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## NORTHWESTnews

# LEARNING CURVE

## Safe Schools Summit draws statewide advocates for queer youth

by Sarah Dougher

Activists and students from throughout Oregon met April 6 at Nike's Tiger Woods Center. They were hosted by Equity Foundation, which is working to support gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning students, frequently the target for bullying and harassment. Equity awarded \$20,000 to four Oregon organizations to launch the Safe Schools Initiative in 2002, and the Safe Schools Summit was in part a report on the activities of these groups.



Jedidiah Chavez of Equity Foundation discusses the Safe Schools Initiative with David Colton of James Madison High School.

Recipients of the awards include the Gay Straight Alliance at Madison High School in Portland; the Oregon Safe Schools and Communities Coalition; Salem Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays; and the Springfield Alliance for Equality and Respect.

The event was sponsored by Nike, and the group was welcomed by global affairs director Bob Speltz and state and public affairs deputy director Julia Brim-Edwards, Portland Public Schools board chairwoman. Both Speltz and Brim-Edwards spoke to the importance of such a gathering and the pride they felt in playing host to the group. Speltz recalled growing up in "Lake Woebegone" and feeling constantly different and alien because of his sexual orientation.

Two panels of students who came to the meeting from throughout the state reflected Speltz's comments. They answered a series of questions posed to them by moderator Dawn Holt, Equity donor adviser, such as, "What is wonderful about being queer? What is difficult?" and "What could allies do to support you?"

On this last question, the student answers were revealing:

- "Don't fall for heterosexism, and don't assume anything about me."
- "Be supportive of family members if they are gay."
- "Don't settle for safe spaces at school. Insist that your whole school is safe, whether you are gay or straight."
- "Just one supportive adult can make the difference in a young person's life, so come out."

The keynote speaker was Carolyn Laub, founder and executive director of the Gay Straight Alliance Network, California's largest youth-led organization that empowers youth to fight homophobia and transphobia in schools. Under her leadership, the number of GSAs in California has grown to 470. In addition, Laub helped lead the effort to pass California's school nondiscrimination law, the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000. In 2001, she co-founded the California Safe Schools Coalition, which is working to ensure

full implementation of the state nondiscrimination law.

Laub emphasized the value of research in helping her develop policy that convinced lawmakers to act on behalf of queer kids.

In a study sponsored by the California Safe Schools Coalition, the 4-H Center for Youth Development and University of California, Davis, 7.5 percent of students statewide reported being harassed on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation. That translates to more than 200,000 middle and high school students harassed every year.

According to the survey, kids who are harassed are more than three times as likely to carry a weapon to school, to seriously consider suicide, to make a plan for attempting suicide or to miss at least one day of school in the past 30 days because they felt unsafe. They are more than twice as likely to report depression and are more likely to have low grades, to be victims of violence, to smoke cigarettes, to drink alcohol and to use marijuana. When it is possible to show that kids' health is at risk because harassment is allowed to happen in school, lawmakers are a lot more eager to do something to help, Laub noted.

In Oregon, although the research is not complete, statistics about queer or perceived-queer kids is similar. In 1999, an estimated 20,000 seventh- to 12th-grade students reported



Carolyn Laub of the Gay Straight Alliance Network of California sits with Alana Hein of Equity Foundation.

that they had been targeted with anti-gay harassment at school or traveling to and from school. These students were three times more likely to report a suicide attempt than their nonharassed peers, according to the 1999 Youth Risk Behavior Survey by the Oregon Health Division.

After some interactive work in pairs moderated by Equity Foundation board chairwoman Alana Hein, the group was treated to some brief theater pieces exploring scenarios around harassment and creative problem solving.

At the conclusion of the event, Equity executive director Linda Traeger summarized the group's activities and reported that both Portland Mayor Tom Potter and the Multnomah County Commission had resolved to make April 6 Safe Schools Day in their respective jurisdictions. She led the summit participants in establishing a "to-do" list: provide visible support for diversity; provide support systems for queer students, teachers and allies; establish policies that support people in being who they are; and use activism and grassroots organizing to make a difference in creating safe school environments.

Although this is easier said than done, activists, teachers, students and allies throughout Oregon are making a formidable start through their collective and individual efforts.