



Ending Harassment in Our Schools

May 2008

Young people are both the reason for and a major force behind the work of Advocates for Youth. Advocates' mission is to ensure that young people have access to the comprehensive information and services they need to make informed, responsible decisions about their reproductive and sexual health. As a key part of this mission, Advocates has organized a nationwide network of more than 20,000 young people who regularly engage in advocacy and education efforts for the rights of their peers.

As just one example of the power of these young voices, last month, Advocates sent an alert to its database that resulted in young people writing more than 1,100 letters in four days.

What was the issue? Read on.

Recently, in a Memphis, Tennessee high school, Principal Daphne Beasley made an announcement over the PA system demanding that teachers provide her with the names of all "hetero and homo" student couples. Principal Beasley then publicly posted the list in her office.

Two boys—Nicholas and Andrew—suddenly found that the whole school knew about their relationship. Worse still, Principal Beasley called Nicholas' mother to inform her that her son was part of a gay couple. Ms. Beasley also told the mother that she did not like homosexuals and that homosexuality would not be tolerated in her school.

Principal Beasley was apparently worried about "public displays of affection." But for students like Nicholas and Andrew, her all-too-public display of intolerance carried real consequences. Not only have the boys experienced increased harassment at school by faculty and fellow students, but Nicholas was not selected for a recent community service trip because he might "embarrass" the school by engaging in gay affection.

The American Civil Liberties Union has sent a letter on behalf of Nicholas and Andrew charging that the school violated the boys' Constitutional right to freedom of association. Advocates then sent its alert to 20,000 young people, who wrote 1,129 letters to the Memphis School Board, asking them to take action against Principle Beasley's egregious and harmful actions.

While the issue is still being decided, there is no doubt that the more than 1,000 letters have convinced the school board to pay attention to this issue. Further, they have helped to educate others about the incredibly damaging effects of homophobia on students, especially gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (GLBT) youth who face disproportionate rates of teen pregnancy, HIV infection, depression, and homelessness as compared to their non-GLBT peers.

In addition to taking action on specific incidents of harassment, Advocates' program areas that support the needs and rights of young GLBT youth include advocacy to eliminate abstinence-only-until-marriage sex education programs that discriminate against GLBT youth from America's schools; www.youthresource.com, a Web site by and for young GLBT youth; www.ambientejuven.org, a Web site by and for young Spanish-speaking GLBT youth; and a new Anti-Homophobia/Transphobia project to assist community-based organizations serving youth of color to decrease homophobia and transphobia within their organization and youth clientele. To find out more about these and other programs and download publications on working with GLBT youth, please visit <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/glbqtq.htm>.