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Suffering In Silence

LA MIRADA ? Edy Ruvalcaba, a 16-year-old junior at La Mirada High School, says he was verbally harassed and called "faggot" by some of his physical education classmates after he told them he is gay.
Ruvalcaba also says he was physically abused after his announcement in February. At least one student in the class shoved Ruvalcaba against a gym-room locker.
The bullying, ridicule and torment continued for a week, until Ruvalcaba asked his counselor to take him out of the class and re-assign him as a teacher's assistant, he said.
"I didn't feel safe," Ruvalcaba said.

Ruvalcaba's harassment isn't an isolated incident, say other local gay, lesbian and bisexual high school students.
On April 8, these students, their straight allies and some teachers at several area high schools drew attention to the harassment, abuse and bullying of lesbian-gay-bisexual-transgender (LGBT) youth by participating in the 13th annual National Day of Silence.

The event officially is this Friday, but most area school districts held it early because they are on spring break this week.
Nationwide, students have registered more than 8,000 schools to participate, said Daryl Presgraves, spokesman with the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), which sponsors the National Day of Silence.
Students collaborated in the event in a variety of ways, such as wearing "Day of Silence" T-shirts and not speaking for the entire day, symbolic of the silence that gay students suffer when they are harassed and bullied. When someone asks why they are not talking, the person receives a note card explaining the student's solidarity with gay classmates.
Some students are holding events in memory of Carl Walker-Hoover, an 11-year-old from Springfield, Mass., who hanged himself April 6 after enduring constant bullying at school. Walker-Hoover, who did not identify himself as gay, is an example of students who are bullied because they are perceived to be gay.

He would have turned 12 Friday.
Carl's death was the fourth suicide of a middle-school child linked to anti-gay bullying this year, Presgraves said.

"Day of Silence is not about changing beliefs or values, but changing the behavior that causes bullying and causes students to feel alienated and that schools don't care about them. This is a preventable problem," Presgraves said.
Gay, lesbian and bisexual students from several area high schools, including Cabrillo and Wilson in Long Beach, Dominguez in Compton, and Lakewood, Paramount, and Norwalk, say they are targeted for harassment and abuse because of their sexual orientation. The students also feel that some teachers and school administrators minimize or ignore the problem.
Some teachers agree with that assessment.

"The homophobia is boiling under the surface, but the school administration avoids talking about it," said Andrea Hoover, an English teacher at Woodrow Wilson Classical High School.
Administrators at area school districts, however, say they are unaware a problem exists, but if one does, it would be prohibited by each district's anti-sexual harassment or anti-bullying policies.
"That harassment and bullying should not be happening," said Ginger Shattuck, superintendent of Norwalk-La Mirada Unified School District. "It's annoying that no one has come forward to report this. Students are supposed to report harassment and bullying to teachers. If an adult has not listened to them, the students need to go to administrators."
Adds Christopher Steinhauser, superintendent at Long Beach Unified School District: "If it was epidemic, we would know about it. You are always going to have individual cases of things that have happened."

Thousands harassed

A recent California Healthy Kids Survey by the California Department of Education found that more than 245,000 students statewide are harassed because they are gay or lesbian or perceived to be.
GLSEN's 2007 National School Climate survey of LGBT students found that more than 86 percent of them heard "faggot" or "dyke" or the slang phrase, "that's so gay" ? meaning stupid or worthless - at school and more than one-third reported being physically harassed or assaulted.
That negative behavior also contributes to serious academic and health risks. Other studies have reported that 28 percent of LGBT youth drop out of high school and one-third attempt suicide.
Much of this harassment, however, goes unreported, especially from students who are not open about their sexual orientation or those, such as La Mirada's Ruvalcaba, who are afraid of retaliation, experts say.
Students at several local high schools have confronted the anti-gay climate by forming gay-straight alliances, which are chartered student clubs, with a faculty adviser, whose members devise ways of addressing harassment and homophobia.
More than 50 percent of California public high schools have such clubs, said Carolyn Laub, executive director of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, a youth leadership group that helps students organize the alliances.
Students who have been harassed, bullied or abused can learn how to file a complaint from their gay-straight alliance faculty adviser, a support school-staff member or at www.gsanetwork.org/resources/ [1] ab537.html.
"It's not fair to be discriminated against," said Kamie Valenzuela, 16, a junior and straight ally at La Mirada High School. "If I can do something to stop my friends from facing discrimination, why

shouldn't I?"

Legal protection

One school district has been proactive in combating anti-gay behavior.
The Los Angeles Unified School District's Project 10 is a districtwide program that, among other things, has provided sensitivity training on sexual-orientation issues and how to recognize and prevent discrimination, bullying and harassment of students to more than 35,000 teachers and administrators.

The program was launched in 1984 at Fairfax High School by Virginia Uribe, a lesbian teacher, after a gay male student, who had been verbally abused and assaulted, was transferred to another high school, Uribe said.
Three years later, the program was expanded to the entire district.
Long Beach, ABC, Paramount, Downey, Cerritos and Norwalk-La Mirada school districts do not have programs like Project 10. Some administrators, such as La Mirada's Assistant Principal Ron Carroll, don't think "indoctrinating" teachers and staff with similar programs is necessary.

"First and foremost, my job is to educate these students. Anything else is secondary. You can take that however you like," Carroll said.
In 1988, LAUSD was one of the first school districts in the state to pass a student and staff nondiscrimination policy that included sexual orientation. Since then, California has passed two student-protection laws, making California one of 10 states that protect students from bullying based on sexual orientation and one of five to protect students based on gender expression and identity.
Enforcement of these laws, however, has been challenging, experts say.

"There's this idea that you don't have to deal with LGBT issues unless a student is out of the closet or he or she comes to the administration with a problem," said Daniel Solis Martinez, Southern California program coordinator with the Gay-Straight Alliance Network.
Stephen Jimenez, LAUSD's Project 10 specialist, says, "Principals are supposed to outreach to gay youth. They have to say the words `gay and lesbian and outreach' to the students, telling them it is OK to come to (them) and report these problems.
"But it makes school districts uncomfortable to talk about gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender issues," Jimenez said. "They think talking about LGBT issues means you are going to be talking about sexual behavior, which is not the case. You're talking about a student's civil right to attend school in a safe environment."
In 2003, the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in Flores vs. Morgan Hill Unified School District that harassment based on a student's sexual orientation violates the equal protection clause of the 14th Amendment.
"Some faculty want to sweep these issues under the carpet and not even acknowledge they have gay or lesbian students in their class," said Stuart Biegel, professor of law and education at UCLA. "But there's no question that students have the law on their side. We are talking about the U.S. Constitution."

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