



Listening to Youth Voices: American Indian and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Students Discuss School Climate and Barriers to Learning

US Department of Education—Minnesota Listening Sessions, 2009-2010

Youth made recommendations to the US Department of Education regarding school safety and bullying in four listening sessions held in Minnesota in late 2009 and in 2010. Assistant Deputy Secretary Kevin Jennings for the Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools gathered the input from Minnesota American Indian and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) youth. He was joined at the last session by Steven Means, Senior Policy Advisor in the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education.

In each session, 12-15 youth participated. The youth were from the Omnicore Program at the Little Earth Housing Community in Minneapolis, and from Minneapolis, St. Paul, Anoka, Burnsville and St. Cloud. LGBT and American Indian youth shared their experiences at school, including barriers to learning and systems of support.

American Indian Youth

The American Indian youth in both sessions focused on helpful teachers, challenges with transportation, curricula recommendations and experiences with bullying.

Teachers: A good teacher is one who listens, takes time to explain things, who helps and who is culturally competent. Students had specific descriptions: “teachers who don’t yell too much;” teachers who listen, acknowledge issues and validate emotions. “I want teachers who understand where I come from (as an Indian), or more Native teachers.” “Recognize youth that are of mixed race.” The impact of such teachers “helps build my confidence.”

Transportation: The transportation policy in Minneapolis poses barriers for students to get to school on time. Due to budget cuts and health concerns, students are required in Minneapolis to walk up to two miles to school. While walking is good exercise, it is a challenge for students with asthma, especially in cold weather.

Bullying: Bullying happens in all aspects of students’ lives—at school, in the neighborhood and in through electronic media. The older students all agreed that bullying was more prevalent and harder in Middle School than in high school. Teachers who intervene in bullying are seen in a positive light, but still, too many youth do not trust teachers, or believe that telling a teacher will make matters worse. As one student put it, “If nothing is going to be done, why should the kids talk to the teachers?”

Curricula: Curricula about American Indians and “Native programs in schools that emphasize culture and language” would improve schools. “It’s important to have someone who knows us.” “We are the Seventh generation, and if we don’t learn about ourselves, we will get lost.”

LGBT Youth

The LGBT youth also identified teachers as helping or hurting the cause of school safety. They also had curriculum recommendations and discussed bullying interventions.

Teachers: Teachers who are supportive and clear about respectful language in their classrooms helped to support the education of LGBT students. “Yes, many teachers support me. Some kids say ‘that’s so gay’ in the classroom and I have had teachers stop them and say ‘that is not acceptable here.’” Students with visible Safe Teams

expressed a high level of support, from teachers to administrators. “Our school has ‘safe zones’ and our teachers wear ‘safe zone’ t-shirts every Wednesday.” One student described his experience of acceptance from teachers in elementary school: “For me, being out was never a problem. Teachers in elementary school always told us it was ok to be ourselves—so I was.”

Bullying: However, from the students’ perspective, many teachers lack skills to address LGBT bullying, or in the instance of one district, seemed to be confused by the district’s “neutral curriculum” policy. “Teachers need to be told that no matter what, bullying is wrong—too much of the time staff let personal issues and beliefs get in the way—bullying is bullying.” “Sometimes teachers don’t step up. My thing is, if you see bullying, do something!” As with the Indian Students, high school is perceived as better than middle school, and schools with a Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) are perceived as more supportive, especially by students who did not have a GSA. “We don’t have any of that (GSA’s). I’ve been hiding for a long time. If I had some of the things you guys have my life would’ve been much easier.” Support for middle school LGBT students is needed: “Younger kids are very susceptible to what other younger kids say. That’s why so many suicides are with younger kids—they don’t know it gets better. In high school you get support.”

Peers can prevent bullying. Adults are speaking up and being respectful; “kids need to do the same.”

Curricula: Besides being practical and useful to all youth, comprehensive sexuality education that includes information about LGBT youth is a way for LGBT youth to be seen and acknowledged. “We need to be included in regular sex ed,” said one youth. “And teachers need to be educated too. They shouldn’t ignore us—we are sitting right in front of them!” Social Studies and literature classes were also identified as places for inclusion of LGBT authors, history and culture. “We had assignments to read certain authors—and I struggled with it—then I found out somewhere else that the author was gay—it would have made a difference to me if I would have known that.”

Adults

Mr. Jennings solicited concerns and suggestions from the adults who accompanied the youth. Recommendations included:

- Provide guidance to school districts regarding laws protecting free speech and extra-curricular activities in schools. One GSA advisor described the challenges in her work: “We have had to fight for everything—to put signs on the walls, to meet, to write for grants.”
- Provide better data to guide practice; encourage the inclusion of LGBT markers on climate and community surveys, so that LGBT youth can be more easily tracked and their voices heard.
- Build strong collaborations to address LGBT student concerns and assure resources are available in their communities as well as at all schools. Support for LGBT students appears to be non-existent for some students in some schools and communities.

Federal Actions

Mr. Jennings highlighted several actions taken by USDOE regarding safe learning environments:

- Release of the Office of Civil Rights clarification regarding bullying and harassment, including bullying or harassment of LGBT youth;
- Formation of a national LGBT Task Force by the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education;
- USDOE has conducted meetings on bullying and will host a National Bullying Summit in April;
- President Obama releasing a video speaking directly to LGBT youth;
- President Obama hosted for the second time in US history, a gathering of all American Indian Tribal leaders at the White House.
- Allocation of Safe and Supportive Schools grants to 11 state education agencies to measure and improve school climate.