

Getting through high school

A list of do's and don't's for dealing with lesbian/gay/bisexual youth in the schools

BY JULIE BAUMLER

High school. Most of us go. We love it, sometimes. We hate it, sometimes. If we're gay or lesbian it tends to be more of the latter than the former. Thankfully, I graduated almost three years ago, but according to my friends, things haven't changed much. Based on my experiences and those of some of my friends, I have come up with a list of do's and don't's for dealing with lesbian/gay/bisexual youth in the schools. Most of these principles can be generalized beyond the high school situation.

Youth

Acknowledge students' sexuality

This summer, I was on the front page of my hometown paper talking about being a lesbian activist. Two months later I went to a volleyball game at the school I had attended from 7-10th grade. One of the teachers — whom I had never actually even taken a class from — came over to say hi and mentioned that she'd seen me in the paper that summer. Just that comment made me feel much better about the school, that teacher (whom I'd never particularly liked), and even the time I had spent at that school. On the other hand, I had many teachers at my other high school — which was an all-female institution — who even knowing that I was lesbian, continued to talk to the class on a regular basis, on the issue of marriage (to a man) and children. In their defense, I must say that they were encouraging to us to continue to have careers and to marry men who would be supportive, but I am still upset by their assumptions of both heterosexuality and the fact that we would all marry and have children.

Don't allow harassment

A friend of mine dropped out of high school, mainly because high school is not a comfortable place if you are gay. After eight months he decided that another year of high school couldn't be any worse than spending the rest of his life as a high school dropout. The day he went back another guy was beat up (rumor has it because he was gay). As a result my friend dropped out again. (The good news is he is now in a community high school completion program.)

There were days after I came out at school when I feared for my own physical safety.

Don't put students in a position of having to come out or lie.

During my senior year in high school, I was in a writing class. A visiting writer came to class and assigned us to write a series of vignettes about kisses — our first kiss, our most recent kiss, our most embarrassing kiss, etc. Well, this was before I came out at school, my most recent kiss had been with a woman, and this was a class where we read our work aloud. I don't remember what I wrote, but I do remember agonizing over whether to tell the truth and come out or remain safe and lie. I also remember my relief when the rest of the class also objected to reading their pieces and we all got off the hook.

Don't assume that just because someone is gay/lesbian/bisexual, he/she is sexually active.

While some of my friends did come out by getting into a sexual relationship, many of us realized we were gay, lesbian, or bisexual and lived in that community for months or years before becoming sexually active. I know that at 16 I knew I was not ready to open the

whole emotional can of worms of becoming sexually active, and realizing I was attracted to women did not change that fact. Two years later at 18, an age I had long considered appropriate for becoming sexually active, sex was something I was ready and able to deal with. My experience has been that whatever people's mores and beliefs about having sex are, they don't change a lot when that person comes out; as a result gay teens are no more likely than straight teens to be sexually active.

Don't assume that because a student is openly gay or mentions she/he is gay that he/she has a problem with it.

The first person I came out to at my school (other than my dorm's RA who was a lesbian herself and had pretty much figured it out), was my senior humanities teacher. One day he gave us one of the many lectures we received on not throwing away our education, brains, etc., for a man. I stayed after class and told him that I was a lesbian and I was offended that he assumed that we were all heterosexual. His reaction was to ask if I had discussed this with the school counselor. I came out to him for political reasons, not because I had a problem.

By the middle of the next term I was out to the whole school. In a conference, my Women's Studies teacher said to me, "This lesbian stuff is a big [personal] issue with you isn't it." It took me ten minutes to make her realize that I was blatant for political reasons, in order to challenge the rampant homophobia among my peers.

If you are lesbian or gay and closeted, don't over compensate.

I went to boarding school my junior and senior years. When we had dances, the library was locked so students wouldn't take their dates there to make out. We weren't allowed to go off campus at night unless we took a cab (which I couldn't afford) and a friend (all of mine were at the dance). The dorm was very boring with almost everyone at the dance. So about half way through my senior year, I went to the proper school administrator, told her I had no interest in the dances (which was not strictly true, I loved the brownies they served, but that only killed five/ten minutes) and would rather study and requested that they not lock the library during dances so I (and others) could go there to study.

It was a widely held belief among students and faculty that this administrator was a lesbian — she lived with another woman and the year after I left they adopted a child together. She refused to change the policy, and I'm certain that her reaction, if not her action, would have been different had I told her that it was against my religion to dance or to do so with members of the opposite sex.

Support gay and lesbian teachers.

I can not say enough about how much having gay and lesbian teachers who were willing to be open has helped me. Without them I would have dropped out a hundred times over and done about a million stupid things. It was a lesbian teacher who helped me rebuild my self esteem in sixth grade when I was harassed by most of my class for not being interested in boys (among other things). In my senior year, a lesbian teacher kept me from taking my first girlfriend, at the time the relationship of my lifetime, too seriously. It was a gay teacher who commiserated with me on how hard it was to be gay at my school and left me ready to go on. The two of them helped make it possible for me to go to the gay youth group in the next town which kept me sane. At that, one of the facilitators of the youth group was himself an otherwise closeted teacher.

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