



Challenging sexuality & gender based bullying in schools



The executive summary of a report about sexual orientation & gender identity discrimination in WA schools

Commissioner's forward



During 2010, the Equal Opportunity Commission's Training and Education Unit consulted with a range of key stakeholders on the issue of gender and sexuality based harassment and discrimination in schools. Although bullying has long been on the school agenda, it is only in the last decade that particular attention has been paid to homophobic bullying in schools.

Anecdotal evidence from the consultation identified that gender and sexuality based harassment and discrimination in schools remains a serious problem for students in Western Australia. The majority of those consulted during the Equal Opportunity Commission's consultation identified a need for a project in order to develop a policy to systematically address gender and sexuality based bullying and discrimination in schools as an urgent priority.

The Equal Opportunity Act was amended in 2000 to make gender history discrimination unlawful. Gay and Lesbian Law Reforms were passed in 2002 by the Western Australia Parliament with the aim of addressing discriminatory policies and practices. These changes recognised that the human rights of same sex attracted people had long been violated. The Equal Opportunity Act was amended to make sexual orientation discrimination unlawful in 2002.

Whilst there is no doubt that generalised bullying policies have their place in schools, homophobic bullying differs from other bullying for a number of reasons, and therefore also requires a specific focus in educational policy. The pervasiveness of homophobia makes it harder for those working with young people to challenge homophobia compared to other forms of bullying, and makes it even more difficult for GLBTIQ young people to access support. Most Gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, intersex and queer (GLBTIQ) young people also come from heterosexual families, making feelings of alienation and isolation more absolute.

Following this consultation, I convened a steering committee and a working group was also formed with representatives from the Department of Education, Independent Schools, Catholic Education, GLBTIQ community organisations and the Teacher's Union. With the facilitation of the Equal Opportunity Commission the Steering Committee and Working Group instituted the Challenging Sexuality Based Discrimination and Bullying in School Project. The purpose of this project is to develop a coordinated and coherent strategy across public and private schools to systematically address gender and sexuality based bullying and discrimination experienced by students in schools. The critical goal of this project is to create a safe environment for GLBTIQ student at schools in Western Australia without compromising their learning opportunities. The project developed a Nationwide Education Department Policy Comparison and GAP analysis. Dr Tiffany Jones from La Trobe University was invited to analyze the findings in the context of her work on GLBTIQ students in Australia.

This report is Dr. Jones' analysis of this area with her research results and recommendations for the ongoing development of the project. I wish to thank Dr. Jones for her clear and well researched findings and on behalf of the Steering Committee and Working Group members assure her that these groups will work to ensure that a model policy in this area is achieved.

Yvonne Henderson
COMMISSIONER

Introduction

Greater recognition of discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity led the United Nations to take a direct stand against school-based homophobic bullying. The UN Secretary-General called the prevalence of this specific type of bullying a public health crisis. UNESCO has released several documents guiding education sectors globally to explicitly address it. Education leadership are advised to take urgent action, and to prevent the need for a reactive approach to homophobic discrimination and bullying driven by the type of legal actions and public protests now emerging across several Australian states.

Literature Review – Schools and GLBTIQ Students

Human rights statements and laws have recently been introduced that protect against discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity which many Australian education stakeholders may not be aware of, or reflecting in policy and practice. However, media controversies surrounding school-based discrimination will not have escaped notice, particularly around same-sex couples at school formals and teen suicides stemming from homophobic bullying. Around 2% of people are born intersex and there is an increasing number of youth who question their gender identity. Further, 10% of secondary students identify as gay or lesbian, and bisexuality may count for over one-third of adolescents' sexual experiences. Research reveals that as Australian GLBTIQ students increasingly 'come out' they are actually experiencing more abuse at school than in previous years: 61% reported verbal homophobic abuse, 18% reported physical homophobic abuse and 69% reported other forms. Overall, 80% experienced the abuse at school (up from 69% a decade ago). Other problems included a lack of relevant sexuality education, and deficiencies in social and structural supports.

Education policy can make a difference to these issues at both state/ sector and school levels. GLBTIQ students in Victoria and NSW particularly benefit from state level anti-homophobia policies, and GLBTIQ students who know their schools have policy protection in place are more likely to feel safe (75% v. 45%) and to report a specific GLBTIQ support feature at their school (84% v. 41%). Strikingly, they are almost half as likely to be physically abused at school, less likely to self-harm and almost half as likely to attempt suicide due to homophobia. ***Distinct protective policies that explicitly name homophobic discrimination and bullying can make a potentially dramatic difference to self-harm and suicide rates*** for one of the most vulnerable youth groups in Australian society today.

WA Education Review – Gaps and Opportunities

A comparative review of WA education for GLBTIQ students reveals an urgent situation for the state. While a strong majority of WA GLBTIQ students reported receiving a school-based sexuality education, these provisions mainly overlooked GLBTIQ issues. Only 12% were taught that homophobia is wrong, the lowest result across all states. Only 20% of WA GLBTIQ students attend a school with protective policy against homophobia in place (11% for Catholic schools), and there was a lack of specific supports seen in schools in other states. Many students considered their schools actively homophobic. These issues appeared linked to the lack of an explicit, separate state level policy dealing with homophobic discrimination and bullying. However, unique partnership structures and resources exist which could be utilised by the WA DET – if it chose to take a stand against homophobic bullying – to support swift and informed progress in the state.

Rationale – The Safe and Supportive Schools Approach

Research shows that policies taking a 'Safe and Supportive Schools' approach, explicitly mentioning anti-discrimination laws and homophobic bullying, and providing detailed guidelines for the provisions of specific structural and social supports for GLBTIQ students, are the most useful type of policy-led approach for protecting GLBTIQ students currently used by education providers. This approach entails the direct establishment of expectations for school provisions around sexual orientation and gender identity, and is built on a philosophy of support for GLBTIQ students (and the many other students in the school affected by homophobia and GLBTIQ issues). Steps are taken by schools to ensure safe and equitable educational provision and prevent discrimination, without relying on GLBTIQ students having to identify themselves to have their specific needs met. These steps are framed as a professional duty of leadership and staff for all school levels, sectors and types. They involve establishing particular structural and social supports, training and leadership.

Recommendations – Policy and Practice Strategies

The report concludes with a series of recommendations arising out of recent research, consultations with the WA EOC Working Group and Steering Committee and UNESCO, and key informants from the Victorian and NSW contexts. These recommendations are directed to government, education authorities and schools. Important features include the need for policy-based leadership, clear guidelines and training and specific structural provisions. Many different education stakeholders are seen as having a role in preventing discrimination and bullying on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity.

For a full copy of the report go to www.eoc.wa.gov.au.