

Preface

PURPOSE

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth are coming out at an earlier age than they did in years past. Many young adults in the LGBT community come out by the age of 15, and some have known their sexual identity since the age of 10. LGBT students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender often fear the consequences of coming out at such a young age. They fear losing friends and family and are often threatened by their peers. LGBT students are more likely to be harassed or abused by peers, which can negatively affect their school engagement and performance.

In order for students to be engaged in school, they must feel safe in their school environment. School personnel can help this often mistreated group by providing safeguards and supports to protect LGBT students. School administrators have the influence and duty to create those safeguards and supports, and therefore, can have a profound impact on LGBT students. Safeguards and supports include codes of conduct and board policies as well as offering curriculum, resources, and after-school opportunities. This book explores safeguards and supports to help engage LGBT students.

WHO SHOULD READ THIS BOOK

Educators who believe they can change their school culture will gain insight by reading *Dignity for All: Safeguarding LGBT Students* because there are personal stories from the field as well as practical tips on how they can safeguard and support LGBT students in schools.

Creating safe spaces, incorporating curriculum, and establishing Gay–Straight Alliances (GSA) are some of the ways educators can help LGBT students. Action steps are provided in this book to help educators find ways to make LGBT students feel safer in school. In addition, establishing a more accepting school climate will help students who come from diverse backgrounds feel more welcome in schools.

Administrators need to read this book. As a practicing administrator, I understand that I influence the culture of the building, and teachers will only feel that they can step out of their comfort zone if I provide them with the environment to do so. It is an administrator’s job to make staff and students feel safe so that students can explore a diverse curriculum that will help them become career and college ready. In addition, I understand that we need safeguards in our code of conduct as well as our school board policies so that we have support as we confront issues with parents and students. I have tried my best to provide steps to bring administrators closer to those safeguards in their school system. When all is said and done, every single student who enters school doors deserves an education that will help foster their imagination and help them find their strengths. It should not matter what their race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation is, and it is not the job of educators to be the gatekeepers to a quality education. All students deserve it.

In addition, this is an important resource for parents. Parents have a role in the education of their children and deserve a place in the discussions that affect their children every day. When we involve parents in the discussions about our school systems, we get another voice that can lead to a stronger, more inclusive school system. The reality is that there are parents who disown their children when they identify as LGBT. This sad reality can happen for numerous reasons, but one of the biggest is that parents have not been exposed to people in the LGBT community. This book will offer resources to parents who lack exposure to LGBT issues.

THE GOAL OF THIS BOOK

Through stories from LGBT students and adults, readers will be exposed to the real-life experiences of these individuals. This book will encourage educators to make at least one change in their

classrooms or schools that will help an LGBT student feel safer and more welcome. A friend told me that he saw an LGBT student from Rochester, New York, speak once, and the teenager stood up in front of a crowd of educators and said, “You don’t have to do everything; you just have to do something.” It is not my intention for readers to think they have to make every change I suggest, although that would be great, too. It is my intention to offer suggestions on where educators can make changes, and have them make one or two changes in their classrooms or schools. That alone may help an insecure LGBT student feel more secure.

Changing a school system to be more inclusive for LGBT students is a net positive for all students because it provides them with the exposure to diverse people, which will help them when they reach adulthood and enter society. If it is good enough for a heterosexual student, it should be good enough for an LGBT student as well.

THE APPROACH OF THIS BOOK

I am a former elementary school teacher and a practicing elementary school principal. I work with students at their level, which means I do not use a great deal of educational jargon and try not to use big words. Although some readers may be uncomfortable addressing this issue, the book is designed to be a reader-friendly resource. I have included current and past research on all issues regarding LGBT students. I begin with why this is a timely and worthwhile topic, and then the book explores bullying, curriculum, GSAs, and school board policies, all of which will create a more inclusive school. Although the book does focus on the bullying of LGBT students, the suggestions I make can help with all bullying, not just one minority group.

Readers should use this as both a handbook and a resource for a book-club discussion. I believe debate can be a healthy and enriching experience, and this book will inspire debates among readers. I understand that not everyone approves of homosexuality and many do not wish to highlight it in any way. That can have many negative effects on all students. Although not many people enjoy confrontation, it can be constructive when it leads to a better place among educators.

Every chapter has both action steps and discussion questions. Action steps will provide readers with guidance when exploring

adding safeguards to board policies and codes of conduct. The action steps will also help guide readers who want to begin a GSA in their school as well as providing guidance to those who wish to develop parent outreach programs. In addition to the action steps are discussion questions that readers can use for book-club discussions. Those questions can also be used if you are reading this book solely to find useful information. They may help you process each chapter after you read it.

WHY READERS SHOULD BUY THIS BOOK

I do not expect all readers to agree with my opinions, advice, and guidance. To some this book may offer good suggestions that they can use in their school. As an openly gay administrator, I understand that this book may be very controversial, and readers will struggle with some of my suggestions. It all depends where readers live and what they have been exposed to in their lives. Regardless of their circumstances, readers will gain insight into LGBT student and parent populations that they will come into contact with, and they deserve to be treated with the same level of respect as their heterosexual peers.

Second, this book acts as a resource for educators when they begin to implement changes in their classrooms and schools. They need to know what to be aware of and have insight into how some community members and colleagues will react when they broach the topic of safeguarding LGBT students. I believe this book will be that resource to educators in a respectful way. It is not my intention to preach to readers why this is important; it is my intention to motivate others to start thinking about why this topic needs to be addressed.

Third, regardless of what readers do with this book after they finish it, they will have a better understanding of how to change the school culture in their buildings. After reading this book, teachers can help change their classroom culture, which will begin a grass-roots effort to change the culture in their schools. For administrators, this book will put a minority group of students on the radar, and by making simple changes to language, what is hung up on school walls, what appears on the school website, and what groups are allowed in the school, administrators will change the building's culture for the better, which will have a direct impact on all students.