

This year, for the first time, the U.S. government has included information about protecting students from harassment and abuse based on sexual orientation in a policy guide issued to schools.

"It's become very, very clear that if you're going to talk about hate in schools, you have to talk about gay youth," says Kate Frankfurt, director of advocacy and public policy for the Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network, a national organization working to tackle issues involving sexual minority youth and schools.

The 158-page guide, which includes samples of policies already in place in some jurisdictions, represents the first time the U.S. Department of Education has included advice for schools on protecting gay and lesbian students in a manual designed to help schools establish policies.

Such policies are sorely needed, say backers of the action, because abuse is no small problem.

For example, in Cherokee County, Ga., eighth-grader Josh Belluardo was killed by a 15-year-old bully, Jonathan Miller, who allegedly used anti-gay slurs. Miller had reportedly called other students "faggots" and said that gays "deserved to die." The crime is not being investigated as a hate crime, and Cherokee school officials plan no changes despite the fact that Miller had been in trouble at school 34 times in the last two years, according to media reports.

Meanwhile, high school student Adam Colton of San Marin, Calif., now bears the scars of student-on-student harassment. He was attacked in February and the word *fag* was carved with a pen into his chest and forearm. He had attempted to start a gay and straight alliance at the school and had been the target of abuse.

These are only two cases of what experts say is a widespread problem.

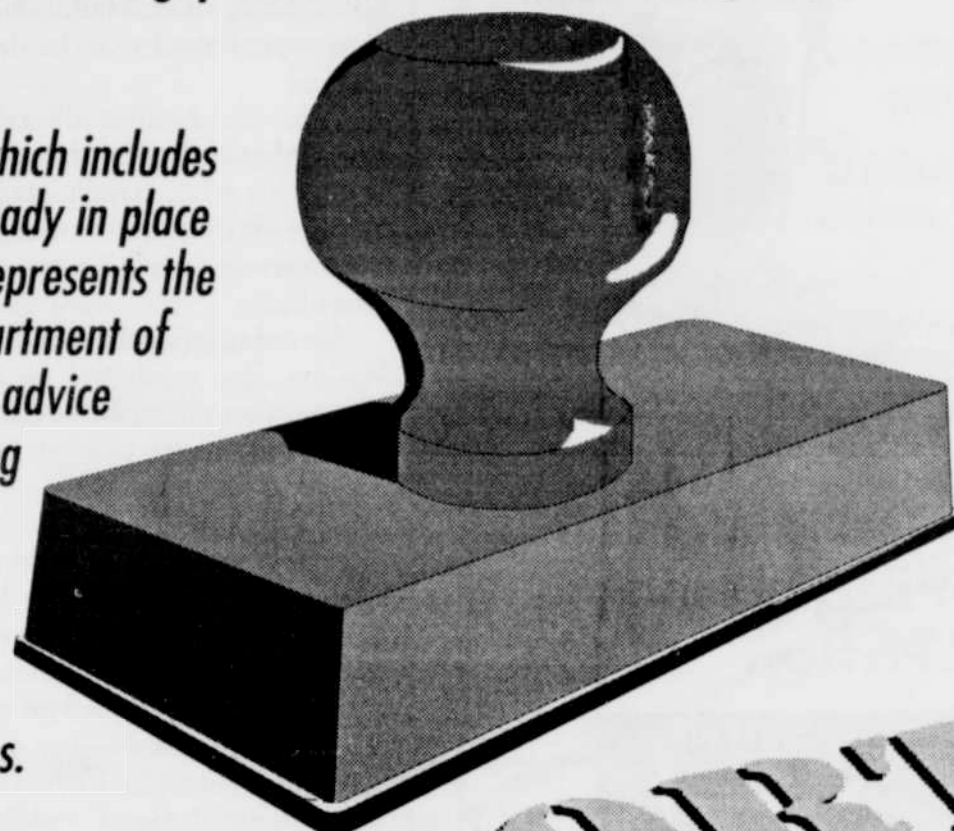
In a recent survey of 3,000 students ages 16 to 18, nearly half said they are biased against gay and lesbian people, according to *Who's Who in American High School Students*. The number is up 19 percentage points from last year.

The Federal Bureau of Investigation recorded 848 incidents of hate-motivated crimes in schools in 1997, the latest year for which statistics are available. That number represents more than 10 percent of all hate crimes and does not

"E" FOR EFFORT

New Department of Education manual tackles the problem of anti-gay harassment in schools by Gip Plaster

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take into account incidents that went unreported.

Additionally, queer youth are two to five times more likely to skip school than their peers because of feeling unsafe, according to research compiled by GLSEN. They are twice as likely to consider suicide and four times more likely to attempt it, the group reports.

Some school districts have policies protecting students from harassment and some do not. Few include protection based on sexual orientation. No federal regulations protect gay and lesbian students and no federal laws require schools to have policies protecting students based on sexual orientation.

The new manual, titled *Protecting Students from Harassment and Hate Crime: A Guide for Schools*, was issued in mid-January by the DOE in conjunction with the National Association of Attorneys General.

DOE officials say the guide aims to increase awareness and to offer strategies for creating long-term solutions, developing policies and providing support for victims.

"While we had published legal guidance before, we were hearing that there was a real need for more," explains Arthur Coleman, DOE's deputy assistant secretary for civil rights. "When we started talking about providing additional information, we talked about going beyond what the law required."

The department chose to include recommendations that sexual orientation be addressed by school districts, while noting the law does not require them to do so.

"I think it is a major step forward across the board," Coleman says. "We've taken a step to highlight prevention strategies."

He adds DOE is striving to "get schools to look at the issues before the problem arises."

GLSEN's Frankfurt worked with the DOE officials from the beginning. She was contacted by them to offer feedback on language used in the guide and helped them incorporate sexual orientation throughout, rather than relegate it to an out-of-the-way section where it could easily be missed.

"They wanted to make sure the way they were doing it rang true," she explains.

Frankfurt says this is the first time she has worked closely with DOE, and that she believes the tide has changed in the past year.

"We believe the decision to put the language in the manual shows a very large commitment," she says. "It's what we've been waiting for all along."

She admits, however, that changes further down the line will not come overnight.

"I think changes in schools around this issue are slow," Frankfurt says.

STRAIGHT STUDENT CITED FOR COMBATING ANTI-GAY HARASSMENT

A heterosexual student who is vice president of his Barrington, R. I., high school's Gay Straight Alliance has been awarded a \$10,000 college scholarship for his efforts to combat anti-gay harassment.

Benjamin Chaika, 17, is one of 35 Rhode Island students recognized for their public service by the Public Education Fund in Providence.

Feinstein Scholars, as they are known, receive the grants if they attend a college or university in the state. The scholarships are named for philanthropist Alan Shawn Feinstein.

In his application, Chaika wrote that after learning how frequently gay and lesbian youths are victimized by harassment, hate crimes, violence and depression, he joined the then newly formed GSA chapter.

"I plan to remain active in the GSA and continue to speak out when I hear homophobic remarks," he vows. "I had some openly gay friends even before I joined the GSA. I feel acceptance of all is very important. Rather than just believing that, I thought I should act on it."

A senior at Barrington High School, Chaika has applied to Brown University, the Ivy League school in Providence.

■ Reported by PETER CASSELS

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