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Preparing CA Students for College, Not Prison

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GSA Network's Racial and Economic Justice Manager, Geoffrey Winder, recently testified before the [CA Senate Select Committee on the Status of Boys & Men of Color](#)^[1]. In its partnership with the California Endowment and six other youth development organizations, GSA Network represents the needs of young gay-bi and trans young men of color in Los Angeles as they try to address the systemic issues that are setting them up to be pre-prison, not pre-college. The post below is adapted from his testimony and features videos from this important campaign.

I went to school under nearly ideal conditions compared to our youth today ? an overachieving, proud, out, young gay boy of color with a supportive family and an engaged school in a suburban community ? and I often found the social isolation of being openly gay and brown in a mostly white high school too much to bear. It wasn't until last year, as an adult, that I found out that my mother called my school every day for two years to make sure that I had attended that day.

But my story, let alone my success, is **not** typical of GBT boys and men of color in Los Angeles. In California, our youth of color are struggling to succeed by most health and academic achievement metrics. For gay and bisexual young men, and especially for transgender students of color, the barriers to learning and success in school are often compounded by pervasive bullying and violence based on actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender identity. This has serious consequences on students' health, mental health, and academic achievement.

The California Healthy Kids Survey found that students who are harassed based on actual or perceived sexual orientation are more than **three times as likely to carry a weapon to school, more than twice as likely to report depression, more likely to report low grades and more than three times as likely to report missing school in the last 30 days because they felt unsafe**. According to the California Safe Schools Coalition's Preventing School Harassment survey, the **majority of LGBT youth of color report sexual orientation-based bullying**, and LGBT students of color who are harassed based on both race and sexual orientation are more likely to report feeling unsafe at school, experiences that are linked to lower grades, missing school, and higher drop out rates.

These young people are growing up in the context of a culture that stigmatizes them, peers who

harass them, families who often reject them, schools that fail to protect them from harassment and violence, and a set of policies and systems that discriminate against them. The social conditions many of these young men find themselves in are appalling, with 40 percent of the foster and homeless youth populations estimated to be lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender. GBT youth are over-represented in our youth and juvenile justice systems where they face even worse discrimination, harassment and violence than in our schools. These conditions are not conducive for these young men to live a healthy life, let alone graduate successfully from school. Yet the youth I work with are also incredibly resilient, facing these challenges as some of California's most courageous and determined students, full of pride in their identities, and with enormous potential to be leaders in California. Our vision for a California in which all young people can thrive and succeed must include gay, bisexual, and transgender young men of color.

Tragically, we've lost many youth to suicide after they suffered relentless bullying in their schools. Of the many high-profile stories of such tragedies in the past year, the vast majority have been young men of color who were openly gay or perceived as gay or gender non-conforming. GBT young men of color are also most likely to be pushed out of school. The experiences of bullying and violence that leave GBT young men of color at an increased risk of not graduating or surviving high school are compounded by harsh, punitive school discipline practices which disproportionately push young men of color out of the public education system and into the juvenile justice system.

In terms of health disparities, the CDC reports that sexual minority youth face challenges such as stigma, discrimination, family disapproval, social rejection, and violence that put them at increased risk for certain negative health outcomes such as HIV, syphilis, and other sexually transmitted infections (STIs). For example, between 2006 and 2009, HIV incidence increased 34% among young MSM and 48% among young, black MSM.

The conditions of gay and bi boys and men of color and our transgender brothers and sisters in Los Angeles could not be more dire, nor can we wait to implement solutions needed to improve their conditions. And we don't need to wait; the solutions are right before us:

- **Ensure schools provide access to comprehensive and non-biased sexual health prevention education and mental health services.**
- **Establish and support Gay-Straight Alliance clubs and strong anti-bullying policies** to create safer, more welcoming school environments. These policies must be implemented, enforced, and supported by professional development for teachers and staff. They also need to break the cycle of punitive school discipline that pushes young men of color, and especially GBT young men of color, into the juvenile justice system.
- Invest state funds in the California Department of Education to **increase oversight and enforcement of the Comprehensive Sexual Health and HIV/AIDS Prevention Act of 2004** that requires schools to provide sexual health education that is unbiased and medically accurate.
- **Conduct state-funded surveys that include demographic questions about sexual orientation and gender identity,**

so that our public education and public health systems can adequately identify and address education and health disparities based on sexual orientation and gender identity that compound racial inequities.

All students, regardless of race, class, sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, disability or English language proficiency, have a right to be safe and supported at school for exactly who they are. In order to achieve our vision for a vibrant and strong California, in which all Californians are embraced and GBT boys and men of color can develop as leaders, we need to envision California schools as "health homes" for students in which they will be able access safe, comprehensive and confidential health, sexual health and mental health services. GBT students need all school reform efforts to include school climate transformation that will allow their multiple identities to thrive.

Source URL: <http://gsanetwork.org/news/blog/preparing-ca-students-college-not-prison/03/13/12>

Links

[1] <http://assembly.ca.gov/menofcolor>