

Get It In Writing

Lambda Legal's LGBTQ Youth Publications

Our cover story features the case of two high school students who faced harassment and trauma at their California high school. Years later, they have finally been vindicated in court, their school held responsible for neglecting their welfare. Unfortunately, this case is just one of many such examples across the country — young LGBTQ people dealing with hardship and discrimination, with too few resources to turn to for help.

Working to protect and empower LGBTQ youth is one of Lambda Legal's biggest priorities. Part of that is accomplished by creating and distributing educational material in schools, libraries and drop-in centers. This fall, we published updated versions of two valuable toolkits for youth. *Out, Safe and Respected* addresses the needs and concerns of LGBTQ youth in middle and high schools, and *Bending the Mold* is geared specifically towards transgender and gender-nonconforming youth and their allies. Both publications offer guidance to LGBTQ youth and their allies in how to be advocates for themselves and their friends, and they also assist adults who work with young people to better understand and advocate for LGBTQ students.

Our publications target issues that we see in our

casework involving youth in schools and in out-of-home care. Many of these cases aim to protect free speech rights, as in the landmark case *Colin v. Orange Unified School District*, where the court ruled that schools receiving federal funding must allow gay-straight alliances to meet on campus if other student groups are allowed to do so. Other cases have protected students' rights to be out on campus or to dress in a way they feel comfortable with. A recent example is the case of K.K. Logan, whose principal denied him entrance to his high school prom because he was wearing a dress. Lambda Legal has filed a complaint on K.K.'s behalf, arguing that the school restricted K.K.'s First Amendment rights.

Some of the most troubling cases are those that involve bullying and harassment of LGBTQ youth. One of Lambda Legal's landmark cases on antigay bullying in schools was *Nabozny v. Podlesny*, where a gay student faced such relentless and violent harassment that he attempted suicide and dropped out of school. The court found school officials can be held liable for failing to address peer abuse.

The goal of our publications and our other educational work is to prevent such events from happening by promoting a respectful institu-

tional environment for young LGBTQ people. We also give LGBTQ youth a starting point on understanding their legal rights and encourage them to approach school administrators, parents, foster care caseworkers and other involved adults to ask for help. This is the motivation behind *Out, Safe and Respected*, *Bending the Mold* and our forthcoming toolkit paired with *Out, Safe and Respected* — written specifically for school administrators, faculty and staff.

LGBTQ youth are not just vulnerable at school: They often face abuse and discrimination from peers and adults in out-of-home care. Our Youth in Out-of-Home Care Project has reached out to child welfare services and homeless systems of care in order to raise awareness about the needs of LGBTQ youth so that those whose job it is to serve and protect them can do so with knowledge and compassion. Two of our publications, *Out of the Margins* and *Getting Down to Basics*, are designed to educate LGBTQ youth in out-of-home care and the adults who work with them. In 2003 we developed listening forums in which youth and adults came together to address the

needs of LGBTQ youth in out-of-home care. These were so successful that in November 2008 we launched more listening forums in the Chicago area to discuss how to support black LGBTQ youth in schools.

Growing up is hard. Lambda Legal's working for the day where sexual orientation or gender identity and expression isn't a factor that makes it harder. Whether in a classroom, a shelter, at prom or at the mall, our hope is that by giving youth the resources they need to advocate for their rights, and by educating the entire community of adults about how best to help and protect the LGBTQ youth they work with, we will see fewer cases of harassment of and discrimination against the youngest members of our communities. **L**

