

"That's So Gay Is Not OK"

Backgrounder

Here's why it's important to take action. Our District mission statement says that we are committed to each student's success in learning within a responsive and safe environment. Unfortunately, many sexual minority students don't feel they are in that safety zone. A 1999 McCreary Centre Society report highlighted the following:

- 46% of the lesbian and gay youth surveyed attempted suicide at least once, by the average age of 13.
- 37% of gay and lesbian youth feel like outsiders at school.
- Two-thirds often hear homophobic remarks made by other students.

These are shocking statistics. Sexual minority youth and youth who are questioning their sexuality often feel very isolated. They may not feel safe to explore their issues at home or be able to acknowledge their sexual identity in their daily life. There may be no visible role models to learn from and no reference to the range of today's families in their school community. Students experience the pervasive, disrespectful use of the word "gay" as in "Oh, that's so gay!" used as a phrase to express negative feeling.

When we brought students together to help us develop the policy, they told us that the single most important action a school can take to change this homophobic attitude is to challenge gay bashing phrases. They look to the adults in our schools to take action if they hear discriminatory phrases or observe discriminatory behaviour. Students also told us that it is important to:

- Include discussions of same sex relationships and sexual activity when covering curriculum areas of sexuality and sexual health.
- Treat issues based on gender identity, gender expression or sexual orientation as seriously as other forms of discrimination, such as racism.
- Support *Gay/Straight Alliances* in middle and secondary schools.
- Make sure students know who they can safely approach about these issues at the school.

Our Board has established a District *Gay Straight Alliance Advisory Committee*. The committee's role is to assist in the implementation and further development of recommendations to support our sexual minority students and ensure sexual minority families feel included.

When we passed our groundbreaking policy and action plan, our board room was packed with young people. A cheer rang out and the students rose, one by one, to give a standing ovation to the District.

Awareness and inclusion will make a world of difference for young people too easily marginalized by their sexual orientation.