

National Education Conference Focuses On GLBT Students of Color

By: Kenneth Harvey

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Educators learn about bullying and harassment.

The National Education Association, representing 3.2 million educators nationally, held its 2009 Joint Conference, at the Manchester Hyatt Hotel on Monday, June 29, where 1,000 educators gathered to discuss "Public education, the gateway to global opportunities in a diverse society."

The conference took special interest in GLBT students and their teachers, along with GLBT minorities of color and women.

"For educators, the challenges are numerous," said Human Rights Campaign (HRC) special projects manager Che Tabiosa, who gave a presentation on identity issues for GLBT students of color. "Every teacher has had an experience where students will use 'that's so gay,' and it's become this awful slang." Tabiosa said that educators have many resources available to counteract such usage.

"HRC for example has got this wonderful resource called 'Welcoming Schools. It has things like lesson plans with specific strategies for when you hear a child use 'gay' in a hurtful way. It breaks down strategies for different age groups."

Citing a survey that GLSEN.org conducts every two years focusing on bullying of GLBT students, Tabiosa said 86.2 percent of GLBT students are verbally harassed, another 44.1 percent are physically harassed, and 22.1 percent are assaulted, meaning they are punched, kicked or assaulted with a weapon.

The study analyzed the statistics to reflect the GLBT population of color, whom Tabiosa said also deal with racial discrimination and racially motivated violence.

The research also focused on the unique issues facing transgender students. "The transgender students we talk about are more likely to skip a day and miss class because they don't feel safe because of their gender identity," Tabiosa said. "These students also describe situations where the staff hear these homophobic remarks being made, and rarely intervene."

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Outlining ways for schools to improve GLBT students' quality of life, including non-discrimination policies implemented at the district level, facilitation of gay-straight alliances, no-name-calling policies and no-teasing policies, Tabiosa added that GLSEN's research showed that schools with Gay Straight Alliances have fewer instances of harassment and assault.

"Somebody who cares about literacy, and about if kids have a hot breakfast before they go to school should also care about anti-bullying," Tabiosa continued, urging educators to listen to students. "To hear their stories and their strategies to combat [homophobia] is really inspiring," he said.

Co-chair of NEA's GLBT caucus and GLBT fourth-grade teacher Nicole DeVore said NEA's mandate includes gaining equality not only for students but also for GLBT teachers. "Our goals include equal rights for our members, acknowledgement in all of the states and to advocate for our LGBT teachers and educators across the United States," DeVore stated. NEA provides facilitators to train educators and facilitate discussions, she said.

"A lot of teachers will come and bring up scenarios in their specific school. We talk about what's going on at their schools, and how they might deal with it, what resources can be given to those schools to help direct people."

If NEA cannot help, the association encourages members to receive support from local organizations, she said, adding, however, that many are not aware of resources available.

While DeVore said that she has not faced discrimination as a teacher, either from students or faculty, her students tease each other about sexual orientation. "It is difficult to determine why. Some students may use anti-gay epithets because of other reasons, not always because they are gay," DeVore explained, noting the comments are becoming more prevalent. "There's almost an increase in anti-gay 'Oh you're so gay' comments. I think that's really increased over the years."

In the classroom is where educators should start a discussion, she said. "We [need to] start talking about what they're saying and how it's mean and hurtful." DeVore said she compares sexuality to race to help students relate, because many of her students do not understand what it means to be gay, and she does not want to explain sexuality to fourth-graders.

"I try to get them to understand the personal, that they're hurting somebody else's feelings," DeVore said. "[NEA is] trying to show [educators] how to create a safe zone in the classroom so that students, no matter what state they're in, can focus on learning."

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Eric Hines, an out fourth-grade teacher from San Francisco, said NEA has given him a lot of support. "Both the national union and the state union have been extremely supportive of LGBT issues. They've made it much more possible for me to come out in my classroom, to my co-workers and my administration."

"I find the more out you are, the more protected you are," Hines said, but he acknowledged that teaching in San Francisco, where GLBT people are typically more accepted than elsewhere in the country, may contribute to this. "There are still places in this country where teachers can be fired for talking about or being gay. It's important they have protection and they have an opportunity to talk about issues and have a safe place where they can explore issues and learn how to advocate for their kids as well." Hines said in his classroom he finds his students become more tolerant as the school year progresses.

"It starts as young as kindergarten. A lot of it has to do with gender norms for young kids. It centers around gender: what's a 'girl' thing; what's a 'boy' thing, how you sit, the colors of what you wear. What I tend to do is try to challenge that as much as I can. I'm not necessarily saying that's a bad thing, but to open their minds to other possibilities."

According to the NEA's recent report, research shows increases in GLBT students' academic achievement when school staff take steps to create a positive environment. NEA urges schools to adopt codes of conduct and anti-discrimination policies that prohibit harassment and bullying because of sexual orientation. The report offers six tips for addressing harassment:

- 1 take complaints seriously
- 2 report alleged harassment or bullying
- 3 reassure and do not judge
- 4 offer professional help when appropriate
- 5 stand up and speak out for students in need
- 6 do something, let perpetrators know their behavior is unacceptable.

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