

A 2003 survey conducted at Portland's Madison High reveals that 96 percent of students who responded report hearing frequent queer slurs and homophobic remarks at school. Nearly half say other students don't bother to intervene, though a teacher or staff person sometimes does. Because they felt uncomfortable or unsafe, two out of three kids have skipped school. And according to a 1999 Oregon Health Division report, students who experience anti-gay harassment are three times more likely to report a suicide attempt than their nonharassed peers.

Scenarios like these, along with successes and strategies in combating discrimination, harassment and bullying, peppered the discussion of more than 50 policy leaders, educators and students from throughout the state attending the Safe Schools Summit on Nov. 4 at Nike World Headquarters in Beaverton.

Launched in 2002, Equity Foundation's three-year Safe Schools Initiative recognizes growing documentation that queer and questioning students—and those even perceived to be—are frequent targets for bullying and harassment. The nonprofit believes all students should have the opportunity to learn in a safe educational environment.

The challenge, however, is to help administrators and teachers understand that the problem is real and that there are effective ways to address it. To that end, Equity last year awarded \$20,000 to four Oregon organizations to support Gay Straight Alliances as well as other methods to battle intolerance of queer students in educational settings. The results are helping the foundation develop a "blueprint for success" to aid educators in implementing safe schools programs statewide.

Former Portland Police Chief Tom Potter

TEACHING TOOLS

Equity Foundation's Safe Schools Summit offers lessons learned to combat harassment of queer students by Timothy Krause



Karla Wenzel moderates a panel on safe schools solutions Nov. 4 at Nike World Headquarters in Beaverton

offered the summit's keynote speech, addressing his experience as the father of a lesbian student who didn't feel comfortable coming out. Looking back, he said his daughter Katie, who now works for the Portland Police Bureau, asked him, "Who could I tell?"

Potter, a Portland mayoral candidate, offered suggestions to build hate-free schools, including running for school board, working with universities that train teachers, being a mentor, writing letters to newspaper and legislators, and "letting children know you will always love and accept what they are, as they are." He added, "If we can't end discrimination and bullying in our schools, we'll never end it in our adult society."

Karla Wenzel, vice chairwoman of Mult-

nomah County Commission on Children, Families and Communities and former Portland Public Schools board president, served as moderator for two panels that shared both advances and advice.

"I worry about those students that don't have anyone to talk to," said panelist Paul Wagenblast, a high school student in The Dalles who described the challenges he and his colleagues faced when trying to form a GSA last spring. Though the club is now active, counselor Ayme Allison suggested that controversy might

reappear next year when The Dalles' two school districts merge under a new board.

"No one is hard-wired to believe gay is wrong," contended Misha Isaak, who attends Reed College and served as a student representative on the Portland Public Schools board. Isaak called on administrators and teachers to re-evaluate the environments they create because harassment and violence are symptoms of a larger problem.

Portland Police Capt. Dorothy Elmore suggested that safe schools programming be introduced not only in secondary schools but also in elementary schools. She recommended "dialogue circles" that address barriers preventing people from even talking to each other about particular issues. Likewise, Layne Newton, a former student at Col-

orado's Columbine High School, said, "You're not going to hurt someone if you know them."

Representatives from grantee organizations included David Colton and Chris Enyeart of Madison High School, where a GSA has evolved from a vehicle for safety and visibility to one that embraces activism.

Marion Malcolm, representing Springfield Alliance for Equality and Respect, was joined by Devin McGeehan, a student and GSA founder at Springfield High School. Both spoke of the need to continue to develop GSA leadership and build on community partnerships.

That sentiment was echoed by Joyce Liljeholm, who discussed the accomplishments of the Oregon Safe Schools and Communities Coalition, highlighting its recent conference in Eugene to train teams of adults and youth on working with educators and students in their hometowns.

Another grantee, Salem's chapter of Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, was represented by Gloria Holland Smith, who shared personal stories as both a PFLAG mom and a schoolteacher, asking that educators and parents alike review everyday assumptions, even one as simple as households with two parents of the opposite sex.

Equity executive director Linda Traeger says the Safe Schools Initiative's progress is on target. Grantees will continue teacher training, plan a statewide GSA network, conduct annual forms and implement an evaluation component to ensure replicable models. ■

For more information about Equity Foundation's SAFE SCHOOLS INITIATIVE call 503-231-5759 or visit www.equityfoundation.org.

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