Building Visible Allies for Safe And Supportive Environments: Systemic Implementation of the OUT for Safe Schools Campaign

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BUILDING VISIBLE ALLIES FOR SAFE AND SUPPORTIVE ENVIRONMENTS: SYSTEMIC IMPLEMENTATION OF THE OUT FOR SAFE SCHOOLS CAMPAIGN

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Abstract: Contemporary data illustrate a greater risk in school environments for students who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, or queer (LGBTQ). Verbal or physical harassment, and feeling generally unsafe in school, can lead to higher absence rates and lower levels of academic performance for these youth, when compared to their heterosexual peers. School districts across the country are responding to this challenge. This article profiles an implementation of the OUT for Safe Schools Campaign which is designed to provide visible adult allies for LGBTQ students throughout a school district. It highlights the systemic nature of the OUT for Safe Schools Campaign, as well as its implementation within a carefully designed complement of synergistic programs and policies within the San Diego Unified School District. Qualitative examples of impact are detailed, along with long-term plans for evaluating the campaign's effectiveness over time.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth continue to face school environments that challenge both their identity and their right to an education. A 2015 national study by the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) found that:

- 57.6% of LGBTQ students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 43.3% because of their gender expression.
- The vast majority of LGBTQ students (85.2%) experienced verbal harassment (e.g., called names or threatened) at school based on a personal characteristic, most commonly sexual orientation (70.8% of LGBTQ students) and gender expression (54.5%).
- 27.0% of LGBTQ students were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 20.3% because of their gender expression.
- 56.2% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff, and 63.5% of students reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other school staff (Kosciw, Greytak, Giga, Villenas, & Danischewski, 2016).

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) provides further description of risks for LGBTQ youth. YRBS data indicates that nearly one-third (29%) of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth had attempted suicide at least once in the year prior to data collection, compared to just 6% of heterosexual youth (Kann et al., 2016). Choi, Baams and Wilson (2017) conducted a study of LGBTQ youth and their peers. In this case, the study was isolated to the state of California. Yet, findings were largely similar with GLSEN's national study. LGBTQ youth felt less safe in school and reported higher levels of victimization relative to their non-LGBTQ classmates.

Results of School-based LGBTQ Negative Experiences

While most people would quickly find these statistics and the actions that they represent unacceptable, it is the effect of these actions and the challenges that they pose that are the most concerning. The available statistics go beyond frequency rates. Today's research has established causal links between adverse experiences in school and a range of resulting impacts. GLSEN's research expands to describe these negative outcomes. For example, LGBTQ students who experienced higher levels of victimization because of their sexual orientation:

- Were more than three times as likely to have missed school in the past month than those who experienced lower levels (62.2% vs. 20.1%);
- Had lower grade point averages (GPAs) than students who were harassed less often (2.9 vs. 3.3);
- Were twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education (e.g., college or trade school) than those who experienced lower levels (10.0% vs. 5.2%);
- Were more likely to have been disciplined at school (54.9% vs. 32.1%), and
- Had lower levels of self-esteem and sense of school belonging, and higher levels of depression (Kosciw et al., 2016).

Again, the findings of Choi, Baams, and Wilson's (2017) California-specific study illustrate similar effects. LGBTQ students had higher rates of absence, and reported receiving lower grades, when compared to their non-LGBTQ peers.

The statistics present clear and present challenges that schools must work to address. Interestingly, these organizations also find themselves in a rather ideal place to effect change and impact these data-based trends. Heck, Poteat, and Goodenow (2016) describe this opportunity and promise as follows:

[s]chools are a primary social context where most LGBTQ youth spend the preponderance of their time. Yet, schools present a major dilemma for youth who traverse them each day. Namely, schools are a setting in which LGBTQ youth both remain at risk for experiencing adversity, but at the same time they are also one in which LGBTQ youth could receive critical support and resources from their peers and adults" (p. 381).

From Data-based Trends to Systemic Action

Recognizing these alarming trends, schools and districts are increasingly exploring and implementing strategies and supports for their LGBTQ students. Successful districts are realizing the importance of addressing these challenges in ways that reflect their systemic nature. Simple solutions, typically in the form of an isolated training for staff or school assembly, do little to change the culture. At best, these "one and done" experiences may raise awareness, but they cannot effect and sustain positive change.

A number of established strategies exist for creating safe and supportive environments in schools. The Safe and Supportive Schools Model (Bradshaw, Waasdorp, Debnam, & Lindstrom Johnson, 2014), developed with funding from the United States Department of Education, asserts that positive school climate involves addressing the interconnected areas of engagement, safety, and environment. The developers describe the model's attention to each of these areas as follows: Engagement (strong relationships between students, teachers, families, and schools and strong connections between schools and the broader community); Safety (schools and school-related activities where students are safe from violence, bullying, harassment, and controlled- substance use); and Environment (appropriate facilities, well-managed classrooms, available school-based health supports, and a clear, fair disciplinary policy; Safe Supportive Learning, 2015).

The Safe and Supportive Schools Model highlights the systemic connections among the three elements of engagement, safety and environment. Likewise, the model underscores the fact that addressing school climate requires integrated, multi-component solution systems that, together, become responsive to the full range of root causes and systems at play in a given school or district seeking to establish and support safe and supportive environments.

The National OUT for Safe Schools Campaign: A Systemic Strategy

The National OUT for Safe Schools campaign provides one such support strategy that has been carefully designed to systemically promote safe and supportive environments. Developed by the Los Angeles Lesbian Gay Bisexual and Transgendered (LGBT) Center and originally implemented in Los Angeles Unified School District in 2013 and continuing today, the campaign has also expanded into districts and schools across the United States. The idea is simple, yet results have proven powerful. District staff can choose to participate in the campaign by wearing a badge to indicate a willingness and commitment to speak to students and parents about LGBT concerns. "This lets

students know that 'safe spaces' aren't limited to the classroom but extend to anywhere there is an adult who is wearing this badge" (Los Angeles LGBT Center, n.d., ¶ 5).

Intentionally systemic, the program designers explain how this works in practice. By equipping all willing staff, from teachers to school leaders, to bus drivers and cafeteria workers, the badges "spread the reach of the campaign to the areas where the most incidents of victimization occur: on the playground, during lunch time, and in school hallways" (¶ 5). In this way, the OUT for Safe Schools Campaign responds to the Safe and Supportive Schools Model in the areas of Engagement (supporting relationships among students, teachers and staff), Safety (providing allies and promoting an environment safe from violence, bullying, harassment), and Environment (well-managed classrooms and campuses).

While the campaign itself seeks to provide a systemic support across an adopting school district, it is equally important to recognize the local context in which the district implements the program. San Diego Unified School District's context provides a living example of one district's implementation.

The San Diego Unified School District (SDUSD) Context

As California's second largest school district, SDUSD serves over 105,000 students throughout central San Diego County. Its over 15,800 employees include approximately 6,500 classroom teachers. The district includes 181 schools from Pre-K through grade 12. The district has a strong commitment to equity. It pursues this outcome with a diverse student population that includes the following demographics: 60% of students qualify for free or reduced lunch; 27% of students are English learners; 15% of students are in special education programs; and, 6% of students are homeless (San Diego Unified School District, n.d.).

Addressing the Challenge Systemically

The district's commitment to its students includes a number of initiatives and programs, established and operated with systemic forethought, to bring about positive, effective outcomes for its students. The district's implementation of the National OUT for Safe Schools campaign is exemplary of this systemic approach. This campaign operates within the context of, and with complementary support from, the programs and policy presented in Table 1. It is critical to note the supporting policy, as well as synergy among programs and district advocates, that together created the context in which the OUT for Safe Schools program was successfully launched.

Table 1
Systemic Support for the OUT for Safe Schools Campaign

Element	Description
Anti-bullying Program and Procedure	Formally adopted by the school board in 2016, the procedure is based on the following vision: "The district believes that all students have a right to a safe and healthy school environment. The district, schools, and community have an obligation to promote mutual respect, tolerance and acceptance. The district will not tolerate behavior that infringes on the rights and safety of any student. Neither staff nor students shall intimidate, harass, or bully another student through words or actions." (AR 5131.2(a), p. 1). (see https://www.sandiegounified.org/anti-bullying-and-intimidation)
A CDC-funded Program, supporting safe and supportive environments	Presented by the district's Sexual Health Education Program (SHEP), this five-year program provides dedicated services and supports to schools across the district. The program integrates four related components: (a) exemplary sexual health education; (b) safe and supportive environments; (c) sexual health services; and, (d) policy. (see https://www.sandiegounified.org/SHEP)
LGBTQIA Education and Advocacy Department	This unit supports school leaders in ensuring that students have multiple opportunities to thrive both academically and personally. Support services include professional development, curriculum development and training, student engagement and leadership support, and community collaboration. (see https://www.sandiegounified.org/overview-0)

Implementing the National OUT for Safe Schools Strategy in SDUSD

SDUSD's participation in the National OUT for Safe Schools campaign encouraged school staff to publicly identify as supportive LGBT allies. The visual display of support lets students know that "safe spaces" exist anywhere there is an adult who is wearing this badge, whether the staff member is on campus in a classroom, locker room or auditorium, or offsite on a school bus or chaperoning an event. The OUT badges were designed and implemented to create safe spaces and resources for LGBT students, staff, and parents, and also to foster an inclusive community for all students to celebrate all identities.
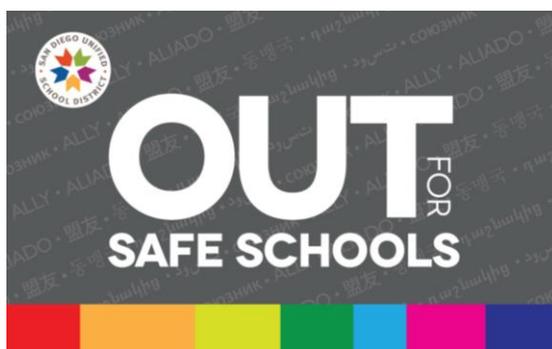

Figure 1: San Diego Unified School District's Out Badge

Funded as part of a CDC Cooperative Agreement that included providing safe and supportive environments, the district's SHEP program collaborated with key leaders and stakeholders within the district, as well as community partners, to elicit support for the program. Through word-of-mouth and early adoption by employees across the district, the OUT badges became popular. Staff began reaching out to SHEP for more badges.

To reduce barriers to implementation, the SHEP team chose to keep the accompanying training sessions brief. However, once interested people came together, these initial 25-minute trainings turned into 45-minute trainings, and then into hour-long trainings that included more general LGBT cultural competency training. The original briefings eventually included extra modules including background statistics (see Introduction), student voices, implications for transgender and gender non-conforming youth, and best practices that are simple to implement by all school stakeholders. It seems introducing the badges into the district environment created both an interest in, and hunger for, more information and supports. The need to provide more information and support strategies was a welcome problem to have.

Alignment with, and Reinforcement of, District Efforts

The OUT badges support the district's efforts to provide safe and supportive environments for all students. They foster school connectedness among students and staff by creating safe zones where students know that bullying and sexual harassment will not occur. The OUT badge professional development (training) events also created an opportunity for staff to be trained in LGBT cultural competency and ally-ship, and to foster conversations among school and district staff on how to make safer and more inclusive campuses.

The OUT program was announced at the School Board meeting in October 2016 to coincide with LGBT History Month and Ally Week, a large display was created to honor these events, and the district's website heavily promoted the program. Badges were only distributed to staff during a training.

Implementation to Date

While more time is necessary to truly measure the impact of this initiative, the implementation and adoption figures are considerable. The program continues today.

- Eleven (11) PD events were held throughout the school year for central office staff and school site designees to attend and receive the training, badges, and resources to bring back to their site.
- Targeted PDs were also held for staff such as for Counselors, Nurses, Food Services, Transportation, Custodial, and Information Technology.
- Over 10,000 badges have been distributed to staff at all 226 of the district's educational facilities.
- Over 500 badges have been distributed non-site staff such as IT and Transportation employees.
- Additional LGBT Cultural Competency professional development sessions are currently being held in all SDUSD schools that reinforce the OUT program and what it means to be a supportive LGBT ally.

SDUSD's Office of Youth Advocacy (OYA), working in collaboration with SHEP, was pivotal in implementing the OUT program. Together they promoted the program and co-coordinated and facilitated the trainings. Additionally, numerous community agencies that directly support LGBT youth and community members helped promote the badges and were listed as resources on the back of the badge: The San Diego LGBT Youth Center, Pride San Diego, and Trans Student Educational Resources. The San Diego chapters of the following organizations are also featured: Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN); the TREVOR Project; and, the Human Rights Campaign (HRC).

Case Study Examples: Evidence of Short-term Outcomes

Ultimately, measures of worth around this initiative will include constructs that investigate school climate impact and potential changes in bullying incidence rates. Until such longitudinal trend data become available, qualitative findings regarding adoption and ownership have provided promising indicators of early impact.

Transportation Services

The Transportation Services department provides an example of how staff can influence each other to support the program. The district's more than 300 bus-drivers went through the training. A significant number were enthusiastic about the program and happily grabbed a badge. Some of these same employees were eager for ideas. They offered many questions at the end of their training sessions. Initially the SHEP staff thought that the

mechanics, a group that confirmed that they rarely interact directly with students, would be a tough sell. However, a significant faction of this group voluntarily took a badge and said to their peers, "C'mon guys, take a badge." Many did.

Students taking Ownership

Today, in actions that signal the import of the role these badges play, students are increasingly taking ownership of the program. One of the districts Gender and Sexuality Alliance (GSA) Clubs designed an OUT Badge Training for their site's staff members. There were more than 50 staff members in attendance. Students in the GSA Club collaborated to coordinate and facilitate the staff training which involved a presentation and skits that examined the impacts of bullying interventions, staff support for LGBTQ students, and the confluence of various identities (including race, socioeconomic status, disabilities, etc.) with the LGBTQ experience. The educators walked away from that training with an OUT badge and a foundation for supporting for LGBTQ students.

In addition, students have been asking from the beginning of the OUT for Safe Schools campaign if they could wear the OUT badges too. However, the district's leadership wants to maintain the distinction between an LGBT-supportive staff member and a supportive student. This year, the campaign has been enhanced with a new element. SHEP has ordered 10,000 OUT for Safe Schools stickers for students to wear and visually show their support as either members of the LGBT community or as allies. With this additional tier of support for LGBT students, the expectation is that incidents of bullying and harassment will continue to decrease.

Conclusion

This article has chronicled the implementation of the OUT for Safe Schools campaign within SDUSD. Throughout, the importance of carefully integrating this program within the context of allied, systemically-supportive initiatives has been stressed. While the campaign, if attempted outside of this context, may have had success, we believe the short-term impact evidence presented is made possible by the favorable climate established in the district. This is the result of multiple programs, initiatives, and supporting policy.

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