



**A Series of Information Resources
on**

***Youth Subcultures:
Understanding Subgroups to Better
Address Barriers to Learning
& Improve Schools***

As calls for addressing barriers to student learning and improving schools increase, better understanding of youth subculture is essential. This series is intended to stimulate thinking about the implications for policy and practice of the complex, multifaceted subgroups with which youth come to be identified and/or assigned by peers.

Public health and education policy makers, practitioners, researchers, and educators need to know as much as they can about the factors that lead youth to manifest behaviors stemming from group defined values, beliefs, attitudes, and interests. Such understanding is basic to promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems arise, and enhancing intervention impact on severe and chronic problems.

To these ends, the Center is producing a series of resources, such as this one, as aids for policy and practice analyses, research, education, and school and community improvement planning.

**About Sexual Minority (LGBT)
Youth Subculture**

Our focus here is on briefly highlighting:

- (1) LGBT subculture and identity
 - (2) the impact of the subculture groups
 - (3) prevalent policy and practice efforts to address
negative impact
 - (4) data on intervention efforts
 - (5) proposed new directions
 - (6) resources for more information.
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About the Sexual Minority (LGBT) Youth Subculture

Discussions of sexual minority or “non-straight” youth usually are controversial and heated. This is particularly the case when one explores gender identity and sexual orientation as aspects of human diversity and as related to a subculture lifestyle. Therefore, it is inevitable that some folks will be displeased with what follows – some just because we are focusing on the topic, others because we use the label LGBT as shorthand in the discussion, and still others because of what we choose to emphasize.

For the most part, our focus here is not on the controversies that constitute a long-standing, major societal battlefield. Rather, we approach the topic in terms of the reality that a significant number of students identify and are identified with specific “non-straight” or sexual minority youth subcultural groups, and these young people are at increased risk for encountering problems at school and out of school.

Defining the LGBT Subculture and Identifying Subgroup Members

As is widely acknowledged, experimentation with sexuality is a common element of growing up and of establishing one’s sexual identity. As sexual identity develops, it plays a key role in shaping who one associates with and one’s lifestyle. Of course, other life shaping factors complicate the process. This is particularly so for individuals who identify and/or are identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, transsexual, transvestite, queer, or questioning and who are widely grouped under the general label LGBT (for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender).

Survey data indicate that from 2 to 4.5% of high schools students self-identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual. It is uncertain how many more choose not to state or are unsure. And while more and more youth seem to be coming “out of the closet,” the role of schools in addressing the subculture, its subgroups, and individual students remains controversial especially in some locales.

Historically, it was not until the 1990s that the label LGBT was widely adopted. While controversial, the label is designed to underscore the diversity of “sexuality and gender identity-based cultures” (Shankle, 2006; Wikipedia, nd). The ongoing debate about the label has political, legal, social, economic, religious, psychological, and educational ramifications (Aragon, 2006; Blasius, 2001; Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2007; Finnegan & McNally, 2002; Halpin, 2004; Mohr, 1988; Rimmerman, Wald, & Wilcox, 2006; Wilcox, 2003).

The debate has at least three aspects:

- > arguments over whether to use an umbrella label such as LGBT (e.g., some see this as trying to encompass too many variations under one label suggesting a homogeneity that discounts critical differences, interests, issues, and priorities)
- > arguments over the order used in the label (e.g., GLBT) and for a different overall label (e.g., adding letters such as two Qs for queer and questioning, adding two Ts for transsexual and transvestite, adding a P for polyamorous)
- > arguments over how to avoid inappropriately minimizing the variations within those grouped under this umbrella term.

In this last respect, a sense of the variations is garnered from discussions of specific concerns within lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and transsexual subgroups (see Alexander & Yescavage, 2004; Aragon, 2006; Bloodsworth-Lugo, 2007; Maskadon, Mayer, Potter, & Goldhammer, 2008; Mohr, 1988; Wilcox, 2003).

From a research perspective: Survey data reported by Russell, Clarke, and Clary (2009) suggest that “historically typical sexual identity labels (e.g., lesbian, gay, and bisexual) are endorsed by the majority (71%) of non-heterosexual youth. Some non-heterosexual youth report that they are ‘questioning’ (13%) their sexual identities or that they are ‘queer’ (5%); a small proportion (9%) provided alternative labels that describe ambivalence or resistance to sexual identity labels, or fluidity in sexual identities (e.g., pansexual).” Saewyc, Homma, Skay, Bearinger, Resnick, and Reis (2009) note that “More adolescents self-identify as bisexual or report attractions to or relationships with members of both genders than report exclusively same gender sexual identities, attractions, or relationships.” And Wilkinson and Pearson (2009) indicate that “Research has found that sexual minority teenagers consider the desire to be romantically involved a more important aspect of sexual orientation than identity or behavior. Many adolescents who experience same sex desires will never identify as gay, lesbian, or bisexual.”

What is the impact of these subculture groups on society and on subgroup members?

At one time, concern over the problems experienced by sexual minorities was almost nil. The view was that homosexuality was pathological and needed to be reversed through special treatment. While the psychiatric community finally conceded that this view was unscientific, irresponsible, and unethical, clearly there are forces within the society who continue to pursue this line of thinking.

And, even those who try to fight LGBT prejudice raise concerns about the subculture’s role in spreading HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, and this concern spills over into apprehensions about promiscuity and sexual misbehavior (Kesse, 2007). With specific respect to schools, there continues to be too little attention to the mistreatment of LGBT students (see Exhibit 1). And non-straight teachers confront employment biases and mistrust.

Society’s obligations to LGBT students are reflected in discussions of how best to address the problems experienced by subgroup members in general and students in particular. Increasing attention has been given to legislation and litigation to protect civil rights, deal with hate crimes, and bolster health and social services.

The evidence is clear that LGBT students are victimized. The 2007 national survey by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) gathered data from 6,209 middle and high school students. The findings indicate that “nearly 9 out of 10 LGBT students (86.2%) experienced harassment at school in the past year, three-fifths (60.8%) felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation and about a third (32.7%) skipped a day of school in the previous month because of feeling unsafe.” The GLSEN survey also found that middle school LGBT students are significantly more likely than high school LGBT students to experience hostile school climates and have less access to school resources and support. Surveys of educators confirm that a great deal of verbal and physical harassment at school is directed at sexual minority youth.

Evidence also indicates that LGBT students are at increased risk for mental and physical health problems and may end up among the homeless population. And, from an educational perspective, available evidence suggests that as contrasted with heterosexual peers, lesbian, gay, and bisexual students have lower levels of school achievement (Rostosky, Owens, Zimmerman, & Riggle, 2003) and higher levels of school leaving (Remafedi, 1987). And survey data from GLSEN indicate that the grade point average for LGBT students who were harassed was half a grade lower than that for other LGBT students (2.6 vs. 3.1).

Moreover, the problems of LGBT youth may be compounded for those who also fall into groups that commonly are the target of stigmatization, prejudice, discrimination, rejection, and violence (e.g., those from ethnic/racial minority backgrounds; those with physical or mental disabilities, the economically disadvantaged). These are matters for everyone who works with young people to understand and require careful attention in terms of school and public health policy and practice.

Exhibit 1

A Sampling of Concerns About LGBT Youth and Schools

“Educational institutions can be stressful places for sexual minority youth. These youth frequently feel unsupported and unsafe, and victimization and bullying are commonplace experiences. Antigay and antilesbian hostility can be particularly immobilizing for sexual minority youth given that they are legally required to attend schools to a certain age, that they have recourse to change schools should their school be a hostile environments, and that they are under the legal and/or financial control of their parents. The impact of the hostility is further amplified given that they are in a developmental phase focused on issues of identity development. ... Sexual minority youth often report feeling socially and emotionally isolated in their lives. They frequently do not know to whom they might turn for support as they work through identity development processes, learn to cope with stigma associated with being a sexual minority member and/or gender nonconforming, face struggles with relationships, and encounter numerous other issues that arise for these youth. ... Experiencing school as a hostile environment can substantially interfere with students’ learning processes and is associated with increased likelihood of skipping individual classes and missing entire days of school because of feeling unsafe.” (Walls, Kane, & Wisneski, 2009).

“Youth who feel same sex attractions may develop a sense of difference and internal distress. Feeling different at a time in life when the need to ‘fit in’ is especially pronounced can be itself distressing. ... Research has documented sexual minority youths’ increased likelihood of being involved in fights, most often as the victims of physical harassment by peers as well as the negative academic consequences of stigmatization. ... Same sex attracted youth are at greater risk for decreased well being; these youth are at higher risk in nonurban schools and in schools where football (greater impact for boys) and religion (greater impact for girls) have a larger presence” (Wilkinson & Pearson, 2009).

“It is a disturbing fact that homophobic verbal abuse is rife in many parts of the world, and runs largely unchecked in high schools. ... Not all homophobic name calling is intentionally directed at young gay and lesbian students; for example, research has consistently found that terms such as ‘gay’ are often used to refer to anything deemed unmasculine, non-normative or ‘uncool.’ ... Sticks and stones may be more likely to break their bones but the relentless, careless use of homophobic pejoratives will most certainly continue to compromise the psychological health of young homosexual and bisexual people by insidiously constructing their sexuality as something wrong, dangerous or shameful” (Thurlow, 2001).

“Adolescents with same-sex attraction are more likely than their heterosexual counterparts to report depressed mood and suicidal tendencies. A social stress model suggests that stress is the social factor influencing mental disorder. Social support and personal efficacy moderate the stress-disorder relationship. Stress has less effect when an individual has a large pool of social or personal resources available to cope with the

(cont.)

stressors. Peer relationships, school environment, and family context provide opportunities for social support as well as potential stressors. Adolescents attracted to their own sex are at a higher risk for depressive symptoms because they are more likely to perceive prejudice, are more likely to witness and experience victimization, and have lower perceptions of support and social acceptance” (Teasdale & Bradley-Engen, 2010).

“Bisexual adolescents had lower levels of most protective factors (e.g., connection to family and school) than did heterosexual adolescents, which may help explain their higher prevalence of risky behavior. Students who reported sexual partners of both genders reported higher rates of substance use, violence, and suicide attempts. Bisexual behavior may be part of interrelated risk behaviors engaged in by at risk adolescents” (Saewyc, Homma, Skay, Bearinger, Resnick, & Reis, 2009).

“Sexual minority adolescents reported more externalizing behaviors and depression symptoms than heterosexual youth. Compared to their heterosexual peers, sexual minority youth reported more sexual harassment, more bullying, less closeness with their mothers, and less companionship with their best friends. ... Overall, both victimization and social support mediated the link between sexual orientation and psychosocial symptoms. ... These findings highlight the contextual risk and protective factors associated with non-heterosexual sexual orientations in accounting for the emotional and behavioral problems in this population” (Williams et al., 2005).

“GLB youth have fewer opportunities to explore social roles and socialize with their peers. Their ‘rehearsal for adulthood’ becomes more difficult. Further, kids may internalize negative social attitudes; the result may be self-hatred. Their emerging sexuality may be clouded in shame. To cope with stigma, some adolescents learn to conceal their identity, aware of the risk of exposure, which increases isolation” (Hooper, 2004).

Bontempo and D’Augelli (2002) found that high levels of victimization at school was associated with high levels of health risk behavior for LGB youth.

Russell, Franz, and Driscoll (2001) report evidence indicating that youth indicating same-sex or both-sex romantic attraction are at greater risk for experiencing, witnessing, and perpetrating violence.

In contrast, Murdock and Bolch (2005) report finding that only 14 out of a sample of 101 youth fell into a ‘highly vulnerable’ group who frequently were “victimized by their peers in school and who also had poor support from teachers, their family, and their close friends.” They stress that “having more support from teachers and being in a school that is less excluding of lesbian and gay youth appears to facilitate a sense of psychological belonging.”

Dane and MacDonald (2009) also stress findings indicating that “The level of support young adults perceived from their sexual minority friends was positively associated with their psychological well-being. ... ingroup support and ingroup identification can enhance well-being, as well as serve to temper the ill-effects of a devalued status. ... The level of acceptance perceived from their heterosexual friends, heterosexual contacts apart from friends, and from their mothers each predicted well-being over and above sexual minority support.”

What are the prevalent policy and practice efforts to address negative impact?

Policies and practices to address the problems experienced by LGBT subgroup members have burgeoned in the last 20 years. Some policies stem from legislative action; some from litigation. Specific examples of the focus at schools include enhancing social support, providing anti-homophobic education, increasing school safety, and establishing a positive school climate.

Social Support. Efforts to enhance social support for LGBT students are well illustrated by the development at schools of *Gay Straight Alliances*. These are student-led clubs open to youth of all sexual orientations. These reflect efforts of schools and colleges to improve the experience of sexual minority youth and young adults. They are designed to support sexual minority students and their heterosexual allies and also reduce prejudice, discrimination, rejection, and harassment. Walls, Kane, & Wisneski (2009) report that more than 3,000 such groups exist in U.S. high schools and colleges.

School personnel, of course, are of major importance with respect to social support. Such staff support is an increasing focus of school policy and practice guidelines. However, it is uncertain how long it will take for the impact of the efforts to become widespread.

Anti-homophobic education. Education about diversity is seen as a fundamental for students, their families, and all school personnel. Solomon (2004), for example, argues that “effective anti-homophobia education must be articulated and delivered to students across the grades, beginning in elementary school.” In this respect, he describes a program entitled “Family Values Workshop – We Value ALL Families.” This workshop “includes lesbian and gay families within the broad constellation of families (two-parent heterosexual, single parent, adopted families, foster families and extended families) using video followed by discussion of the impact of homophobic name calling. The workshop concludes with brainstorming on how to make the students’ own school welcoming.”

Solomon also stresses: “As elementary students move to middle school, their new school environment and new schoolmates present a challenge to standing up to homophobia and the pressure to fit in and go along with others increases.” He calls for a concerted and comprehensive effort at all grade levels to keep learning environments, safe, welcoming, and inclusive.

Safe Schools. A major policy trend has been to add sexual orientation and gender identity to discrimination and harassment policies (see Exhibit 2). Such policies help to ensure that LGBT students benefit from general programs to make schools safe environments (e.g., initiatives for bullying and violence prevention, conflict mediation and resolution). They also are responsible for increasing efforts to enhance safety specifically for LGBT students. For example, the U. S. Department of Education, with the National Association of Attorneys General, incorporated the topic of sexual orientation into a comprehensive guide for school districts on protecting students from harassment (*Protecting Students from Harassment and Hate Crime: A Guide for Schools*, 1999). And as Elze (2003) notes:

“After passage of legislation that prohibited discrimination in public schools on the basis of sexual orientation, Massachusetts developed the Safe Schools Program, a state-funded, statewide network of school-based services for gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth. (Massachusetts Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, 1993). Other states have acted, from developing guides for establishing school based programs targeting sexual minority youths (Minnesota Department of Education, 1994), to creating civil rights teams to address bias motivated harassment in the schools (Maine Safe Schools Resource Collaborative, 1999).”

Among the specific practices that have been recommended is the development of *Safe Spaces/Zones*. The focus is on “marking” people and places that are safe for LGBT students. This may be

Exhibit 2

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education Policy Statement <http://www.doe.mass.edu/cnp/GSA/safegl.html>

Public health and educational research has documented that gay and lesbian students and other students dealing with sexual identity issues face increased risk of violent victimization, harassment, and discrimination, impeding their ability to do well in school. In addition, due to their low self-esteem, lack of support, and family difficulties, some of these students may be at greater risk for alcohol and other drug abuse, suicidal behavior, infection with HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, and homelessness.

In response to these concerns, Governor William F. Weld signed an executive order in February, 1992, establishing the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth. In February, 1993, the Commission issued its report, *Making Schools Safer for Gay and Lesbian Youth: Breaking the Silence in Schools and in Families*, which makes recommendations regarding educational issues.

Based on the recommendations in this report, the Board of Education voted in May, 1993, to adopt the following steps to improve the safety of schools and school-based support services for these students:

Schools are encouraged to develop policies protecting gay and lesbian students from harassment, violence, and discrimination.

In order to guarantee the rights of all students to an education and to prevent dropping out, school policies should include sexual orientation within anti-discrimination policies, as well as within policies which guarantee students' rights to an education and to equal access to school courses and activities.

In order to make schools safe for all students and to prevent violence and harassment, schools should amend existing anti-harassment policies to include prohibiting violence, harassment, and verbal abuse directed against gay and lesbian students and those perceived to be gay or lesbian. Incidents of anti-gay abuse should be treated with the same discipline procedures as other incidents involving bias and hatred.

Schools are encouraged to offer training to school personnel in violence prevention and suicide prevention.

In order to prevent violence in schools, teachers, guidance counselors, and all school staff should be provided with training in violence and suicide prevention, including the particular issues/concerns of gay and lesbian students.

Schools are encouraged to offer school-based support groups for gay, lesbian and heterosexual students.

In order to support students who are isolated and may be at high risk for suicide, high schools should establish support groups where all students, gay, lesbian and heterosexual, may meet on a regular basis to discuss gay and lesbian youth issues in a safe and confidential environment. These gay/heterosexual alliances should be open to all students and should have a faculty advisor and support from the school administration.

Schools are encouraged to provide school-based counseling for family members of gay and lesbian students.

School systems should extend existing student support teams, guidance services, and partnerships with community agencies to provide counseling services to gay and lesbian students and their families.

accomplished by having a safe zone team of students and staff that places a symbol (e.g., sticker with a pink triangle) on safe places at school. Team functions include training allies, publicizing the program, and educating the larger school community about the meaning and importance of the program. (See Safe Schools Coalition – <http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/RG-posters.html>)

School Climate. Ultimately, the desire is to improve overall school climate. Solomon (2004) points out that there has been a tremendous demand from teachers and schools not only to enhance school safety, but to create welcoming and inclusive learning environments for LGBT students and students with LGBT parents. As formulated by the Center for Social and Emotional Education’s National School Climate Center, a positive school climate is one where (a) there are norms, values and expectations that support all people feeling socially, emotionally and physically safe, (b) people are engaged and respected, (c) students, families and educators work together to develop, live and contribute to a shared school vision, (d) educators model and nurture attitudes that emphasize the benefits and satisfaction gained from learning, and (e) each person contributes to the operations of the school and the care of the physical environment (<http://nsc.csee.net/aboutnsc/>).

In an effort to further enhance attention to school climate, the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Safe and Drug Free Schools has created a school climate initiative to encourage schools to regularly assess and improve school climate. “The program awards grants to SEAs to support new approaches designed to change school culture and climate and thereby improve character and discipline, and reduce drug use, crime and violence.”

(See <http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osdfs/stategrantcoord.pdf> .)

Of particular relevance to LGBT students with respect to enhancing a positive school climate are proactive steps to “affirm the dignity and rights, within educational environments, of all lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths.” Below is a joint statement from the American Psychological Association and the National Association of School Psychologists. They resolve to:

- > take a leadership role in promoting societal and familial attitudes and behaviors that affirm the dignity and rights, within educational environments, of all lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths, including those with physical or mental disabilities and from all ethnic/racial backgrounds and classes;
- > support providing a safe and secure educational atmosphere in which all youths, including lesbian, gay and bisexual youths, may obtain an education free from discrimination, harassment, violence, and abuse, and which promotes an understanding and acceptance of self;
- > encourage psychologists to develop and evaluate interventions that foster nondiscriminatory environments, lower risk for HIV infection, and decrease self-injurious behaviors in lesbian, gay and bisexual youths;
- > advocate efforts to ensure the funding of basic and applied research on and scientific evaluations of interventions and programs designed to address the issues of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youths in the schools, and programs for HIV prevention targeted at gay and bisexual youths;
- > work with other organizations in efforts to accomplish these ends (DeLeon, 1993, p. 782).

Any Data on Intervention Impact?

As with so many efforts to address students' problems, data are sparse on the impact of intervention efforts. Here are a few examples from the recent literature.

Williams, et al (2005) state: "Research supports a developmental contextual model of adjustment among sexual minority youth. ... Promoting peaceful and accepting environments, as well as appreciating the importance of both adolescent friendships and family relationships, will result in more encompassing initiatives for improving the adjustment of sexual minority and questioning adolescents."

Walls, Kane, & Wisneski (2009) report that "Many of the documented benefits of Gay Straight Alliances appear to be related to the direct support offered to students and the focus on developing and supporting individual and collective empowerment. ... Significantly fewer sexual minority students who attended schools with Gay Straight Alliances reported experiencing suicidal feelings than their counterparts who attended schools without Gay Straight Alliances. ... Protective factors such as belonging to support groups were correlated with involvement in high schools. Gay Straight Alliance members reported feeling safer at school and being harassed less frequently. ... Sexual minority students in schools where Gay Straight Alliances exist had better grades."

With specific respect to adolescents grappling with issues of sexual preference, Teasdale and Bradley-Engen (2010) report a high association between social support and reduced depressive symptoms.

Researchers also have stressed findings relevant to understanding factors that interfere with intervention impact. For example, Mishna, Newman, Daley, and Solomon (2009) suggest that:

"The mixed success of whole-school anti-bullying programs has been attributed to inconsistent commitment of institutions and society and to insufficient attention paid to issues such as school characteristics. Environments that actively or passively support a hostile milieu for lesbian and gay youth fall directly in the realm of factors that must be identified to ensure the success of anti-bullying interventions. ... Approaches that tend to operate on one level, particularly those targeting individual level dynamics of lesbian and gay bullying, not only may be ineffective, but actually risk contributing to the problem; lesbian and gay youth might become identified as the locus of the problem rather than families, schools, sporting events, places of worship and other key social and community institutions, as well as laws and social policies that ignore or exclude lesbian and gay youth from their purview. ... Interventions must be tailored to particular populations and social and institutional contexts."

With respect to Gay Straight Alliances, Fetner and Kush (2008) emphasize that:

"The social contexts in which young people live have a major impact on their ability to form Gay Straight Alliances. LGBTQ and supportive straight high school students who live in urban or suburban settings and in a region of the country with liberal or progressive political leanings are more likely to start a Gay Straight Alliance. ... Larger schools are more likely to have GSAs. ... Schools in wealthier neighborhoods are more likely to have these support groups than schools in poorer neighborhoods."

New Directions

Those concerned with enhancing efforts to support LGBT students stress both (1) a direct focus on reducing stigma, prejudice, discrimination, and violence toward such young people and helping them overcome problems and (2) a focus on promoting their healthy development and emancipation. The first emphasis is on continuing to sensitize school personnel, ensure there are effective policies related to bullying and school safety, and enhancing responses to help those affected when incidents occur.

The second emphasis is captured by Wilkinson and Pearson (2009):

“Much of the work on interventions has focused on specific programs designed to meet the needs of LGBQ youth, such as gay-straight alliances and safe school policies. While important, such interventions may ignore the subtle yet powerful maintenance of heteronormativity within schools that occur through the reproduction of schemas and daily practices organized around heterosexual relationships, which are further legitimated by the school and by institutions embedded within the school. ... More work should be done to explore the relational contexts of other spaces within schools, such as drama and fine arts programs, to determine the dominant discourses and practices that pervade these spaces and their possible role in reducing the stigma of same sex attractions.”

And from a sociological perspective, Cohler and Hammack (2007) stress that “our society and its discourse on homosexuality have changed rapidly since the 1980s” (shifting from a focus on struggle and success to a narrative of emancipation). This shift can be seen as having a profound influence on identity formation and on the content of interventions designed to promote healthy development.

From a pragmatic perspective, schools need to understand the LGBT subcultures and must become proactive in addressing factors that are significantly interfering with any student’s positive physical, cognitive, social and emotional development and play a prominent role in promoting healthy development.

A proactive approach avoids traditional tendencies to wait for problems to arise. It also avoids presuming every problem requires unique intervention strategies by understanding which concerns represent common youth cultural subgroup dynamics and which are associated mostly with one or a few subgroups. Analyses should consider a subgroup’s behavior in terms of motivating factors (including efforts intended to enhance feelings of competence, self-determination, and connectedness to specific others), as well as social, cultural, and gender politics and economies.

Current new directions for policy and practice addressing student social-emotional problems reflect an increasing emphasis on enhancing social-emotional learning, school climate, and general wellness. As discussed above, all this has relevance to the findings that LGBT subgroups often have specific arenas where psychosocial and mental health concerns arise.

Impact, of course, is dependent on what a school does and what it stops doing so that all students feel “both physically and emotionally safe and feel valued.” From the perspective of our Center’s work, what is needed is the development of a full continuum of interventions. A full continuum allows schools to begin with a focus on promoting healthy development and preventing problems for all students. Well designed systems for healthy development and prevention should be foundational features in every school and community. Beyond the benefits they provide directly, they also provide a platform for determining whether the impact of any subgroup is significantly interfering with positive physical, cognitive, social and emotional development and thus warrants special attention. Where it is clear that this is the case, early-after-onset interventions can be introduced based on an analysis of subgroup concerns associated with a particular lifestyle. Finally,

if individuals are found to need specialized assistance, steps can be taken to address identified needs. In sum, rather than waiting for problems, new directions thinking stresses a proactive approach to preventing school and student problems, enhancing personal well-being, and improving academics, and using a continuum of interventions that contributes to enhancing a positive school climate.

Below and in the box that follows, we illustrate approaching policy and practice proactively and with a full continuum of interventions. Embedded are a few examples to illustrate addressing concerns related to LGBT students.

- *Promoting healthy development and preventing problems*

Examples:

- > providing information to educate school and key community stakeholders and policy makers about the positive and negative features of youth subculture in general and LGBT lifestyle/subcultures specifically and about how to counter any negative impact
- > establishing dialogues with students identified as LGBT, with the intent of engaging them in ways that minimize identified problems and promote healthy social and emotional development (e.g., helping them learn how to turn around any problems stemming from their LGBT status and lifestyle and clarifying their impact on others)
- > protecting all students (e.g., from injuries, from negative social and emotional impact, from discrimination and negative images)

- *Intervening when problems are noted*

Examples:

- > implementing agreed upon promising practices to respond as quickly as feasible (e.g., watching for any impact and taking corrective actions)
- > ensuring a student's LGBT status isn't interfering with success at school (e.g., enhancing engagement if the student appears overly distracted or on other ways disengaged from classroom learning)
- > ensuring medical, mental health, and learning supports are available for all in need (e.g., related to physical, social, emotional, and learning problems)

- *Attending to chronic and severe problems*

For instance:

- > identifying and referring for appropriate individual interventions as necessary (e.g., to reduce serious and pervasive physical, emotional, and cognitive concerns)
- > establishing a safety net of support (e.g., through school, family, community mental and physical health providers and agencies)

A Perspective on What Schools Should Do Based on the Work of our Center at UCLA

Schools experience many overlapping concerns related to youth subgroups and youth subculture. Of special concern is addressing any negative impact (e.g., criminal acts, bullying, sexual harassment, interracial conflict, vandalism, mental health problems). But, also essential is a focus on promoting healthy development and fostering a positive school climate.

As always, the more we understand about subgroups and individual differences, the more effective our interventions can be. But to keep from the tendency to focus on each concern as if it is discrete, schools need to work in a new way.

Given the complexity of the negative behaviors that arise in relation to youth subgroups, those in the school, district, and community who have responsibility for gangs, safe schools, violence prevention, bullying, interracial conflict, substance abuse, vandalism, truancy, and school climate need to work collaboratively. The *immediate objectives* are to (1) educate others about motivational and behavioral factors associated with a particular subgroup, (2) counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services, and (3) facilitate opportunities on campus for youth subgroups to engage positively in subcultural activity and connect with effective peer supports.

By working collaboratively and differentiating the causes of observed problems, school staff and community stakeholders can integrate fragmented and marginalized initiatives for promoting positive youth development, preventing problems, intervening as soon as problems are identified, and providing effective ways to respond to pervasive, chronic, and serious problems. *Longer-term*, the aim is to help develop a comprehensive system of student and learning supports that (a) addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development and (b) re-engages disconnected youth. Such a system encompasses a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems that are fully integrated into the improvement agenda for schools and communities (Adelman & Taylor, 2006a, b).

Toward these ends, schools must reach out to the community and establish a collaborative mechanism where those with specialized knowledge not only bring that knowledge to the table, but also work to build the needed comprehensive system of student and learning supports that addresses a wide range of barriers to learning, teaching, parenting, and development (Adelman & Taylor, 2007). And it is essential to remember that those with specialized knowledge include youth themselves (Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA, 2009).

Moving forward requires building a comprehensive and systemic continuum of interventions and fully integrating the system into the improvement agenda for schools and communities. To guide development of a systemic approach, we have suggested using a continuum of integrated school-community intervention systems as a unifying framework. This includes school-community systems for promoting healthy development, preventing problems, intervening early to address problems as soon after onset as is feasible, and addressing chronic and severe problems.

Policy that helps schools and communities develop the full continuum of interventions is essential to moving forward in enhancing equity of opportunity. Such policy must effectively establish a *comprehensive intervention framework* that can be used to map, analyze, and set priorities. It must guide fundamental *reworking of operational infrastructure* so that there is leadership and mechanisms for building integrated systems of interventions at schools and for connecting school and community resources. And, it must provide guidance for the difficulties inherent in facilitating major *systemic changes*. By working in this way, we can counter the trend in policy and practice to establish initiatives in terms of separate categories that lead to a host of fragmented and too often ineffective programs and services.

For resource aids related to policy examples, intervention frameworks and related mapping tools, examples of ways to rework the operational infrastructure and develop key mechanisms such as a *Learning Support Resource Team*, guides for facilitating systemic change, and much more, see the Center's Toolkit at <http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/summit2002/resourceaids.htm>

References and Resources

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A Few Online Resources

Advocates for Youth – *The impact of homophobia and racism on GLBTQ youth of color* – <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org>

American Civil Liberties Union – *Adding sexual orientation & gender identity to discrimination and harassment policies in schools*. <http://www.aclu.org>

Association for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Issues in Counseling – <http://www.algbtic.org>

Family Acceptance Project – <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu>

Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network – Coming out: A guide for youth and their allies; About Gay-Straight Alliances; Educators guide to the Day of Silence; No Name-Calling Week; New Safe Space Kit; K-12 Curricula and Lesson Plans – <http://www.glsen.org>

Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education – Gay/Straight Alliances: A Student Guide – <http://www.doe.mass.edu/cnp.GSA/safegl.html>

Mental Health America – Factsheet: Bullying and Gay Youth; What does gay mean? How to talk with kids about sexual orientation and prejudice – <http://www.nmha.org>

YES Institute – Education on Gender & Orientation – <http://www.yesinstitute.org/>

You can find a range of online resources on our online clearinghouse Quick Find Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual Issues (including our technical assistance sampler on *Sexual Minority Students* – http://smhp.psych.ucla.edu/qf/p3017_02.htm

The Center's Series of Information Resources on *Youth Subcultures: Understanding Subgroups to Better Address Barriers to Learning & Improve Schools**

Online:

What is Youth Culture? A Brief Introduction

Glossary of Terms Related to Youth Culture Subgroups

Youth Subcultures: Annotated Bibliography and Related References

About Youth Gangs

About the Goth Youth Subculture

About Hip Hop Youth Subculture

About "Loners" and "Losers"

About "Jocks" as Youth Subculture

About Emo Youth Subculture

About Surfing and Skateboarding Youth Subcultures

About the Cheerleading Youth Subculture

About "Mean Girls" as a Youth Culture Subgroup

About "Nerds" and "Geeks" as an Identified Subculture

About "Preppies" as a Youth Culture Subgroup

About Sexual Minority (LGBT) Youth Subculture

Youth and Socially Interactive Technologies

About Raves as a Youth Culture Phenomenon

Others are in development

*Many of the terms used by youth in referring to subgroups often are pejorative and offensive. We do not condone such language. We do, however, recognize the need to go beyond adultcentric definitions and descriptions of youth subgroups if we are to understand youth perceptions and perspectives. So the *Information Resource* documents reflect the terms used by youth.