



# The Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth Project



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## **Background**

Many educators and administrators in school districts throughout Michigan have requested information and technical assistance to help them create school environments that are physically and emotionally safe for all students including sexual minority students (e.g., gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or questioning). Schools throughout Michigan and the nation have struggled to develop policies and train staff and students to support safe and "bully-free" environments that are conducive to students learning. This project was initiated as a direct response to school district requests.

## **The Workgroup**

A wealth of information and resources has been published in the last decade in books, professional journals, and websites that related to school environment and sexual minority youth. In the summer of 2001, a statewide Michigan workgroup dedicated to Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth including teachers, health educators, counselors, parents, and legal professionals was convened. That group still meets today, and is vital to the success of the statewide project. The workgroup provides direction, leadership, and support to the statewide initiative. The workgroup is lead by the Michigan Department of Education program staff, and includes colleagues representing intermediate and local school districts, parent organizations, community-based organizations, homeless and runaway agencies, AIDS service organizations, higher education, and other key stakeholders.

## **The Problem**

Sexual minority youth often face harassment, abuse, and violence from classmates in school settings that put them at greater risk for serious problems such as substance abuse, HIV, and suicide, as well as school failure and dropout. The Massachusetts Youth Risk Behavior (MA YRBS) surveys from 1995 to 2003 documented that sexual minority students are four times more likely to attempt suicide and over three times more likely to be threatened or injured with a weapon at school. For more information from the MA YRBS, go to: [www.doe.mass.edu/cnp/hprograms/yrbs/](http://www.doe.mass.edu/cnp/hprograms/yrbs/). The long-term effects have been documented in numerous national, state, and local reports including *Bruised Bodies, Bruised Spirits: An Assessment of the Current Climate of Safety for Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Youth in Southeastern Michigan Schools* (1996).

## **The Michigan State Board of Education Model Anti-Bullying Policy**

According to the Michigan State Board of Education Model Anti-Bullying Policy (2006), "Harassment or bullying" is any gesture or written, verbal, graphic, or physical act (including electronically transmitted acts – i.e. internet, cell phone, personal digital assistant (pda), or wireless hand held device) that is reasonably perceived as being motivated either by any actual or perceived characteristic, such as race, color, religion, ancestry, national origin, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression; or a mental, physical, or sensory disability or impairment; or by any other distinguishing characteristic. For a complete copy of the model Anti-Bullying Policy, go to: [www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/SBE\\_Model\\_AntiBullying\\_Policy\\_Revised\\_9.8\\_172355\\_7.pdf](http://www.michigan.gov/documents/mde/SBE_Model_AntiBullying_Policy_Revised_9.8_172355_7.pdf). For more information and resources on Michigan Safe Schools go to [www.michigan.gov/safeschools](http://www.michigan.gov/safeschools).

## **The Resource Guide**

The **A Silent Crisis: Creating Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth** resource guide includes a wealth of information for teachers, counselors, administrators, parents, and other professionals who want to learn more about issues related to safe schools for sexual minority youth. The guide was produced and compiled by Calhoun Intermediate School District in cooperation with the Michigan Department of Education with the guidance of the Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth workgroup. The guide is now in its 4<sup>th</sup> printing and is distributed by the Educational Materials Center, Central Michigan University. As of February 2008, more than 1940 copies of the guide have been distributed. The guide has been requested by professionals in 19 states: California, Delaware, District of Columbia, Georgia, Illinois, Iowa, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, Utah, Vermont, Wisconsin, and

Wyoming. Those who participate in the *A Silent Crisis* trainings receive the resource guide as part of the workshop. Additional copies of the resource guide can be purchased from Central Michigan University Educational Materials Center (EMC) for \$38.00. To request a copy, call 800-214-8961 or email the EMC at [emc@cmich.edu](mailto:emc@cmich.edu).

### **Dedication**

The resource guide has been dedicated to the sexual minority students who have endured emotional and physical threats and struggled to find a safe place within school to live and learn. Their voices must not be forgotten.

### **Workshops for School Personnel**

The Michigan Department of Education has supported regional *A Silent Crisis: Creating Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth* trainings for school personnel who want to learn more about issues related to this population and strategies for creating safer schools. The trainings are led by experienced trainers with the Michigan Department of Education. As of February 2008, 24 regional trainings have been implemented in intermediate school districts, and 809 educators from 172 school districts have attended those trainings. Contact Bob Higgins at 517-373-1024 or [higginsr@michigan.gov](mailto:higginsr@michigan.gov) or Laurie Bechhofer at 517-335-7252 or [bechhoferl@michigan.gov](mailto:bechhoferl@michigan.gov) for more information about upcoming *A Silent Crisis* trainings.

### **Is My Schools Safe for Everyone Posters**

Several members of the workgroup conceptualized a poster, developed by Midwest AIDS Prevention Project (MAPP), that reinforced some of the main messages of the Safe Schools for SMY project. The poster emphasizes using non-judgmental comments and speaking up to combat prejudice. It is written by educators for educators and fits well into any anti-bullying or safe schools initiative. To obtain copies of the poster, contact Laurie Bechhofer at 517-335-7252 or [bechhoferl@michigan.gov](mailto:bechhoferl@michigan.gov).

### **What Education and Community Leaders Say About the Project**

*As educators we must be committed to address all issues that impact the health, safety, and educational needs of our children. I applaud the work group for their efforts in developing "A Silent Crisis: Creating Safe Schools for Sexual Minority Youth." This resource guide is an invaluable tool for educators as they work to create safe and supportive school environments for all students including sexual minority youth.*

**Thomas D. Watkins, Jr.**

Former Superintendent of Public Instruction  
Michigan Department of Education  
Lansing, MI

*"A Silent Crisis" was a very worthwhile workshop – actually one of the few in many years to be immediately relevant to my daily work. I discovered resources I didn't know about and was able to use the materials and information with colleagues and students.*

**Michelle Bean, MSW**

School Social Worker  
Fitzgerald High School  
Warren, MI

*"A Silent Crisis" training provided critical information and skills to help educators, administrators, and board members deal more effectively with the issue of school safety for gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning youth. This training is a must for school districts throughout Michigan. The issue of safe schools needs to be addressed at the policy level in order to effect and sustain change.*

**Susan Corbin**

Former Board Member  
Okemos Public Schools  
Okemos, MI

*When I signed up for the "Silent Crisis" seminar, I wasn't sure what to expect. What I got was a very informative day. I learned some amazing statistics on how many students may be affected by the "silent crisis." I learned about the situations these students face on a daily basis and, most importantly, I learned about the legal responsibility of the school district to provide a safe learning environment for these students. As a school board member, it is part of my responsibilities to set the policies to ensure that the schools are safe for ALL students.*

*The information learned, the resource manual received, and the contacts made have already been put to use at least two times in situations that have come up in our school district within the past six weeks. It was a very beneficial day for both me, personally, and for the district through the information I was able to bring back and share.*

**Bonnie B. Reemsnyder**

Board Member  
Pottersville Public Schools  
Pottersville, MI

*"A Silent Crisis" gave a remarkable look into the issues specifically facing the educational system and sexual minority youth. It also provided a useful insight into the general issues that face any institution, such as law enforcement, that works within the educational setting.*

**Martin Underhill, MA**

Chief of Police  
Grand Ledge, MI

*The resource manual for "A Silent Crisis" is superb. It offers vital information in an easy to find format. Every educator needs this timely manual to deal with this ever-growing concern. These kids need and deserve our help.*

**Ben Walker, MA, CPC**

Director  
Arts Academy in the Woods  
Warren, MI

*I want to thank the Michigan Department of Education in their advocacy for safe schools for all of their students. As a physician who takes care of adolescents, I have witnessed the consequences of harassment of sexual minority youth at our schools including depression, suicidal behavior, school drop out, drug and alcohol use, and sexual risk taking. This resource guide and training will save the lives and futures of many of our marginalized youth.*

**Kathryn Wright, DO**

Former Medical Director, Horizons Project  
Adolescent HIV Program  
Children's Hospital of Michigan  
Detroit, MI

**For More Information**

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