



## WORKING WITH SCHOOL BOARDS FOR SAFE AND WELCOMING SCHOOLS

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Most school boards are aware that their communities are diverse – whether that diversity is visible or not. School communities include families of different economic means, races, and religions. School communities include families with different structures, including families with a mother and a father, grandparent-headed families, single parents, and families with LGBT parents.

School board members may not know the importance of making schools inclusive for all of these families. Some may have varying degrees of comfort with being inclusive of families with LGBT parents. But most will understand that families are important to elementary school students and critical to their well-being. As schools fulfill their mission to reflect the realities of the world around them, school boards and school administrators are important partners in the move toward full inclusion.

### GET TO KNOW THE SCHOOL BOARD AND LET SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS GET TO KNOW YOU

- **Actively participate by meeting with local school board members** and encourage other LGBT parents/guardians to do the same. Personal contact makes issues of inclusion more real to school board members. This helps ground the conversation as a real-life community issue.
- **Show that there is support for safe and welcoming schools** from a range of community members.
- **Identify how working to create a welcoming school connects with current school initiatives** and can help address other issues your school faces.
- **Testify before the school board.** Prepare what you want to say. Share your perspective as a parent, guardian or grandparent with students in the schools. Use stories from your experience or your children’s experiences in the schools.
- **Listen carefully to concerns, questions, doubts and fears.** Look for opportunities to foster dialogue in a respectful and personal manner.

### HELP THE SCHOOL BOARD UNDERSTAND THE EDUCATIONAL BENEFITS FOR ALL CHILDREN OF CREATING A WELCOMING CLASSROOM

- Students in schools with a greater sense of community are more academically motivated, have higher educational aspirations and enjoy school more.<sup>1</sup>
- Students who experience acceptance at school are more highly motivated and engaged in learning and more committed to school.<sup>2</sup>
- When there is a positive relationship between families and schools, students perform better academically and socially.<sup>3</sup>
- Helping children develop social skills at an early age may have a greater impact on their academic abilities than concentrating solely on their academics.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eric Schaps, *Principal*, National Association of Elementary School Principals, “Building Community: The Neglected Element in School Renewal,” September 2000. Available at: [www.devstu.org/about/articles.html](http://www.devstu.org/about/articles.html).

<sup>2</sup> Karen Osterman, “Students’ Need for Belonging in the School Community,” *Review of Educational Research*, American Educational Research Association, 2000 (p. 359).

<sup>3</sup> C.J. Pyszkowski (1987), cited in C. Patterson, “Children of Lesbian and Gay Parents,” *Child Development*, 1992 (pp. 1021-1042).

<sup>4</sup> G.V. Caprara, C. Barbaranelli, C. Patorelli, A. Bandura & P. Zimbardo, “Prosocial Foundations of Children’s Academic Achievement,” *Psychological Science*, 2000 (pp.302-306)

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## WHAT CAN YOU ASK FOR?

- **A mission or core values statement for the school district that includes respect.** This is a key way to help all children thrive at school.
- **Review and updating school policies and handbooks.** Ensure that all types of harassment and discrimination are forbidden. Advocate for harassment and discrimination policies that explicitly include protection related to actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, race, class, size, religion, sex and nationality.
- **Professional development for administrators, educators and staff.** Trainings could be school based or district wide. Trainings could be for school counselors or social workers, teachers, school bus drivers, or a core group of personnel in the district. Ensure gender-based and anti-gay teasing and name-calling are specifically addressed, as well as other forms of bias-based bullying related to race, religion, sex, class and nationality. Consider trainings on different kinds of families that are inclusive of LGBT-headed families.
- **Ensure that social skills are a part of the elementary school curriculum.** Proactively develop student's skills to work together, deal with social issues, manage conflict and stand up for themselves and each other. Help students develop empathy, understanding and respect.
- **Review of school forms.** Ensure they are inclusive of the full range of family structures.
- **Inclusion of books in school libraries.** Have books that reflect all the children and families in the school and the community. Assume that your community represents the full array of family structures and gender expressions, whether visible or not.

## FIND SUPPORT IN THE COMMUNITY!

- **Work with and engage other parents, guardians and educators to build support for welcoming schools.** Engage families that represent all forms of family diversity. Find ways to connect with other families who may face challenges in the school related to race, faith, family structure and class.
- **Work with existing organizations in your school such as the PTOs/PTAs** to approach the school board on developing welcoming school communities for all families.
- **Contact organizations in your community.** Think about who may support this work such as youth-serving agencies, family centers and religious organizations

