Conclusion and Policy Recommendations: Making It Better for LGBT Students

[An education is] about giving each and every one of us the chance to fulfill our promise; to be the best version of ourselves we can be. And part of what that means is treating others the way we want to be treated—with kindness and respect.

Now, I know that doesn’t always happen. Especially not in middle or high school. Being a teenager isn’t easy. It’s a time when we’re wrestling with a lot of things. When I was your age, I was wrestling with questions about who I was; about what it meant to be the son of a white mother and a black father, and not having that father in my life. Some of you may be working through your own questions right now, and coming to terms with what makes you different.

And I know that figuring all that out can be even more difficult when you’ve got bullies in class who try to use those differences to pick on you or poke fun at you; to make you feel bad about yourself.

So, what I want to say to you today—what I want all of you to take away from my speech—is that life is precious, and part of its beauty lies in its diversity. We shouldn’t be embarrassed by the things that make us different. We should be proud of them. Because it’s the things that make us different that make us who we are. And the strength and character of this country have always come from our ability to recognize ourselves in one another, no matter who we are, or where we come from, what we look like, or what abilities or disabilities we have.

—President Barack Obama

President Barack Obama delivered his 2010 back-to-school speech to a crowd of cheering students at the Julia R. Masterman Laboratory and Demonstration School in Philadelphia on September 14. Less than a week earlier, fifteen-year-old Billy Lucas took his own life after being suspended from school for fighting back against bullies who, according to friends, would “call him gay and tell him to go kill him-
self.” For several weeks following the speech, the attention of the United States would continue to be captured by a series of tragic suicides completed by several more teenagers who were bullied at school because of their real or perceived sexual orientation. In that context, the president’s message to students that “life is precious, and part of its beauty lies in its diversity” is more poignant than perhaps even he thought it would be.

One month later, the president would revisit his attention to bullying and diversity in schools in a video he created for the It Gets Better Project, an online social media movement started by syndicated columnist and gay activist Dan Savage in response to LGBT youth suicide, “to show young LGBT people the levels of happiness, potential, and positivity their lives will reach—if they can just get through their teen years.” In his video, President Obama said,

Like all of you, I was shocked and saddened by the deaths of several young people who were bullied and taunted for being gay, and who ultimately took their own lives. As a parent of two daughters, it breaks my heart. It’s something that just shouldn’t happen in this country.

We’ve got to dispel the myth that bullying is just a normal rite of passage—that it’s some inevitable part of growing up. It’s not. We have an obligation to ensure that our schools are safe for all of our kids.

. . . As a nation we’re founded on the belief that all of us are equal and each of us deserves the freedom to pursue our own version of happiness; to make the most of our talents; to speak our minds; to not fit in; most of all, to be true to ourselves. That’s the freedom that enriches all of us. That’s what America is all about. And every day, it gets better.

What needs to happen to meet the obligation to “ensure that our schools are safe for all of our kids,” including those who are LGBT? In addition to telling them that it gets better when they are older, what can be done to make it better now for LGBT youth in America’s schools? The social science research and policy analysis included in this book supports a comprehensive policy agenda that promotes strength and resiliency among LGBT youth and ensures that schools are supportive, affirming places where young people can reach their full potential.
Federal Policy Recommendations

As discussed in detail in chapter 3, there is significant opportunity and need for the federal government to lead efforts to protect students through the enforcement of existing laws and the creation of new laws and policies that explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity as enumerated categories of protection. The following recommendations would decrease anti-LGBT bullying and enhance LGBT youths’ ability to access an education free of violence and discrimination. These changes would also improve health outcomes and decrease young gay men’s disproportionate vulnerability to HIV and other sexually transmitted infections. The addition of behavioral and demographic questions to federal surveys will also provide a better understanding of the experiences of LGBT youth as compared with their heterosexual and non-gender-variant peers.

• We encourage Congress to pass and the president to sign the Student Nondiscrimination Act, which would outlaw harassment, bullying, and violence against students based on real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, and the Safe Schools Improvement Act, which would require schools to adopt codes of conduct that specifically prohibit bullying and harassment and to collect and report data on bullying and harassment to the Department of Education.
• The U.S. Department of Education should work closely with state and local partners to expand nondiscrimination and antiharassment policies in schools and to educate school districts about existing federal laws that require them to protect students from discrimination, harassment, and bullying.
• The president, members of Congress, and other influential political leaders should continue to show leadership acknowledging the impact of homophobia and anti-LGBT prejudice on students and the moral and ethical obligation to ensure that all youth have access to a safe and quality education.
• Elected representatives and the leadership of anti-LGBT advocacy groups should be held accountable for their efforts to prevent the passage of legislation and policy that protects students from anti-LGBT harassment and violence.
• Comprehensive sex education that includes age-appropriate infor-
mation about safer sex practices for same and opposite-sex partners should be mandatory for all public schools.
• Questions that assess sexual orientation and gender identity should be mandatory for federal surveys like the Youth Risk Behavior Survey, so that valuable data about LGBT youth can be collected. Federal agencies should also be equipped with expertise to analyze these data and make appropriate recommendations.
• Qualified LGBT people should be appointed to federal advisory boards and committees that guide the implementation and enforcement of existing federal laws and policies related to schools and school safety.

State Policy Recommendations

In addition to federal leadership, states must be equal partners in ensuring not only that LGBT youth have equal access to a quality and safe education but also that LGBT educators and administrators are protected and encouraged to serve as role models and mentors for youth (see chapter 3). The following recommendations cover the range of opportunities schools have to fundamentally change and prevent anti-LGBT school climates.

• Existing laws and policies that protect students from discrimination and harassment should be enforced and, if necessary, amended to include real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity as enumerated categories of protection.
• States without school nondiscrimination and antiharassment laws should pass comprehensive legislation with enumerated categories of protection, as New York State did in September 2010 when Governor David Paterson signed into law the Dignity for All Students Act. New Jersey also has a model antibullying law, with tough reporting requirements and real consequences for students who bully and for teachers/administrators who fail to intervene and report.
• Charter and private schools should be required to abide by state nondiscrimination and antibullying laws and regulations.
• In addition to making public schools safe for LGBT youth, appropriate schools and programs like the Harvey Milk High School in New York City, which specifically reach out to LGBT youth who are struggling in the school system because of issues related to
their sexual orientation or gender identity, should be created. While such schools are not a long-term solution, they may be the best option in larger school systems where broadscale change is not possible in a short period of time.

- “No promo homo” laws and policies, which prevent educators from including age-appropriate information about LGBT people in health classes and other school courses, should be repealed.
- School curricula and textbooks should include the contributions to history and culture made by LGBT people.
- States should reject funding for abstinence-only-until-marriage programs in favor of programs that include comprehensive, age-appropriate information about how to prevent the transmission of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases. Health and family planning curricula should include positive and accurate information about LGBT people and same-sex couples.
- In addition to federal efforts, state boards of education and school districts should ensure that teachers and school administrators are educated about legal requirements to protect LGBT students from discrimination and harassment. State political leaders should learn from the model policies and actions in Massachusetts to create commissions that examine the challenges faced by LGBT youth and identify policy solutions.
- Boards of education should create and support comprehensive safe schools programs modeled after successful programs in Massachusetts, California, and New York City.
- States should include optional questions about sexual orientation and gender identity on the Center for Disease Control’s Youth Risk Behavior Survey and other federal surveys that collect data on the sexual orientation and gender identity of students.

School-based Policy Recommendations

While the ability of schools to protect LGBT students is affected by federal and state policy, there is significant opportunity to adopt regulations, policies, and curricula that bridge legal gaps and ensure that the daily experiences of students and teachers occur in an environment that not only has zero tolerance for harassment and bullying but also facilitates diversity and acceptance. The following recommendations are summarized from the research and analysis in chapter 4.
• School districts should adopt regulations that prohibit discrimination against students, teachers, and staff based on real or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity.
• Teachers and school administrators should enforce existing school safety and antibullying laws and policies.
• School districts should conduct trainings to ensure that teachers and other staff are culturally competent in serving LGBT youth and confronting bullying and harassment. This training should address particular issues affecting LGBT youth of color and children with LGBT parents.
• School administrators should create safe spaces for LGBT teachers to work openly and honestly about themselves and their families and should encourage them to be role models for students and staff.
• Schools should conduct periodic surveys that measure incidence of anti-LGBT harassment and bullying in school, similar to the GLSEN National School Climate Survey.
• Principals should support the creation and maintenance of gay-straight alliances and should support teachers/administrators who choose to sponsor such groups (see “Guidance for Students, Parents, and Staff Who Want to Create a GSA” in chapter 4).
• School boards and administrators should support programs that create community and safe spaces for LGBT and questioning students, such as GLSEN’s Safe Space campaign and New York City’s Respect for All Week.
• School libraries should include age-appropriate books about LGBT people, history, and culture.
• Internet filters on school computers should not prevent students from accessing age-appropriate information about LGBT issues.

Making it Better for Transgender Youth in Schools

Throughout this book, we frequently noted the need for more research on transgender youth. Advocacy organizations like GLSEN have made significant contributions to this need through the inclusion of transgender youth and their experiences in surveys and school outreach programs. Research findings indicating that the school experiences of transgender youth are even more harmful and dangerous than those of their LGB peers highlight a critical need for attention to this population of
students. To reduce the harm currently experienced by transgender youth, a number of key actions are required.

• Educators and school administrators must acknowledge that transgender youth exist in schools and that they have a legal obligation to support and protect transgender youth regardless of how they choose to express their gender identity.
• Educators and school administrators must intervene to reduce the risks experienced by transgender youth in schools because of discrimination and marginalization.
• Steps must be undertaken to reduce the vulnerability of transgender students by providing them access to resources that meet their specific needs, including sensitive and effective care by school health staff and guidance counselors.
• Education about transgender people should be included in the professional preparation and in-service training programs for all teachers and school administrators.
• Youth who identify as transgender must be educated about society’s gender constructs and how these contribute to their vulnerability and devalue their health status. Strategies to enhance emotional, social, and physical development must be established to assist transgender youth in building the resiliency they need to live in a culture that tenaciously maintains a binary concept of gender.7

**Beyond Policy to Social Change**

Implementation of these policy recommendations will significantly help and protect LGBT students. Alone, however, they are not enough to ensure that schools are safe and supportive learning environments. Homophobia and anti-LGBT discrimination in schools is deeply rooted in sociocultural history and beliefs about gender stereotypes and how young people should be educated. Beyond policy, there are several ways in which the American ethos needs to change in order to comprehensively prevent anti-LGBT harassment and violence in schools.

Family acceptance and support are integral to the positive development and overall wellness of all children, including young LGBT people. Parents who reject LGBT children cause immeasurable harm. We must send a clear message to families that they play a critical role in promoting positive health and wellness outcomes of LGBT youth. Fam-
ilies who embrace their LGBT children should be visible in their communities in order to set positive examples, and LGBT youth who feel supported in their families should share their stories. Such publicity will promote the strengths and resiliency of families and encourage others to follow their lead.

State and local community organizations should implement interventions to disseminate and reinforce these messages, such as Gay Men's Health Crisis's 2008 My Son Is My Life campaign, which presented the importance of parental support in the lives of black young gay men. The informational palm cards and ads on bus shelters and phone kiosks created for this campaign, aimed at both young men and their fathers, acknowledge the many reactions parents can have upon learning that their son is gay, and they illustrate the steps parents can take to continue to provide support and love to their children.8

To achieve fundamental change, we must also expose and challenge the myth of the “normal” family in America. We must counsel families to let go of the heterosexist notion that all children will automatically be heterosexual, so that couples who plan to have children will consider the possibility of having a gay or transgender son or daughter. We must encourage families to let go of stigma and silence around homosexuality, so that parents who believe their child may be gay can find other families like theirs. Groups that advocate for acceptance of LGBT youth, such as Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, serve extremely important functions in this regard.

The active support of religious leaders, who have enormous impact on family values, is also critical for helping not only families with LGBT children but also all parents who influence the worldview of their children, gay or straight. While some religious leaders and organizations promote positive messages about LGBT people, many send messages of intolerance that influence family reactions to LGBT youth. We should also enlist the business sector, organized labor, the nonprofit philanthropic sector, and other parts of society in support of these efforts. Shifting to messages of love, acceptance, and support and ending the political exploitation of anti-LGBT sentiment will better not only the lives of LGBT students but also society as a whole.