Schools and LGBT-Parent Families: Creating Change Through Programming and Advocacy

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Eliza Byard, Joseph Kosciw, and Mark Bartkiewicz

Over the past three decades, a growing number of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) parents have joined school communities nationwide as their children reached school age. In the 1990s, a new wave of children with LGBT parents began elementary school, their parents among the first to have chosen to have children in the context of a same-sex relationship (Goldberg, 2010). As documented in the films of pioneering lesbian filmmaker Debra Chasnoff, the lesbian moms depicted in the 1984 film, *Choosing Children,* began to interact with and interrogate the practices of the schools profiled in the 1996 film, *It's Elementary*: *Talking About Gay Issues in Schools*. Meanwhile, a continuing "gayby boom" in the 1990s led to sharply increased visibility of LGBT parents in schools from 2000 on (Goldberg, 2010).

Current estimates suggest that there are between two and nine million children being raised by LGBT parents in the USA, and it is likely that these numbers have been increasing in recent years (Cahill, Ellen, & Tobias 2003; Gates, 2011; Movement Advancement Project, Family Equality Council, & Center for American Progress, 2011). Today, the experiences of the children of LGBT parents pose a growing challenge for schools and families and represent an emerging issue for advocates working on ending discrimination and violence directed at LGBT people in K-12 education. For the past two decades, the "Safe Schools movement" in the USA has focused on improving the school experiences of LGBT youth and mitigating the impact of homophobia and transphobia on school climate and youth development overall. The growing number of school-age children with LGBT parents requires educators and advocates to examine the ways anti-LGBT bias and behavior play out in schools from a new angle.

Despite the growing urgency of these issues, little is known about the school-related experiences of LGBT parents and their children. Much of the existing research on LGBT-parent families has focused on comparing children of LGBT parents with those raised by heterosexual parents in terms of their psychological well-being, gender identity and gender role behavior, and sexual orientation, in order to determine whether the children of straight parents are "better off" (Biblarz & Savci, 2010; Goldberg, 2010). These studies have paid little attention to the social context of family life, such as school experience, or to family processes, such as family communication, that might account for any differences among children across family types (Stacey & Biblarz, 2001). These studies have also largely included only gay or lesbian parents and have not been inclusive of parents who identify as bisexual or transgender. Although some prior research has

E. Byard, Ph.D. (✉) • J. Kosciw, Ph.D.
• M. Bartkiewicz, Ph.D.
GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network), 90 Broad Street, 2nd Floor,
New York, NY 10004, USA
e-mail: ebyard@glsen.org; jkosciw@glsen.org;
mbartkiewicz@glsen.org

examined whether children with same-sex parents are different from other children with respect to school-related outcomes, there is limited research that explores the family–school relationship, school climate, and other school-related experiences for LGBT parents as well as their children. This chapter summarizes research findings on the school-related experiences of LGBT parent-headed families and presents the key challenges faced by LGBT parents with respect to their children's schools. We examine resources and programming for K-12 schools specific to LGBT parent-headed families, address advocacy issues pertaining to crucial resources and supports related to K-12 education, and delineate specific steps that key stakeholders can take to improve school climate for LGBT-parent families, both students and parents. A list of resources for parents, educators, and students is provided at the end of the chapter.

Prevalent Anti-LGBT Bias and Behavior in Schools and Its Impact on Parents and Students

Ensuring that one's child gets the best possible education can be daunting enough for any parent. LGBT parents and their children face an added layer of difficulty and challenge in this regard. LGBT parent-headed families that join school communities enter environments that are largely hostile to LGBT people and with respect to LGBT issues. In the past decade, a growing body of literature focused on the school experiences of LGBT students has revealed a bleak picture— K-12 schools across the USA are hostile environments for LGBT students and with regard to LGBT issues in general. For example, middle and high school students report that sexual orientation and gender expression are among the top three reasons students in their schools are bullied or harassed (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2005). Further, there is strong evidence that LGBT students are more likely to be bullied and harassed than other students (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2011; GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2005). More than 90% of LGBT

students report hearing anti-LGBT language "frequently or often" in their schools (Kosciw, Greytak, Diaz, & Bartkiewicz, 2010). Harassment and victimization based on sexual orientation or gender identity/expression are commonplace in schools and can hinder access to quality education and diminish educational aspirations (Kosciw et al., 2010).

This scenario is hardly welcoming for LGBT parents and their children. Children must negotiate hallways where LGBT people like their parents are denigrated, and parents themselves may face discrimination or harassment in relation to their sexual orientation or gender identity, difficulties which non-LGBT parents do not encounter. Studies suggest that the moment when the children of LGBT parents enter school for the first time is a critical moment of reckoning for the family. For example, Casper, Schultz, and Wickens (1992) conducted qualitative interviews with 17 gay and lesbian parents with children in daycare through fifth grade. They found that when children of gay or lesbian parents entered school for the first time, they became cognizant of how their family configuration countered the norm. Further, these children had to contend with the fact that their family constellation was either not represented at school or represented as deviant. For their part, parents are painfully aware of the homophobia in their communities and schools and may therefore take steps to address these issues with their children in advance in an effort to prepare them for the experience. In a qualitative study of lesbian mothers of children aged 7–16, Litovich and Langhout (2004) found that most mothers spoke with their children about the possibility of experiencing homophobia because of their family's constellation.

Existing studies detail the extent to which anti-LGBT bias and behavior in schools affects LGBT-headed families, an impact visible to other members of the school community. Findings from a national study of 1,580 K-12 public school principals found that three-quarters of secondary school principals and four in ten elementary school principals reported that students at their school have been harassed because they have an LGBT parent or family member (GLSEN &

Harris Interactive, 2008). In fact, this same study found that only about half of secondary school principals and 60% of elementary school principals reported that a student with an LGBT parent would feel very safe at their school. Further, many of the principals surveyed in this study believed that a gay or lesbian parent might feel uncomfortable attending a school function—with one in six principals reporting that a lesbian or gay parent would feel less than comfortable participating in the following activities at their school: joining the PTA or PTO (15%), helping out in the classroom (15%), or chaperoning a field trip (16%). Similarly, Russell, McGuire, Lee, Larriva, and Laub (2008) found that LGBT students in 6th through 12th grade were likely to report that their school environments were less safe for students with LGBT parents than for other students.

Involved, Invisible, Ignored (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008), a report by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) in partnership with two national LGBT family organizations (Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE)) and the Family Equality Council (FEC), reported on the school experiences of LGBT parents of children in K-12 schools and students who have LGBT parents. This study (which we will subsequently refer to as the GLSEN family study) captured the experience of 588 parents and 154 youth between the ages of 13 and 20. The study's sample was more likely to be White than the general population of LGBT parents. Compared to the 59% of the same-sex parents who identified as White in the 2000 US Census data (Dang & Frazer, 2005), 88% of the same-sex parents in the GLSEN sample identified as White. Among the students, 64% of the GLSEN family study sample was White versus 55% in the estimates derived from census data (Dang & Frazer, 2005). The vast majority of the students (81%) and parents (78%) in the GLSEN family study were enrolled or had a child enrolled in a public school, with about 15% of public school parents and 41% of public school students reporting that they or their child attended a charter or magnet school. Respondents lived in all areas of the country, though predominantly in the Northeast and West, and in urban, suburban, and rural or small town communities.

A number of parents in the study reported that they did not feel acknowledged or accepted by school personnel. Many parents described the ways in which they were made to feel excluded, like one mother who said that "The teacher's assistant most always ignores my partner or is short with her, especially if she picks up my daughter without me." Almost a fifth of parents in the GLSEN family study reported that they felt that school personnel failed to acknowledge their type of family (15%) or felt that they could not fully participate in their child's school community because they were an LGBT parent (16%). Respondents described various forms of exclusion—both overt and covert—including being excluded or prevented from fully participating in school activities and events, being excluded by school policies and procedures, and being ignored and feeling invisible. Parents described situations in which they, their partner or significant other, and/or their child were not able to participate in school activities because they were an LGBT parent, such as when their child was not allowed to make two Mother's Day gifts for the child's two mothers or when they were not permitted to display a family collage on the wall with the other students' work because it showed two lesbian mothers.

These slights, whether intentional or out of ignorance, are detrimental to the family–school relationship. For some LGBT parents, the relationship may be further damaged by overt forms of mistreatment by other members of the school community, such as other parents and their children's peers. In a longitudinal study of lesbian mother-headed families (150 mothers of 85 children), Gartrell et al. (2000) found that 18% of these mothers reported that their school-age children had had homophobic interactions with peers or teachers. Morris, Balsam, and Rothblum (2002) found in a large sample of lesbian mothers that 16% of their sample reported that they had experienced harassment, threats, or discrimination at their children's school or by other parents. In research by Kosciw (2003), 16% of the parents surveyed reported having been mistreated or

received negative reactions by their child's teacher or daycare provider. Finally, in the GLSEN family study (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008), parents reported a relatively low incidence of negative experiences from school personnel. This finding is due perhaps in part to the fact that these parents may have chosen the school specifically because it was thought to be a positive, affirming environment, or because of the work the parents have done in proactively talking with school personnel about their families. LGBT parents were more likely to report that they had been mistreated by other members of the school community. Namely, 26% of parents in GLSEN's family study reported mistreatment by other parents, and 20% reported hearing negative comments about being LGBT from other students at their child's school. Parents described events in which they were subjected to hostile behaviors from school staff and other parents, had to deal with general discomfort and ignorance, or had their parenting skills called into question because they were LGBT.

The experiences of the children in the GLSEN family study provide additional texture to this picture of a hostile school climate (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). The most commonly reported reason that these students feel unsafe in school was because of their family constellation—that is, having LGBT parents (23%)—or because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation (21%). Among students with LGBT parents, 40% reported being verbally harassed in school because of their family. Although the vast majority of students in the study identified as heterosexual, 38% reported being verbally harassed in school because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation. As with the parents, students' mistreatment did not always come from other students, but also from adult members of the school community. Nearly a quarter of students had been mistreated by or received negative comments from the parents of other students specifically because they had an LGBT parent (25% for both). A small percentage of students reported being directly mistreated by or receiving negative comments from a teacher because of their family (11% and 15%, respectively), also mirroring the parents' experience.

Other research further highlights the in-school victimization that children of LGBT parents face. In a qualitative study of 46 adult children of LGB parents, Goldberg (2007) found that some of these adult children of LGB parents recalled experiencing bullying during their youth related to their family constellation. Further, Tasker and Golombok (1997) interviewed young adults with lesbian mothers and found that 36% of the participants reported that they had been teased by peers sometime during their school years because of their mother's sexual orientation, and 44% reported that they had been teased during their school years about their own sexual orientation or "inappropriate" gender role behavior.

Such negative school experiences have consequences for both LGBT parents and their children. Among parents, feeling excluded from the school community reduces their sense of connection to the school and makes them less likely to take part in school life. In the GLSEN family study, LGBT parents who felt excluded from the school community were less likely than other LGBT parents to have been involved in a parent–teacher organization (44% vs. 63%), to volunteer at school (47% vs. 72%), and to belong to other community groups (e.g., neighborhood associations) with parents from their child's school (25% vs. 40%) (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Because parent engagement can both enhance a student's learning and improve family–school communication regarding any negative experiences a student may have, this reduced parental involvement with school life could have significant consequences for student achievement and well-being.

For the children of LGBT parents, bullying and harassment may affect their in-school relationships and their ability to learn and be part of the school community. Compared to a national sample of secondary school students, students with LGBT parents in the GLSEN family study were more than twice as likely to have skipped a class in the past year because of feeling unsafe (15% vs. 6%) and to have missed at least one entire day of school also because of feeling unsafe (17% vs. 5%) (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Other research further suggests that this hostile school

climate has a concrete negative impact on the well-being of children of LGBT parents. For example, in a study of 100 planned lesbian families in the Netherlands, Bos, van Balen, van den Boom, and Sandfort (2004) found that lesbian mothers who experienced greater rejection in their community were more likely to report behavioral problems in their children.

Proactive Strategies for Parents and Schools

Despite the daunting reality of school life for LGBT parents and their children, there are signs of hope, including indications that in-school resources and supports may act as a buffer against a hostile school climate. For example, in Russell et al.'s (2008) study of student experience in California, students who had access to LGBT resources and supports were more likely to report that their school environments were safer for students with LGBT parents. There are steps that both parents and schools can take to improve school climate and educational opportunity for these students, and research indicates that LGBT parents are alert to these measures, engaging with schools in order to pave the way for a positive school experience.

Parental Strategies: School Choice, Engagement, and Advocacy

One of the most common strategies among LGBT parents for dealing with the challenges of school climate is exercising whatever forms of school choice may be available to them. Parents in the USA have the option of sending their children to public (zoned, charter, or magnet) schools, or to private (nonreligious or religious-affiliated) schools, though these choices can be seriously limited by issues of proximity, access, and ability to pay. Parental decision-making regarding school selection may be based on any number of factors, including practicality (finding the closest school to their home), the academic approach of the school (e.g., the Montessori method), or a school's academic reputation. Research demonstrates that in addition to these considerations, LGBT parents often weigh a number of other factors when making a decision about school enrollment and seem to be more likely to choose an alternative to their neighborhood public school than their straight peers, when such choice is accessible to them. The GLSEN family study found that although the majority of LGBT parents sent their child to a public school, the percentage was significantly lower than available statistics on the general population of parents (78% vs. 89%) (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). As noted above, a significant percentage of both parents and students in the study indicated that they attended a charter or magnet public school, a form of school choice that may require significant advocacy and some means of travel to and from school each day, but not necessarily additional financial resources.

Parents' options regarding school enrollment are heavily dependent on what choices are available in their communities, on how actively they can advocate for their child within a public school system, or on their ability to pay private school tuition or access financial aid. What we know about the demography of LGBT parent-headed families indicates that these constraints may pose a very significant challenge for the LGBT-parent population as a whole. Children of same-sex couples are twice as likely to live in poverty than the children of married heterosexual couples, and their parents are more racially and ethnically diverse than the married heterosexual parent population (Albelda, Badgett, Schneebaum, & Gates, 2009; Dang & Frazer, 2005). A study of data from the 2000 US Census found that 96% of US counties housed at least one same-sex couple raising children, with the highest concentrations found in New York City, Los Angeles, and the San Francisco Bay Area, but other families were found in less hospitable areas like Mississippi, Wyoming, Alaska, Arkansas, Texas, Louisiana, and Oklahoma (Sears, Gates, & Rubenstein, 2005). It is critical that school systems everywhere take steps to improve school climate; indeed, the burdens of advocacy (sometimes difficult because of community climate) or choice (which is not always an option) should not be left on the shoulders of LGBT parents.

When in a position to choose what school their child will attend, many LGBT parents consider the diversity of the school and the reputation of the school regarding diversity. When asked about their decision-making, parents in the GLSEN family study most commonly reported that they chose to send their children to the local or neighborhood school (54%) or a school with a strong academic reputation (54%). Yet nearly one-third of parents (31%) also reported that they considered the diversity of the school population (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Notably, the GLSEN family study also found that LGBT parents who chose a private, nonreligious school were more focused on the diversity of the school population than other LGBT parents in the study. Nearly half (46%) of the LGBT private school parents in this study reported that the school's reputation for being welcoming of LGBT-parent families was a key consideration in their school decision-making, and this percentage was much higher than the parents of children in religious private schools and the parents of children in public schools (15% and 11%, respectively). In addition, a sizeable percentage of parents reported seeking out schools that have experience with diverse family forms— about a quarter of public school parents and private religious school parents (29% and 23%, respectively) and nearly half of private school parents (45%). Even among parents whose child attended their local public school, about a quarter reported that they chose their school, in part, because of reasons related to diversity. This finding suggests that LGBT parents may not only seek out what schools would be most accepting but also seek to live in communities that would be more tolerant of families like their own. This research is corroborated by a qualitative study of lesbian mothers conducted by Mercier and Harold (2003), which found that in order to minimize any potential for problems, parents often selected their child's school because it was known for its openness and multiculturalism.

For LGBT parents of elementary-aged children, school demographics are particularly important for their decision-making process. In the GLSEN family study, elementary school parents were more likely than middle school or high school parents to base their school selection on knowing that the school included other LGBT-parent families, had a reputation for a diverse population, and had a reputation for welcoming LGBT-parent families. Concerns about school diversity may be even greater among LGBT multiracial families and families of color. Likewise, in the GLSEN family study, families with a student of color were more likely to choose a school based on its diverse population than families with a White student regardless of the race/ethnicity of the parent or parents (43% vs. 25%). Of course, as noted above, parents who do not have the means to pay tuition may not have any choices to make, if they live in a district with only one zoned school available. Similarly, parents who base their school selection on the family's religion or who wish their child to receive religious instruction in school may also have fewer options available to them.

As they consider school choices and in preparation for initial enrollment, LGBT parents often approach schools proactively to discuss their family constellation in an effort to lay the foundation for a more positive school experience. In the GLSEN family study, private school parents were most likely to have approached the school ahead of time, but it was not uncommon for public and religious school parents to do so (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Overall, about half of all parents (45%) said that they had specifically sought out information from the schools pertaining to how they would be with LGBT issues before enrolling their child. Of these parents, the vast majority (78%) reported that the information gained was very important in making a decision to enroll their child.

Once a child is enrolled in school, LGBT parents are very likely to reach out to the school to try to set the stage for a good school year. This outreach is an effort these parents may well need to make again and again, as their child has new teachers, for example. In the GLSEN family study, about half of the parents (48%) reported that they had gone to the school at the start of the school year to talk about their family (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). About two-thirds of parents reported that they had spoken with teachers at their child's

school about being an LGBT parent and 45% had such discussions with the principal during the school year.

There is also evidence that LGBT parents may be more likely than heterosexual parents to remain actively engaged with their child's school through volunteering and other forms of parental involvement. Nearly all parents (94%) in the GLSEN family study reported that they had attended a parent–teacher conference or Back-to-School night, and two-thirds had volunteered at the school (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). About half of the parents reported that they belonged to the school's parent–teacher organization (e.g., PTA or PTO) and an even higher percentage reported that they had taken part in activities of this organization in the past year (regardless of belonging to the organization). These rates of school participation are higher than the general population of K-12 parents—for example, LGBT parents were significantly more likely than a national sample of parents to be members of the school's parent–teacher organization (41% vs. 26%). There may be a number of reasons for this heightened engagement with a school: LGBT parents may be particularly concerned about averting potential problems for their children or getting engaged with the school after negative incidents, as well as simply trying to support their child's educational experience.

Organizations serving LGBT parents, their children, and the schools they attend have produced resources to assist parents in assessing a school's climate with respect to LGBT-parent families and LGBT issues in general. These resources can help parents select among schools or identify areas for improvement in the school in which a child is enrolled. Some also help parents figure out how best to approach a school about their family and think about the ways to be engaged in their children's education. GLSEN's *Is This the Right School For Us?* is designed to help parents with children in kindergarten through sixth grade judge whether or not a school will be a good place for their family (see resource list). For parents with children already in school, this resource also offers information about improving school climate, for example, addressing issues such as inclusion of LGBT resources in a school library and staff training on LGBT issues. The FEC offers a resource called *Opening Doors: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Parents and Schools*, which includes a wide array of information for LGBT parents and educators, supporting parents' proactive approach and encouraging ongoing dialogue between family and school (see resource list). For parents, the resource includes information about how to go about becoming involved in their children's education, such as suggesting being as open as possible about their family constellation. For educators, the booklet provides guidance as to how school staff can best support children of LGBT parents, such as working with school administrators to make school forms and other documents inclusive. *Opening Doors* also offers suggested questions and answers that parents and educators can ask one another in an effort to create a safe and respectful learning environment (see resource list). Also available from FEC is an abbreviated version of the resource, called *Back to School Tool: Building Family Equality in Every Classroom*, and a "Rainbow Report Card," which is an online-based, interactive tool that has LGBT parents answer questions about their children's school and then generates a report for them with custom recommendations (see resource list).

School-Based Interventions that Improve LGBT-Parent Families' Experiences

There are a number of in-school programs, approaches, and interventions that have a positive impact on LGBT-headed families' experiences, mitigating the homophobia and transphobia that can create barriers to full inclusion and a great educational experience. These in-school changes are an important focus for parental—and general—advocacy, as they can have a beneficial effect on improving school climate for a wide range of students. Ultimately, improvements in school climate that reduce homophobia and transphobia can contribute to greater individual well-being, improved academic achievement, and

greater educational attainment among the students most affected by these forms of bias and violence.

Anti-Bullying/Harassment Policies and Laws

Bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression are commonplace in America's secondary schools (Kosciw et al., 2010). One of the several ways that GLSEN has attempted to address this problem is through the passage of comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment laws and policies that prohibit bullying and harassment of all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. Laws and policies that enumerate categories of protections, such as sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, may provide students with greater protection against bullying and harassment in that they offer explicit protections. These laws and policies often have associational language that follows an enumerated list (e.g., "any student or students associated with any individual with any of the listed characteristics"). Such language protects the child of an LGBT person. In the GLSEN family study, three-quarters of parents (75%) and students (73%) reported that their school had some type of policy for dealing with incidents of harassment and assault (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). However, far fewer reported that the school's policy explicitly mentioned sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression (42% of parents and 35% of students). Notably, students with LGBT parents whose school had an LGBT-inclusive anti-bullying/harassment school policy reported fewer negative experiences in school, particularly with regard to being mistreated by teachers and other students at school because of their family constellation. Parents who reported that their child's school had a comprehensive policy were more likely to report that addressing their child's harassment was an effective intervention (89%), compared to parents who said their child's school had a generic policy (72%) or no policy at all (62%). Parents themselves reported a lower frequency of mistreatment in school when the school had a comprehensive policy and were less likely

to feel unacknowledged as an LGBT-parent family. Thus, policies may act as a buffer against a hostile school climate for students of LGBT parents and also create a more welcoming school environment for parents themselves. When researching schools for their children, LGBT parents may want to pay particular attention to each prospective school's policy on bullying and harassment and determine if there are clear and effective systems in place for reporting and addressing incidents that students experience so that all students, including those with LGBT parents, feel safe at school.

A growing number of states across the country have added explicit protections for LGBT students in their state education antidiscrimination and harassment statutes, including, notably, states such as Arkansas and North Carolina. Such laws have primary importance for protecting students from bullying and harassment and may also afford protection to the children of LGBT parents with regard to harassment related to their actual or perceived sexual orientation and harassment related to their family constellation. As with school policies, these laws often include association language that would protect the child of an LGBT person. Recent research suggests that same-sex couples raising children in states with favorable LGBT laws have greater psychological well-being than parents who live in states with less favorable legal climates (Goldberg & Smith, 2011).

Currently, only 15 states plus the District of Columbia have comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment laws that include sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression. The GLSEN family study found that—above and beyond the laws' impact on LGBT student experience—state-level comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment legislation was associated with better school climate for LGBT-parent families in a range of ways (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). For example, students in these states were less likely than students in states with generic "anti-bullying" laws or no laws at all to hear certain types of biased language in school, such as homophobic remarks (73% vs. 92% and 95%, respectively). Parents from states with comprehensive legislation were least likely to report not feeling acknowledged by the school

community as an LGBT-parent family and were most likely to report that the school was inclusive of LGBT-parent families (9% vs. 15% and 20%, respectively). There was no evidence that generic bullying-prevention legislation has any benefits for LGBT-headed families over having no legislation at all.

Although there may be many contributing factors that might result in differences across states by type of anti-bullying/harassment law, these findings nevertheless lend evidence to the claim that comprehensive laws that include sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression may be more effective than generic laws or no law at all in creating safer schools for LGBT students and families. Comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment and antidiscrimination legislation at the state and federal level that specifically enumerates sexual orientation and gender identity/expression as protected categories alongside others such as race, faith, and age, and that includes association language that would encompass students with LGBT parents, is an important focus of advocacy in order to improve the experiences of LGBT-parent families in school and to create a safe learning environment for all students.

As part of our work to ensure safe schools for all students, GLSEN has worked with local, state, and national coalitions as well as elected officials to pass legislation and policies that are comprehensive (requires policy development, reporting mechanisms, and educator and student training) and enumerate the categories of students protected (including actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity). (Tools available from GLSEN on these issues are included in the Resource List at the end of this chapter.)

Supportive School Staff and Staff Training

For students, having a supportive adult at school can benefit their academic experience and may be particularly important for those who encounter negative reactions from other members of the school community because of their family. For LGBT parents, as for any parents, positive family–school communication is also beneficial for the child's educational attainment. In the GLSEN family study, the majority of LGBT parents

(67%) reported that there were at least a few supportive teachers or school staff at their child's school (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). More than half (55%) of the students with LGBT parents in this study could identify many (six or more) supportive school staff people. For these students, the presence of supportive school staff was related to their academic achievement. For example, students with LGBT parents who could identify many supportive staff at their school reported a GPA half a grade higher than those students with LGBT parents who did not have any supportive school staff (3.4 vs. 2.9). Identification of a greater number of supportive educators was also related to fewer missed days of school due to safety concerns (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

Unfortunately, most school personnel do not receive professional development that encompasses LGBT-related issues and can lead to a more supportive school environment. In a study of public school principals, only 33 out of 1,010 principals whose schools provided professional development on bullying or harassment reported that it included specific content on students' sexual orientation (30%), the sexual orientation or gender identity/expression of students' family members (26%), or students' gender identity/expression (24%) (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2008). Perhaps not surprisingly, secondary school principals were more likely than elementary school principals to report that their school provides professional development inclusive of sexual orientation and or gender identity/expression content (29% of secondary school principals vs. 15% of elementary school principals; GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2008). Elementary school principals were more likely than secondary school principals to report that their professional development on bullying/harassment was general and did not specify sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression (42% vs. 29%; GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2008).

Based on the GLSEN family study, we know that few LGBT parents (10%) reported being aware that school personnel had any training on LGBT issues (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Yet, parents who said their child's school had trainings on LGBT-related issues for school personnel were

less likely than other parents to report that their child had been bullied or harassed in school, both in general (14% vs. 31%) and specifically related to their family (7% vs. 20%). In addition, parental reports of educator trainings were associated with a more positive response from school personnel when parents addressed their child's harassment. These parents were also less likely to report that they themselves had experienced mistreatment in school related to being LGBT.

Overall, trainings on LGBT issues directed at education professionals may be easier for a school to implement than some other LGBT-inclusion measures. Resistance is generally highest to programming, information, or training directed at students. School- or district-wide implementation of educator trainings on issues related to LGBT issues (including LGBT-parent families) and bias-based bullying and harassment may help to give teachers and administrators the tools they need to create an inclusive environment in which all students feel respected and a part of the school community. In addition, such trainings may help educators become more cognizant and sensitive of LGBT family issues and be more likely to include LGBT-inclusive curricular resources in their classrooms. Above and beyond the inclusive curricular resources, school personnel should work on ensuring that administrative items, such as field trip permission forms, are more inclusive (e.g., using the general and neutral "parent1" and "parent2" as opposed to "mother" and "father").

Inclusive Curricular Resources

An LGBT-inclusive curriculum provides positive representations of LGBT people, history, and events and helps to create a tone of acceptance of LGBT people and increased awareness of LGBT-related issues. An LGBT-inclusive curriculum should be age-appropriate and carried out differently in an elementary school as opposed to a secondary school. In an elementary school, a school library might include books that represent different types of families, including LGBT-parent families, while a history class in secondary school might include LGBT historical figures or a discussion of the beginnings of the contemporary Gay Liberation Movement in the late

1960s. As seen in the experiences of LGBT students, inclusive curricula help promote respect for all and can improve an individual LGBT student's school experiences and increase their sense of school connectedness (Kosciw et al., 2010). GLSEN's 2009 National School Climate Survey, a study of the school experiences of 7,261 LGBT students between the ages of 13 and 21, found that LGBT students in schools with an inclusive curriculum were less likely to report hearing homophobic remarks and experience less victimization at school based on their sexual orientation or gender expression (Kosciw et al., 2010). However, with regard to access to information about LGBT-parent families and other LGBT-related topics, less than a third of both students (27%) and parents (29%) in the GLSEN family study reported that the school curriculum included representations of LGBT people, history, or events in the past school year (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). When asked specifically about the inclusion of representations of LGBT-parent families in classroom activities, less than a third (31%) of all students said that representations of LGBT-parent families were included when the topic of families came up during class activities (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

Curricular inclusion is in some ways the "next frontier" in LGBT issues in K-12 education, and the use of LGBT-inclusive curricular materials can be difficult in the absence of strong community support. However, to the extent that curriculum in the early grades focuses on family studies, the presence of LGBT-parent families in schools nationwide forces the issue in elementary school settings in a significant new way. For those teachers and schools in a position to include these materials, and for those families in a position to advocate for greater representation of LGBT people in class materials, there are resources available to assist schools in including positive representations of LGBT people, history, and events in their curriculum:

Include Diverse Families

Whenever possible, educators should include examples of diverse families, including same-sex couples and LGBT parents, while referencing

families in the classroom. Providing students with these examples can help LGBT students and students with LGBT family members feel included in the classroom. For example, educators can be more inclusive in their language when addressing issues pertaining to families. Instead of always saying "mom and dad" when referring to parents, educators can be more inclusive by saying "parents."

Include LGBT History

Educators can raise the visibility of LGBT people and communities by providing students with concrete examples of LGBT people in history and LGBT-related historical events. For example, when teaching about the Holocaust or about civil rights movements, educators can include the persecution, struggles, and successes of the LGBT community. Educators can also show documentary films, such as *Out of the Past: The Struggle for Gay and Lesbian Rights in America* (1998) or *Gay Pioneers* (2003), that highlight different eras in the LGBT rights movement (see resource list). There are also lesson plans such as GLSEN's *When Did It Happen: LGBT History Lesson* (2001) to teach about important leaders and events in LGBT history, or *Unheard Voices* (2011), an LGBT oral history resource with lesson plans, created by GLSEN, the Anti-Defamation League, and StoryCorps.

Use LGBT-Inclusive Literature

Using LGBT-inclusive literature helps to create a welcoming space for students with LGBT parents, as well as promote respect and acceptance among all students. Several organizations provide resource lists of books that feature positive and diverse representations of LGBT characters that educators can use in the classroom, including GLSEN's BookLink, an online resource featuring LGBT-themed and LGBT-inclusive books organized by grade level, to find appropriate books for their curriculum (see resource list). For example, it offers information about resources such as *And Baby Makes four* (Benjamin & Freeman, 2009), a book about the experiences of a young child of a two-mom household whose

family is about to expand with the addition of a new baby.

Films such as *It's Elementary—Talking About Gay Issues in Schools* (referenced above) afford educators the opportunity to help young people address prejudice of all kinds and the techniques to help them do so. COLAGE, a national organization that serves individuals with a LGBTQ parent, offers a youth-produced documentary film by and about youth with LGBTQ parents called *In My Shoes: Stories of Youth with LGBTQ Parents*. Both films have accompanying discussion and action guides (see resource list).

Celebrate LGBT Events

Celebrating LGBT events can help LGBT students feel included in the school. Educators can promote LGBT events throughout the schools as educators would any other cultural celebration. Educators can celebrate LGBT History Month in October or LGBT Pride Month in June by displaying signs, alerting students, and recognizing the struggles, contributions, and victories of the LGBT community.

Supportive Student Clubs

Student clubs that provide support to LGBT students, such as Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs), may also be a resource and source of support for secondary school youth for LGBT-parent families. Research has shown that GSAs can provide safe, affirming spaces and critical support for LGBT students and also contribute to creating a more welcoming school environment (GLSEN & Harris Interactive, 2005; Goodenow, Szalacha, & Westhimer, 2006; Kosciw et al., 2010; Szalacha, 2003). The presence of a GSA or similar supportive student club may be beneficial for LGBT-parent families. For example, these types of clubs may provide a safe space in which students with LGBT parents can talk openly about their experience, regardless of their own sexual orientation or gender identity. They may also contribute to creating a more welcoming school environment and provide children of LGBT parents a sense that their school community is supportive of LGBT people. However, no research has been conducted to examine potential benefits of GSAs

for children of LGBT parents specifically. Only about a third (34%) of the students in the GLSEN family study reported that their school had a GSA or other kind of student club that provided support to LGBT students and their allies (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Compared to the general population of students, students with LGBT parents in the GLSEN family study were more likely to report that their school had a student club that addresses LGBT issues (34% vs. 22%).

GLSEN's *Jump-Start Guide* is a resource designed for students to help with new and already established Gay–Straight Alliances (GSAs) or similar clubs at schools (see resource list). The guide consists of eight self-contained sections and takes students through the process of establishing or reestablishing a supportive student club such as a GSA, identifying the club's mission and goals, and provides information on assessing school climate.

Conclusion

The growing numbers of children of LGBT parents enrolled in schools nationwide are forcing critical issues into the open in school communities. Even those schools that are interested in creating a more inclusive school community face challenges that are not completely under their control and that could require them to take a much more proactive stance on LGBT issues than they ever imagined. Findings from the GLSEN family study show that LGBT parents are more likely to report having problems with students in the school or parents of other students than they were to report having problems with school personnel. It is important for school personnel to understand that harassment by students of anyone in the school community, whether it be a student or a parent of a student, should not be tolerated. Schools should provide training for school staff to deal effectively with a student being bullied or harassed because they are or are perceived to be LGBT, or because they have an LGBT family member. Further, professional development for educators should include multicultural diversity training that includes information about LGBT-parent families.

Results from GLSEN's family study also highlight the important role that institutional supports can play in making schools safer for students of LGBT parents. Given that students with LGBT parents in this study were more than twice as likely to have skipped a class in the past year because of feeling unsafe as compared to a national sample, it is important to consider the steps that schools can take to improve school climate and improve youth's educational outcomes. Supportive student clubs, such as GSAs, that address LGBT issues in education may be beneficial for LGBT-parent families in that these types of clubs may provide a safe space in which students with LGBT parents can talk openly about their experience, regardless of their own sexual orientation or gender identity. Beyond supportive student clubs, schools should also increase access to age-appropriate and accurate information regarding LGBT people, history, and events. An LGBT-inclusive curriculum can help to create a tone of acceptance of LGBT people and increase awareness of LGBT-related issues.

In the GLSEN family study, students of LGBT parents whose school had a comprehensive safe school policy were less likely to report mistreatment because of having LGBT parents. Additionally, parents who reported that their child's school had a comprehensive policy reported a lower frequency of mistreatment in school when the school had a comprehensive policy. These findings highlight the need for schools to adopt and implement comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment policies with clear and effective systems for reporting and addressing incidents that students experience so that all students, including those with LGBT parents, feel safe at school. As with school-level policies, the GLSEN family study shows that state-level comprehensive safe school legislation was associated with better school climate for LGBT-parent families. Students in states with comprehensive legislation were less likely to hear homophobic remarks in their schools and LGBT parents in these states were more likely to feel included in the school community. This finding highlights the dire need to pass comprehensive anti-bullying/harassment and antidiscrimination legislation at the state and federal level that specifically

enumerates sexual orientation and gender identity/expression as protected categories alongside others such as race, faith, and age in an effort to create safe learning environments for all students and their families. Taken together, the resources and supports outlined in this chapter can enhance the family–school relationship and create a school environment that is positive and respectful.

Resource List

Resources for Parents

Is This the Right School For Us?

GLSEN's *Is This the Right School For Us?* is a guide to assess school climates for LGBT parents of elementary-aged children (K-6). http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/news/record/1674.html.

Opening Doors: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Parents and Schools

The Family Equality Council's *Opening Doors* resource includes a wide array of information for both LGBT parents and educators. An abbreviated version is also available, called *Back to School Tool: Building Family Equality in Every Classroom.* http://www.familyequality.org/site/PageServer?pagename=resources_publications.

Rainbow Report Card

The Family Equality Council's Rainbow Report Card is an online-based, interactive tool that has LGBT parents answer questions about their children's school and then generates a report with custom recommendations. http://www.familyequality.org/site/PageServer?pagename=resources_publications.

Resources for Policy and Legislative Advocacy

GLSEN's Policy and Legislative Resources

These tools are designed to provide the kinds of information necessary to launch and sustain effective campaigns for safer schools laws and policies, and are available at http://www.glsen.org/policy.

Enumeration: A tool for advocates explains some of the major reasons why anti-bullying and anti-harassment laws and rules that use enumerated categories are better at protecting students, educators, and school systems.

Model District Anti-Bullying & Harassment Policy highlights key points regarding enumeration, complaint procedure, professional development, and student training.

Model State Anti-Bullying and Harassment Legislation explains the policy objectives for each section of the Model, and presents some key points and alternatives to consider. There is also commentary throughout that will help stakeholders tailor the model language to the specific needs of their state, while keeping the original intent of the legislation intact.

Model District Policy on Transgender and Gender Nonconforming Students contains a model policy with explanatory notes on the range of issues schools may face related to transgender and gender nonconforming students. This resource was created by GLSEN in partnership with the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE).

Resources for Educators

Lessons and Curricula

GLSEN's Education Department offers free curricula and lesson plans for educators to use with elementary, middle, and high school students. These resources provide a framework for facilitating classroom discussions and engaging students in creating safer schools for all, regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression: http://www.glsen.org/educator.

Ready, Set, Respect! GLSEN's Elementary School Toolkit

The GLSEN toolkit was developed in partnership with the National Association of Elementary School Principals and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Ready, Set, Respect! contains suggested lesson plans that focus on name-calling, bullying and bias, LGBT-inclusive family diversity, and gender roles and diversity. The templates are designed for teachers to use as either stand-alone lessons or for integration into existing curriculum content or school-wide anti-bullying programs. The toolkit also contains helpful tips for teaching more inclusively and intervening in bullying and promoting respectful recess playtime and physical education.

Safe Space Kit

GLSEN's *Safe Space Kit* is designed to help educators create a safe space for LGBT youth in school. This guide provides concrete strategies for supporting LGBT students, educating about anti-LGBT bias, and advocating for changes in your school. The Kit also shows how to assess the school's climate, policies, and practices and outlines ways to advocate for change inside the school.

No Name-Calling Week

No Name-Calling Week (NNCW) is an annual week of educational and creative activities focused on ending name-calling in K-12 schools. The NNCW site provides educators with LGBT-inclusive lesson plans and extensive bibliographies (divided by school level). http://www.nonamecallingweek.org.

BookLink

Organized by grade level, GLSEN's BookLink makes it easy to find LGBT-themed/inclusive books and videos to use in the classroom. http://www.glsen.org/booklink.

For example: Benjamin, J., & Freeman, J. (2009). *And baby makes four.* Motek Press.

Resources for Students

Jump-Start Guide for Gay–Straight Alliances

This guide consists of eight self-contained sections designed to help students bring fresh and creative energy to leading their student club. The resources take you through the process of establishing or reestablishing a Gay–Straight Alliance, identifying the student club's mission and goals, and assessing your school's climate. http://www.glsen.org/jumpstart.

Day of Silence

On the National Day of Silence hundreds of thousands of students nationwide take a vow of silence to bring attention to anti-LGBT name-calling, bullying, and harassment in their schools. http://www.dayofsilence.org/.

Additional Resources

General Books and Information

COLAGE Bookstore. http://www.colage.org/bookstore/.

Research

GLSEN's Research Department supports the organization's mission by conducting original research, evaluating GLSEN programs and initiatives, and creating resources that document anti-LGBT bias in education (K-12 schools). GLSEN Research reports include the following:

2009 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of LGBT Youth in Our Nation's Schools

Playgrounds and Prejudice: Elementary School Climate in the United States, A Survey of Students and Teachers

Year One Evaluation of the New York City Department of Education Respect for All Training Program

From Teasing to Torment: School Climate in America, A Survey of Students and Teachers

Shared Differences: The Experiences of LGBT Students of Color in Our Nation's Schools

Harsh Realities: The Experiences of Transgender Youth in Our Nation's Schools

The Principal's Perspective: School Safety, Bullying and Harassment

Involved, Invisible, Ignored: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Parents and Their Children in Our Nation's K-12 Schools

GLSEN Research Briefs

All available at: http://www.glsen.org/research.

Films

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