

Interview with Josh, from Equality NC

By the iNSIDEoUT Board '07-'08

What is Equality NC?

Equality NC is the state-wide LGBT advocacy organization. We work in the state legislature to promote pro-LGBT legislation.

What is the School Violence Prevention Act?

The School Violence Prevention Act, or the 'Anti-Bullying Bill', is a bill that would require every school in North Carolina to have a policy that prevents bullying on the basis of enumerated categories, including perceived or actual sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. Every school has a bullying policy, but not every school has enumerated categories, which means their policy just says "bullying is bad", but it doesn't say *what kind* of bullying is bad (it doesn't explicitly direct teachers / staff to step into specific types of bullying). And some schools *do* have enumerated categories, but they don't always include sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. And those categories are really important, because LGBT-related bullying is second only to bullying on the basis of physical appearance.

What is the history of this bill?

This started about two to three years ago, not as a bill at that time, but as a policy through the state school board. We managed to pass it through the school board, but they took all the categories out before they passed it, so it was just another bullying bill. Last year, we tried to pass it through the state legislature. It started in the House committees, and every committee tried to take the categories out, but it finally made it intact to the full House of Representatives. It passed by a pretty large margin - thirty votes or so. That was really historic, because it was the first time that either chamber of the NC legislature has passed a bill that included anything to do with sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. But after it passed the House, the bill had to enter the Senate committee process, and while it was there, the categories were stripped out again. So now there are two versions of the bill: one from the House, and one from the Senate, and we have to reconcile those two versions, and then pass it through the House and Senate again.

How can we support this bill?

To get the bill passed, we have to build public support and tell our stories, especially students who have experienced harassment or bullying or who see it every day. We're going to be having a lobbying day in May, which will be a good opportunity for students to talk directly to their representatives. We want to build up an active email database of supporters, so we can send a greater number of emails to each senator or representative. You can also sign the petition (*included in this zine! -ed.*) or sign our postcards, which we will send to the senators and representatives to encourage them to vote for this bill. If you include your email address on the postcard (or the petition), we'll also send you an email that you can forward to your senator or representative. You can photocopy the petitions and get your friends to sign them, and then mail them to Equality NC.

Why is it important to have a bill with enumerated categories?

It's important because every school's bullying policy doesn't require teachers or staff to step in if they see someone being bullied about their sexual orientation or gender identity. Without the enumerated categories, they can pick and choose what kind of bullying to stop, based on their own prejudices. A teacher might see someone being bullied because they're Muslim or Latino or obese, and they might stop that because that's more politically correct, but they might not stop bullying if it's against an LGBT student. And there are a lot of suicides by LGBT kids, because of the bullying they experience. So with this bill, teachers and staff will know that not only do they have to stop bullying on the basis of race, ethnicity, sex, disability, religion, and so on; but also on the basis of perceived or actual sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

What are other ways students and GSAs can help stop harassment in schools?

Step in. Step in when you see somebody being bullied or harassed. Step in, even if it's not LGBT-related bullying. Go to the person who's being bullied and say, "I'm with you." And if that person is too scared to go to the administration about it, or if they have talked to a teacher or administrator and nothing has been done about it, take it upon yourself to go to your administration and speak up. And confront the bullies when you see it. If you hear someone calling someone else 'faggot' or 'dyke' or saying 'that's gay', tell them to stop. And GSAs are a huge resource, too. They can do the Day of Silence, because that's what that whole day is about, how to stop that kind of harassment.

CONTACT: If you have questions, email iNSIDEoUT180@gmail.com. To get postcards, you can email Josh at: josh@equalitync.org, or call at: (919) 829-0343 ext. 113. You can mail your signed petitions to: Equality NC PO Box 28768 Raleigh, NC 27611

