Gay-Straight Alliance Education

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My action plan addresses the problem of bullying, harassment, and homophobia due to the lack of education on lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues in schools, specifically at El Cerrito High School. It also strengthens the Gay-Straight Alliance (a student activist club) at ECHS and provides opportunities for leadership among the members.

I used an education strategy to address this problem. I designed a workshop, usually 45 minutes long, which is flexible enough to adapt to the needs of individual classes and presenters.

I have: designed a workshop agenda, compiled workshop materials (for presenters to look off of and for audience members to keep), brought the idea to my GSA, held 2 trainings (one in the fall, one in the spring) for GSA members to feel prepared as presenters, sent out emails and asked teachers personally if they felt like they needed a presentation to curb the homophobia in their classrooms, coordinated with those teachers who requested presentations, made sure that each presentation had the right number of presenters (2-3), made sure that all the presenters were excused from their regular classes for the duration of the workshop, and led most of the workshops.

I made it as much of a team effort with the GSA as possible, so that more people felt like they had a stake in the project, so that there were more diverse experiences to share with our peers, and so that everything would run more smoothly. There were 8 students (members of GSAs) who I trained and who carried out presentations.

I have grown my presentation and public speaking skills tremendously. I have also learned ways to answer questions and explain complicated concepts around homophobia, sexual orientation, gender identity, and societal reactions to these issues to people with diverse ages and backgrounds. I’ve learned that I can pull off some very complicated and challenging tasks involving many people, but that it takes organization and dogged determination.

In my opinion, most of the students who went through my learned a lot and had a lot of their confusion cleared up. Since we explained why “casual” slurs and other forms of harassment were hurtful, a lot of people stopped saying them. The climate at my school has opened up somewhat to discussion around these issues, and I have seen less and less hostility towards LGBT people. My teachers and administration have become so much more aware and supportive of our Gay-Straight Alliance, and we’ve gained a lot of admiration for our work. My family has become aware of how much LGBT rights and safety matter to me, which is extremely valuable. I feel loved for who I am.
I hear slurs against LGBT people, including, f*g, d*ke, and “that’s so gay” said casually every day at school (but I’ve been hearing them less as the workshops progress). Most of the time, these things weren’t said to people who identified as LGBT (openly or at all), but it still hurt the openly LGBT people who heard it in the hallways. I don’t like fighting hate with hate, or getting frustrated and responding to anything aggressively. The logical thing for the GSA to do was to reach out to the student body and educate them. The workshops were inspired by one that I had gone through as a freshman; unfortunately, that one was never continued, and it wasn’t as in-depth.

I think that the Symposium did affect my work. It refocused me and gave me an opportunity to ask questions about my project; I was able to get helpful answers from experts and my peers. I later connected with people I met at the Symposium over Facebook, and we’ve been trading tips on GSAs and action plans all year. The connections I made are probably the most valuable resource that the Symposium provided.