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The Impact of Prop 8 on Youth in California Schools

Jun. 15, 2010 ? Carolyn

On June 16, 2010 closing arguments begin in the federal trial challenging the constitutionality of California's Prop 8, the ban on marriage for same-sex couples that voters passed in November 2008. Judge Vaughn Walker issued a set of questions that he asked each side to address in their closing arguments. One of the questions posed was this: "What empirical data, if any, supports a finding that legal recognition of same-sex marriage reduces discrimination against gays and lesbians?" **This question sounded a lot like a question GSA Network asked our youth members last year, as many of them were reeling from the increased harassment and discrimination they faced at school after California voters decided to ban legal recognition of same-sex marriage.**

So, on the eve of the closing arguments in this historic trial, we would like to share the evidence we have that speaks to the damage done to young people because of the passage of Prop 8 and the political battle that surrounded the vote. **We offer up our data that support a finding that *not* legally recognizing same-sex marriage contributes to discrimination against LGBT young people.**



The data come from a survey GSA Network conducts each June with members and leaders of Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in California. The survey includes questions about changes in their school climate and the impact of their GSA club in the school. As the school year that included the fight over Prop 8 came to a close, GSA Network's 2008-2009 survey included a question about the impact of Prop 8 on school climate.

Specifically, we asked if attitudes toward LGBTQ people at school "got better", "stayed the same", or "got worse" during the fall election season and after Prop 8 passed. The results were that 20% said the climate got worse, 41% said it stayed the same, and 39% said it got better. In a typical school year, the numbers are quite different. For instance, the year before, 52% of respondents said the general environment for LGBTQ students at their school got better and only 4% said it had gotten worse.

We asked a follow-up question that prompted respondents to share any specific examples of how the climate at school changed due to Prop 8. Overall, there were mixed results. In some cases, harassment increased, particularly right around the November election. Students reported that bullies felt emboldened and the campus became more polarized. A disturbing trend was how many students reported that teachers and other adults were the ones expressing their 'yes on 8' viewpoint, thereby making LGBTQ youth feel unwelcome and unsafe at school. In other cases, the Prop 8 fight helped bring forward new supporters and allies to the LGBTQ community in a school. However, only one student reported that the public education and forums they held on campus resulted in less polarization and more unity on campus. Several schools held 'mock elections' and in most cases Prop 8 did not pass. Despite this, many students reported a negative impact of Prop 8 on their experiences at school. The quotes below capture the prevailing sentiment:

?More people were singled out for being LGBTQ as the school seemed to divide between those who opposed and those who supported Proposition 8.?

?In my personal experience, two straight boys in my spanish class, knowing that I was gay, placed a "yes on 8" banner on my desk, laughing. I almost broke down. And the next week in our GSA's meeting, I told them about it through tears.?

?People have told me that since the government says we can't get married, their religion was right and we don't deserve to be treated as full people.?

?I was harassed for wearing a rainbow ribbon the day after it was passed and I almost got hit in the face by another student....just for being gay.?

?Teachers with strong religious principles felt the NEED to tell students what they SHOULD think which causes an 'uproar' of diverse opinions and debates.?

?I think it made people think that because the majority of California voters chose to revoke the rights of citizens, it would be okay to make their homophobia apparent in social settings.?

?After the election, there seemed to be students that didn't have as much of a fear to say anti-LGBT slurs at school. It seemed like when Prop 8 passed, it reassured them that its okay to say those things.?

?Generally, language in unsupervised settings (the hallways, etc.) got worse and people seemed to feel like it was OK to speak negatively about LGBTQ students in general.?

?There were a few instances of anti-gay vandalism and one instance of violence against a straight student who mentioned to another student that he/she/ze was an ally for the overturn of Proposition 8.?

?Some students seemed incensed by the fact that LGBT people were so close to gaining the right to marry and more indignant than ever about their anti-LGBT attitudes, possibly due to being given some legitimacy due to a majority state vote. Some teachers broached the issue in their classes and when LGBT students or GSA members challenged Prop 8 they were chastized by certain teachers (this made some students feel very isolated and betrayed by teachers they previously felt connected to). **Some teachers seemed to have no regard for maintaining an impartial position or protecting LGBT students during discussions or debates. Straight allies who supported LGBT students were labeled and made fun of for being "gay" themselves. It could be related or coincidental, but students are reporting more incidences of faculty making discriminatory statements or positions** - they are also reporting more instances where students are making discriminatory remarks without being held accountable by teachers (including racist and sexist remarks).?



Some

students noted that the fight over Prop 8 drew out new supporters of LGBT equality.

?It spurred more allies into action to fight against the Prop and hopefully get it repealed.?

?Because of Prop 8, I found out that my school has a totally genuine faculty and a majority of the teachers and the staff are gay-friendly/very liberal and hence they voted against Prop. 8 when it came up on the ballot. In addition, the staff incorporated the measure into our teachings and especially in the History classes, for the teachers taught how it was another form of oppression and civil inequality.?

?Many of my classmates talked to me the day after the election to share our disappointment with the passing of Prop 8, even people whom I didn't know all that well.?

?More students began to ask questions and allowed for ignorance to falter. **We found out that our campus was more liberal than we had originally thought; which, inadvertently allowed for my GSA to grow and do more activities.?**

?More political interest and awareness about LGBT issues. Huge amount of support for No on 8, and outrage and surprise when it passed. Prop 8 really made everyone realize how even though "this is California," a measure like Prop 8 can pass the voters.?

Other students described the impact of Prop 8 as having a mixed impact on their school climate:

?There was a lot of tension between kids on different sides of the issue but GSA was a safe place for those of us opposed to the ban to speak about how we were feeling from empowered to angry to disappointed to hurt.?

?Election-time was really hard. There was so much Pro-Prop 8 propaganda around the school, and in-class, people would say things like "no homo." It was a terrible, disheartening experience, but my GSA advisor really helped me, and even went to the principal, who proceeded to do nothing, but my advisor was very supportive and helped me to be able to stand up and voice that I felt uncomfortable when people said things like that, not only to the speakers themselves but to other teachers, and it got much better after that. Many of the people who were saying things, when they learned it made me feel badly, stopped!?

?Students who knew Prop 8 was an emotional issue for me provided me with much sympathy after the election. However, on

a No on 8 bumper sticker on my car, someone kept scribbling "YES" on 8.?

?Some people came up to me after the election, and were really nice, I took it hard, so to some degree, I wasn't all that willing to go and talk about it with them. The GSA was really good. We talked all lunch period about it, a lot of us were upset. Some people started to be more aware, and some people were worse. They were hurtfully happy the day after the election, and some people would say things to us about how they were so happy that -insert insult here- like us couldn't ever get married. That was not so much fun, but if you average it out, it stayed the same.?

?On the election day, a few students thought it would be funny to put yes on prop 8 banners up around school and parade them around as well. They did so because we are seen as a "liberal" school. it was upsetting, but not violent, and it was dealt with quickly by the administration.?

?My school was very strange when it came to the Prop 8 incident. I had given out "No on 8" bumper stickers and it was difficult to find a classroom in which not one person had said sticker on his/her binder or backpack. Still, when two boys saw my sticker on my backpack, they circled me, shouting, "Yes on 8! Yes on 8!!" It was certainly not the same as before, but the good and the bad balanced one another out.?

As we watch the federal trial over Prop 8 conclude, and we reflect on who in our society is harmed by the lack of legal recognition for same-sex couples, let's not forget about the LGBT young people and straight allies who faced increased harassment at school due to Prop 8. There is so much at stake in this court case, not only for the same-sex couples who deserve the right to be able to get married, but also for the LGBT young people and straight allies whose safety and acceptance at school hangs in the balance.

About the survey: Over 300 people responded to GSA Network's 2008-2009 year-end evaluation survey. The majority of the respondents, or 52%, were GSA members, 26% were GSA presidents, 16% were GSA advisors, and 6% described themselves as "other." Survey participants were racially diverse with 40% caucasian/white, 32% Latino/Hispanic, 10% Asian/Pacific Islander, 9% Biracial/Multiracial, 4% Native American, 2% African-American, and 4% declined to state. In terms of sexual orientation, 26% of the respondents identified as heterosexual, 70% identified as gay, lesbian, bisexual, queer, or questioning, and 4% declined to state. The respondents were primarily female, with 62% of the survey participants; 28% identified as male, 4% identified as transgender, 2% identified as questioning, and 4% declined to state.

GSA Network is currently conducting the 2009-2010 year-end evaluation survey with students in GSA clubs in California. The survey can be found online [here](#) [1].

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Links

[1] <http://www.surveymonkey.com/s/SGH5JD8>