



## Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)

by Andrew Matzner

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The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) is a national organization in the United States dedicated to creating safe K-12 school environments for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students. Its mission is to reform the American educational system in order to ensure that children accept and respect one another, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity and expression.

Members of GLSEN work to combat homophobia and heterosexism in schools by educating students, teachers, administrators, and the general public about the causes and effects of anti-glbtc prejudice and violence.

### Origins

GLSEN was founded in 1990 by Kevin Jennings, a high school history teacher. In 1988, while at Concord Academy in Massachusetts, Jennings came out to the student body during a chapel talk. Shortly afterwards, he helped create one of the country's first Gay-Straight Alliances at the school.

Building on his advocacy efforts for glbtq students, Jennings next decided to create a cohesive network of teachers, parents, and other members of the community for the purpose of ending homophobic and heterosexist biases in schools. Based in Boston, GLSEN was first staffed by volunteers. However, its impact was quickly felt; in 1993 the organization was instrumental in leading Massachusetts to become the first state in the country to prohibit discrimination against public school students based on sexual orientation.

Over the next several years GLSEN initiated programs within Massachusetts that focused on creating safe school environments for glbtq students. In 1995 Jennings became GLSEN's first Executive Director, and moved its headquarters to New York City, where it became established as a national organization. GLSEN has grown rapidly, and today there are over 90 local chapters across the United States and headquarters in both New York and Washington, D.C.

### Goals and Strategies

GLSEN focuses on a number of goals that are instrumental in creating a safe school environment for glbtq students. First, it aims to have schools institute zero-tolerance policies for name calling, verbal and physical harassment, and anti-glbtc bullying. Second, the organization strives to make school administrators and educators their allies in addressing and fighting bias in the schools. Another vital area of focus is working to monitor and influence national education policies and agendas in order to ensure that glbtq student concerns are addressed.

One of the ways that GLSEN has helped create safe schools is through its support of Gay-Straight Alliances. These school clubs are run by and for students, who often receive resources and advice from GLSEN. Over 4,000 of these clubs have registered with GLSEN, although it is likely that there are even more in existence. The clubs can become significant forces of change in schools because of the collaborative efforts between

glbtq and straight students to create school environments in which bias is not tolerated.

Members of GLSEN also train and work with local activists in order to create long-term links between the national organization and community members. An advantage of this partnership is that, through its experience and resources, GLSEN can help empower and support community members in their struggle to make schools safe spaces. In turn, these community members can educate school administrators and teachers regarding the needs of glbtq students.

GLSEN also has developed a number of training techniques and lesson plans that can be used as resources by administrators and teachers who are working to end bias both at the school- or district-wide level and in the classroom.

Another strategy GLSEN has employed is its public policy program, which lobbies to influence local and state agencies to adopt policies that protect students against harassment and discrimination. Several states, including California, have recently passed laws that protect students, and others are considering such legislation.

### **Challenges**

GLSEN continues to face many challenges. Conservative groups hostile to glbtq issues control school boards in many areas of the United States, and in many schools administrators, teachers, and staff members are not supportive of glbtq students. In addition, political opposition to GLSEN's goals is well-organized and well-funded. Often only litigation or the threat of it will move school officials to actually implement the federal law that requires school boards to permit gay-straight alliances if they also permit other non-curricular clubs.

Accordingly, for a majority of glbtq youth, the school environment is not safe. Still, each year GLSEN has opened more local chapters, organized more grassroots activists, provided more training opportunities, and developed more educational programs. All of these activities bring the organization closer to achieving its vision of schools where students of all sexual orientations and gender identities are welcomed and respected.

### **New Leadership**

In November 2008, Kevin Jennings stepped down as Executive Director of GLSEN. His successor is Eliza Byard, a documentary film and television producer. The two first worked together in 1995 on the documentary *Out of the Past*, which Byard cowrote, coproduced, and coedited.

Among Byard's first projects was to help produce an Ad Council campaign, "ThinkB4YouSpeak," designed to discourage the disparaging phrase, "That's so gay."

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### **About the Author**

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