Graphic Designer
Joy Wallace, OSSCC Co-chair