

“A” is for Advocate: Becoming an “A” for our GLTBQ Adolescents

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Billy Lucas, 15. Jamie Hubley, 15. Jamey Rodemeyer, 14. Caleb Nolt, 14. Asher Brown, 13. Seth Walsh, 13. Carl Joseph Walker-Hoove, 11. Each of these boys took his life after being verbally or physically harassed at school about his sexuality. As their faces and their stories made headlines one after another over the past two years, I was saddened by each, knowing someone might have made a difference. Moved to act, I researched books, websites, journal articles, and sought opportunities for professional development. Here, I will share some helpful resources in the hope that others will seek out information to advocate for lesbian, gay, transgender, bisexual, and queer/questioning (LGTBQ) youth and the issues they face in our schools.

According to research conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2009), 91% of middle school students report experiencing derogatory remarks or verbal harassment, 59% physical harassment, and 39% assault. Half of students never told a parent, and 57% never told an adult at school. Of those reported, schools addressed only 29%. As middle school educators, we need to educate ourselves on how to advocate for students who experience unsafe school environments daily; most often, these are LGTBQ youth. The American Association of Suicidology reports suicide as the 3rd leading cause of death among young people (ages 10-24), and LGTBQ youth are four times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers (2008).

The good news, if there is any, is that suicide is preventable and advocacy does matter. One supportive adult can decrease the risk of suicide for LGTBQ youth by 30% (www.thetrevorproject.org). As middle level educators, each of us has the opportunity, and the professional responsibility, to be that one adult. *This We Believe* (2010) states, “every adult in developmentally responsible middle level schools serves as an advocate, advisor, and mentor” (p. 35). Young adolescents have many concerns beyond academics and they need a trusted adult with whom they can dialogue. These interactions among adults and students can have academic benefits, as young adolescents tend to be more highly motivated and reach higher levels of achievement in schools that are supportive and where they feel valued and respected (*This We Believe*). While academic benefits are important, they are secondary to the benefits advocacy can have for students, their families, and the communities in which we live and teach.

The first step in advocating for our adolescent students is becoming informed. Knowing the terminology, the issues students may face, how to openly dialogue with them about them, and where to send them for help or information is key to advocating for LGTBQ youth, especially those at risk for suicide. The Trevor Project (www.thetrevorproject.org) is the leading national organization providing crisis intervention and suicide prevention services to LGTBQ youth. They provide the only national around-the-clock lifeline, a confidential chat service, social networking, and an online Q&A forum for LGTBQ youth. They also offer a wealth of information for educators, including classroom “survival kits,” LGTBQ book and film lists, downloadable resources/research, and monthly webinars for those working

with LGBTQ youth. They partner with a number of other organizations, such as GLSEN (www.glsen.org), which also provides resources, lesson plans, and tips for educators; and the National Youth Advocacy Coalition (www.nyacyouth.org), a social justice organization working for and with LGBTQ youth to end discrimination and to ensure physical and emotional well-being.

These organizations, and others like them, share many of the essential goals held by middle level education. Their mission statements align strongly with *This We Believe*. We all strive to recognize and value the differences in every individual, meet their unique needs equitably, and empower them with the knowledge and skills to successfully address life's challenges. We all want schools to be safe, inclusive, supportive environments for young adolescents to learn and grow into responsible, enlightened, moral decision makers (*This We Believe*, 2010). Renowned middle level leader John Lounsbury views the ideal middle school as one that must "involve heart as well as head, attitude as well as information, spirit as well as scholarship, and conscience as well as competence," (p. 245). Advocacy for ALL our students is an essential step in achieving his vision. Learning how I might advocate specifically for LGBTQ students, my life has been forever altered. I hope, through the collective advocacy of middle level educators, many lives will be saved.

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