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## Minnesota School District's Policy Gives Bullies the Green Light

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As you may have heard, the **Department of Justice** and the **Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights** are currently investigating incidents of harassment and discrimination of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and perceived LGBT students in the **Anoka-Hennepin School District in Minnesota**. Anoka-Hennepin's policy mandates that staff "remain neutral on matters regarding sexual orientation" and prevents staff from acknowledging the existence of LGBT people or providing support to LGBT students. In addition, the **National Center for Lesbian Rights** (NCLR), the **Southern Poverty Law Center** (SPLC), and **Faegre & Benson, LLP** have filed a federal lawsuit against the school district, alleging that school officials failed to adequately address students' harassment complaints. They believe the district's "neutrality" policy regarding sexual orientation perpetuated the harassment against these students. *GSA Network applauds our friends at NCLR and SPLC for this bold move, and we are grateful for the leadership from the Department of Justice and Department of Education who recognize the importance of protecting LGBT youth from discrimination and bullying.*

Shamefully, school district officials in Anoka-Hennepin have denied all responsibility for the harassment its LGBT and perceived LGBT students have been forced to endure. Despite the launch of a federal investigation after seven of the district's students committed suicide in less than two years, at least four of whom were LGBT, perceived to be LGBT, or questioning their sexuality, district officials have refused to acknowledge any connection between its policy and the abuse of these students.

Anoka-Hennepin Superintendent, Dennis Carlson, described the district's policy to CNN as a "["middle-of-the-road" attempt to placate](#) <sup>[1]</sup> all members of a community split over issues of sexuality. But this policy, which an NCLR [press release](#) <sup>[2]</sup> refers to as a "gag policy," is anything but neutral. Any policy that allows a school district to deny responsibility for the wellbeing of its own students cannot be characterized as neutral. The silence and inaction of school officials inevitably breeds prejudice by passively condoning the harassment of these LGBT and perceived LGBT students.

The situation in the Anoka-Hennepin School District is not unique. Federal agencies recently conducted an investigation of the **Tehachapi Unified School District** in Central California, which was also prompted by the suicide of an openly gay middle school student who had been the victim of bullying. In this case, the investigation led to an agreement to revise the district's policies to prevent harassment based on gender and sexuality, as well as mandatory training for school officials and students. The improvements to Tehachapi School District's policy show that students, parents, and other members of the community who are courageous enough to speak up about harassment can positively effect change, leading to a safer, more equitable environment for all students.

Have you been harassed or noticed other students being harassed for being LGBT or being perceived as LGBT at your school? Speak up! Visit GSA Network's Resource Pages to find out [What to Do If You are Harassed](#) [3]. There you will find resources on how you can make your school safer, how to start a GSA and steps you can take to file a complaint.

Learn how to file a complaint with the federal Office of Civil Rights through [Claim Your Rights](#) [4], from PFLAG and GLSEN.

If you think your school district's non-discrimination or anti-bullying policies need to be updated, learn from GSA Network how to [Change Your School](#) [5], with ideas on how you can make your school safer, how to start a GSA at your school, and how your GSA can launch a campaign to change your school's policy.

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#### Links

[1] <http://www.cnn.com/2011/US/07/20/minnesota.school.civil.rights.probe/>

[2] [http://www.ncrights.org/site/PageServer?pagename=press\\_2011\\_Minn\\_Lawsuit\\_Filing\\_072111](http://www.ncrights.org/site/PageServer?pagename=press_2011_Minn_Lawsuit_Filing_072111)

[3] <https://gsanetwork.org/resources/legal-resources/what-do-if-you-are-harassed>

[4] <http://community.pflag.org/claimyourrights>

[5] <https://gsanetwork.org/get-involved/change-your-school>