



“No respect! Where’s the respect?”

The shout came from the back of the room, from someone who was not on our committee, who had not worked with us in the months preceding the board meeting. But the woman was as upset as we were when Dallas School Board members began to turn away the students who had come to share their stories of antigay harassment by their peers, and the neglect or outright homophobia displayed by teachers and school administrators.

No student should have to fear for his or her well-being in the classroom. In the last couple of decades, many of our nation’s schools have acted on this principle by taking increasing precautions to protect student safety — in the form of metal detectors, beefed-up security and better training for teachers in conflict resolution. But when it comes to the everyday lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) adolescents, separate issues arise, often misunderstood or else neglected by school administrators and teachers.

Lambda Legal has recognized the needs of LGBTQ youth for decades. Our work goes back to the 1970s, when we helped persuade a court to force the University of New Hampshire to allow a gay student group to exist alongside other student

# NOTES from the FRONTLINE

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groups. Since then we have secured first-ever federal rulings that schools must protect gay students from violence and harassment and that gay-straight alliances must be allowed to meet under the same rules as other student groups. We relied on our experience helping make schools safer for LGBTQ youth in working with the Dallas Independent School District (DISD).

Three students waited nervously behind Robert Ivansec, cofounder of Youth First Texas (a drop-in center for LGBTQ youth in northern Texas), who had just presented hard facts to the board: according to GLSEN's National School Climate Survey, nationally, 84 percent of LGBTQ students report being verbally harassed, 64 percent say they feel unsafe in their schools and 19 percent have experienced homophobia from staff members. The DISD, Ivansec reminded its board members, had enacted a nondiscrimination policy in the early 1990s that addressed sexual orientation and also mandated staff training on the needs of LGBTQ students. "You're not doing it," he said, "and youth are not feeling safe."

The DISD, the eighth largest school district in the nation, was the first in the state of Texas to enact a nondiscrimination policy that includes sexual orientation. This policy protects both students and employees from harassment and abuse specifically related to being gay (or the perception of being gay). This policy was the first of its kind in Texas. But in the last 15 years, there has been little to no enforcement of the policy, largely due to a lack of knowledge of its existence.

Lambda Legal, along with Dallas community leaders and Youth First Texas, came together in 2006 to form a committee to address ongoing struggles for LGBTQ youth in the DISD and to try to reactivate the dormant antidiscrimination policy. We decided to bring Dallas students to a school board meeting to offer firsthand accounts of their experiences. That night, after our ally in the audience voiced protest and Ivansec pressed the importance of

hearing these experiences, board members finally backed down and allowed the students to speak.

And their words, unscripted and unrehearsed, were what ultimately got the board's attention. One young woman, a straight ally, said her high school principal followed her around the school, removing signs she had just posted announcing GLSEN's Day of Silence, a national day of action to support LGBTQ students that takes place at schools across the country. After confronting her principal, this honors student said she was deemed "emotionally disturbed" and eventually transferred to another school. Another young woman said she was made an unfair target of security personnel and school administrators because of her "masculinity." She was labeled a "problem student" and transferred in and out of four different schools before eventually dropping out and seeking her G.E.D. instead. And a young transgender man, his first year into college, recalled the period of elementary and high school before he transitioned, saying, "I was called a boy, a dyke, a hermaphrodite. This is before I realized who I was."

**Our success in Dallas is a model for future campaigns we're planning in other cities.**

After the meeting, the school board president sat down with our committee and pledged his support. The DISD Deputy Superintendent asked Lambda Legal to speak to all middle and high school principals about the nondiscrimination policy and encourage more training. The principals, in turn, requested that we educate all school counselors across the system. We did, and some of our publications — "Bending the Mold," a toolkit for transgender youth, and "Out, Safe and

Respected," a resource for LGBTQ youth about their rights and tips on starting a gay-straight alliance — became permanent additions in counseling offices throughout the district.

The policy itself was reexamined and the district agreed to a number of changes: to include regular training on LGBT issues for staff as part of their diversity trainings; to allow groups like GLSEN and Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) to provide in-service trainings for teachers; to keep books, posters, and other LGBT-related materials visible in libraries, and not held behind counters; and to allow access to websites of LGBT organizations that had been blocked, like those of GLSEN and Youth First Texas.

Our work with DISD was a product of our partnerships with local, state and national organizations, along with some supportive corporations that saw the value in students learning to respect diversity early on; businesses like Merrill Lynch, Ernst & Young and Texas Instruments sent letters of support early in the process of securing support from DISD. Our success in our work here is a model for future campaigns we're planning in other cities like Austin, Texas. Lambda Legal has received national attention for our work with DISD — it was mentioned in a *Time* magazine article on Dallas in 2007, and we presented our model at the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force's 2008 Creating Change conference in Detroit.

As Lambda Legal's attorneys continue to pursue litigation that will have a large impact on youth in their states and across the nation, Lambda Legal's community educators complement those efforts with campaigns we lead in school districts, trainings and resources we provide to administrators and other decisionmakers in schools, and advocacy for students who seek information on their rights. Together, these efforts lead to firmer standards and policies that LGBTQ youth can rely upon — and to the respect they desire and deserve. **L**