

SAFE SCHOOLS, SAFE COMMUNITIES: STATE SUPERINTENDENT'S CONFERENCE ON LGBT YOUTH

Nearly 350 educators, youth, community leaders, youth workers, and elected officials attended Safe Schools, Safe Communities: State Superintendent's Conference on LGBT Youth. The conference was sponsored by Wisconsin State Superintendent Tony Evers and was held at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Student Union on March 29, 2012.



Members of Freedom, Inc., Voces de la Frontera, and Alliance School spoke alongside Geoffrey Winder of the National GSA Network about models of resiliency with low-income youth and youth of color.



Participants listen intently at Safe Schools, Safe Communities: State Superintendent's Conference on LGBT Youth.

This was the third time GSAFE and long-time partner Diverse and Resilient, a Milwaukee-based organization committed to the healthy development of all LGBTQ people in Wisconsin, came together to organize this event. Additional sponsors and planning partners were the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, UWM, and the Counseling Student Association at UWM were also sponsors.

"Registration exceeded our expectations," said GSAFE Director of Programs Brian Juchems. "We had over 50 communities represented. Clearly Wisconsin citizens want to talk about what's going on for LGBTQ youth in our schools and communities."

The conference aimed to raise awareness about the education and health disparities LGBTQ youth face in both schools and communities, provide a space to share best practices about how to address these disparities, and inspire participants to continue working for change once home. Conference attendees had 18 workshops to choose from over the course of the day.

Dorothy Espelage, PhD, professor of child development at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, spoke about the connection unchecked homophobic teasing among young children has to increased instances of both homophobic and sexual harassment among teenagers during her morning keynote. She shared from her ongoing research that current anti-bullying programs being used in the U.S. that are held up as successful but don't actually work. Dr. Espelage then followed up her talk with an afternoon workshop that further examined promising practices in addressing bullying in schools.

Geoffrey Winder, Racial and Economic Justice Manager for GSA Network in California, outlined school policies and practices—including zero tolerance bullying policies—that discourage the participation of LGBTQ low income and youth of color and lead to them being pushed out of school and into the prison system. Following Winder's speech a panel of youth and youth organizers from Freedom, Inc. (Madison), Voces de la Frontera (statewide), and the Alliance School (Milwaukee) spoke about their experiences as LGBTQ low income and youth of color as well as their work to build up leadership among this population and their efforts to stem the flow of youth into the school to prison line.

"Dr. Espelage and Mr. Winder played a critical role in shifting the conversation and challenging our assumptions about what's working and not working in efforts to support LGBTQ youth," said Juchems. "This is especially true when we're talking about low income and youth of color."

Additional speakers included former Lieutenant Governor Barbara Lawton, who sponsored the conference in 2010 when it was held at the UW Oshkosh, as well as Diverse and Resilient founder Gary Hollander. State Representative Mark Pocan presented a Senate Citation to conference organizers during lunch.

"We're excited to build upon the new relationships and learning gained from this event. We're committed to working across communities to ensure school is a place where all students can thrive."

Manager of GSA Outreach

TIM MICHAEL

Manager of Anti-Violence Initiatives

MONICA ADAMS

Director of Administration & Development

KRISTEN PETROSHIUS

Director of Programs

BRIAN JUCHEMS

Staff

KATE WILKIN

ELLEN PRYOR

JEFF POLIANSKY

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Board of Directors



Gay Straight Alliance for Safe Schools
301 S. Bedford Street #1
Madison, WI 53703

www.gsafewi.org



GSAFE staff and board members spent three days with Geoffrey Winder (2nd from right), Racial & Economic Justice manager for GSA Network. We worked on understanding how to both focus and deepen our work in support of LGBTQ youth who are also low-income and/or youth of color.

SPRING 2012
NEWSLETTER



WHAT'S NEW AT GSAFE?

You might notice a few changes since our last newsletter, including our newly redesigned logo. We're also no longer referring to ourselves as "GSA for Safe Schools" –just "Gay Straight Alliance for Safe Schools" or "GSAFE". With a new logo comes a newly launched and redesigned website along with a new web domain and email addresses. You can now find us at www.gsafewi.org. Be sure to add our new domain and emails to your bookmarks and address books.

Additionally, Kristen Petroschius joined the GSAFE team this fall as our Director of Administration and Development. She and Director of Programs Brian Juchems now serve as Co-Directors. M Adams continues to serve as our Manager of Anti-Violence Initiatives and Tim Michael continues on as Manager of GSA Outreach.

What isn't new is our commitment to creating schools where all LGBTQ youth and students thrive. We do this by developing student leaders, supporting Gay-Straight Alliances, training educators, and strengthening inclusive families while using a lens of racial and economic justice.

Thank you for all that you do to support us in achieving our mission!

COLORS OF RESISTANCE

GSAFE is better learning and understanding the need to create culturally specific spaces for LGBTQ youth of color and youth of color allies.

Too often within the mainstream LGBTQ community, communities of color are wrongfully dubbed as being more trans/bi/homophobic than their white counterparts. As a result, mainstream spaces provide few opportunities to support and develop allies of color and LGBTQ youth of color often go without valuable resources. In our work, we have learned the invaluable lesson of intentionally supporting communities of color to develop their own culturally specific context to address trans/bi/homophobia and realize LGBTQ justice.

Students at the Youth of Color Summit use theatre to engage about hard, powerful issues—such as racism, homophobia, and violence.

On February 18th GSAFE partnered with Freedom, Inc. to host a day-long Youth of Color Summit to do just that—to create a space for LGBTQ youth of color and youth of color allies to discuss what LGBTQ identities look like in their communities, identify the issues, and discuss ways to build! The summit had 15 young people of Black, Latin@, Southeast Asian and Indigenous heritage. Youth used theater, games, and dialogue to critically engage topics such as: gender and sexuality expectations and cultural norms; intersections of race, class and sexuality; the impact of poverty, violence, prisons, immigration etc. in the LGBTQ experience. Youth also discussed and learned ways that their communities are resilient and resistant, as well as the rights and protections that they have in schools.

GSAFE is striving to become an anti-racist organization, which includes the staff, board and volunteers learning more about racism; creating policies, practices and programming that is inclusive of the needs of youth of color; and teaching white youth, educators, and parents anti-racist leadership skills. Creating and supporting safe spaces for LGBTQ youth of color, and youth of color allies, is an integral part of this. GSAFE is looking forward to continuing the work of creating safe schools for all youth and we look forward to continuing with you!



Students at the Youth of Color Summit use theatre to engage about hard, powerful issues such as racism and homophobia, recognize their resiliency, and build their leadership.

THANKS TO EVERYONE WHO PARTICIPATED IN OUR MARCH PARENT FUNDRAISING AND GEM PHONE BANK! WE APPRECIATE YOUR SUPPORT!

THE FAMILY ACCEPTANCE PROJECT

Families love their children and want the best for them. They want to protect their children and keep them from harm, and from anyone who might hurt their child or adolescent.

When parents hold their newborn infant, few of them think their child might be gay or transgender. In fact, many parents dream of special times in their child's future, especially of their wedding and when their children become parents themselves - with heterosexual partners.

But many young people and adults are not heterosexual. Research shows that between 2-7% of adults are lesbian, gay, or bisexual (LGB). Studies also show that young people—both gay and heterosexual—first become aware of being sexually attracted to another person at around age 10. As more information has become available about homosexuality, it has been easier for many children and adolescents to realize that they are gay at younger ages.

In [The Family Acceptance Project's] studies of LGBTQ adolescents and families, we found that the average age that youth realized they were gay was a little over age 13. Many of them knew they were gay at even younger ages—such as age 7 or 9. And some of them told their parents of other family members.



The Edmonds-Ramirez family models Family Acceptance in many ways—one being their continued involvement with GSAFE!

But many of them didn't tell anyone because by then most had learned that being gay was shameful and wrong from family, friends, and other people in their

community. They learned that gay people were called names, could be discriminated against and hurt by others, and they could embarrass and shame their families. So from an early age, many gay children and adolescents learn how to hide their deepest feelings from people they love.

The parents and family members in [The Family Acceptance Project] study—parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles, older brothers and sisters, guardians and foster parents—like you—told us that all parents and families should learn about our study. They want other parents and caregivers to learn about our research to help their gay and transgender children from early childhood—long before they realize that their child might be gay or transgender. What those parents and family members realized—and what our research has shown—is that families need to create a nurturing and supportive environment long before they know who their children will become.

This article is excerpted from the Introduction to Family Acceptance Project's Family Education Packet, Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Families with LGBTQ Children

Gay Straight Alliance for Safe Schools is supported by generous individuals, foundations, and businesses who share our vision of schools where all LGBTQ youth and students thrive. Below are some of our most generous institutional donors:

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Safe Schools Sustainers are the leading donors that keep the programs of Gay Straight Alliance for Safe Schools going strong. By investing in our community and the lives of our youth, they give a gift that will change the future.

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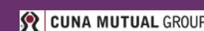
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NATIONAL MOMENTUM: A GSA 'EXPLOSION' IN WISCONSIN

"We've really seen an explosion (in the number of gsas) in the last year or two," said Tim Michael, Manager of gsa Outreach at Wisconsin's Gay Straight Alliance for Safe Schools (gsafe). "And particularly gsas in the rural part of the state."



GSAFE has begun to work more intentionally with middle schools to start GSAs and recently hosted a Middle School Meet Up for middle school-aged youth in Madison.

As the gsa movement spreads across the country, gsafe, an organization that empowers LGBTQ youth, school staff, and families to change Wisconsin school climates, is making sure their state—and its large rural population—catches the momentum. A founding National Association member with grassroots going back to the early '90s, gsafe has grown from just 7 gsas to over 140. Now, inspired by the racial and economic justice focus of the 2011 National Gathering, themed "Make It Better for All," gsafe is expanding gsa work across oppressions and geographic boundaries. "One of our goals is to provide intentional anti-racism training for gsas and see more gsas take on broader social justice issues in their schools," Tim said. "We want to help gsas think outside their typical issues that isolate the LGBTQ identity."

BEHAVIORS THAT AFFECT YOUR LGBTQ CHILD

Often times we believe we're doing the best thing for our children, but don't really know how our behavior impacts them. Thanks to the great research of The Family Acceptance Project, we know know what behaviors reduce LGBT children's risk for health and mental health problems and that promote well-being. Here are some behaviors that help:

- Talk with your child or foster child about their LGBT identity
- Express affection when your child tells you or when you learn that your child is gay or transgender
- Support your child's LGBT identity even though you may feel uncomfortable
- Advocate for your child when he or she is mistreated because of their LGBT identity
- Require that other family members respect your LGBT child
- Bring your child to LGBT organizations or events
- Talk with clergy and help your faith community to support LGBT people
- Connect your child with an LGBT adult role model to show them options for the future
- Welcome your child's LGBT friends & partners to your home
- Support your child's gender expression
- Believe your child can have a happy future as an LGBT adult

Note: This article is excerpted from the Family Acceptance Project's Family Education Packet, Supportive Families, Healthy Children: Helping Families with LGBTQ Children