



Education Department Resource

## Safe Zone Programs

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### What is a *Safe Zone*?

According to GLSEN's *2001 National School Climate Survey*, a majority of lesbian, gay,

- 68.6% of LGBT students (and 89.5% of transgender students!) felt unsafe in their school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression
- 30.9% missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe based on sexual orientation
- 39.7% reported that there were no teachers or school personnel who were supportive of LGBT students at their school

bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students feel unsafe at school and are likely to skip class or even days of school out of fear for personal safety. The research also indicates that students who can identify a supportive faculty/staff member or student group are more likely to feel a sense of belonging at their schools than those who cannot. For many students, the presence of allies to whom they can turn for support—or even the simple knowledge that allies exist—can be a critical factor in developing a positive sense of self, building community, coping with

bias, and working to improve school climate. *Safe Zone* programs therefore seek to increase the visible presence of student and adult allies who can help to shape a school culture that is accepting of all people regardless of sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, or any other difference.

### How does a *Safe Zone* program work?

The main purpose of a *Safe Zone* program is to visibly mark people and places that are “safe” for LGBT students. This is usually accomplished through a sticker with a pink triangle or some other recognizable LGBT symbol. When students and staff affix stickers to their lockers, desks, backpacks, or office doors, it signifies an affirmation of LGBT people and lets others know that they are a safe person to approach for support or guidance. Often the idea behind *Safe Zone* stickers (and the stickers themselves) gets passed around via word of mouth and there is no organized program within the school. Ideally, however, each participating school should have a *Safe Zone* team (made up of students and staff) that publicizes the program and distributes materials, provides a basic training to allies who wish to be involved, and educates the larger school community about the meaning of the stickers and importance of building safe spaces for LGBT and all students.

**Who should take part in a *Safe Zone* program?**

Anti-LGBT bias and prejudice affects *all* students and it is therefore everyone's collective responsibility to work against it. While there are many out and empowered LGBT students who are more than capable of standing up for their own rights, *straight allies* have a special role to play in *Safe Zone* programs. A *straight ally* is any non-LGBT person who supports and stands up for the rights of LGBT people. It is important for straight allies to demonstrate that LGBT people are not alone as they work to improve school climate, and to take a stand in places where it may not be safe for LGBT people to be out or visible. It is also critical for straight people to show that fighting for LGBT rights is not a "gay thing," but a human rights issue about which all people should be concerned. Therefore, all members of the school community—students and adults alike—are potential *Safe Zone* participants, though the following people and groups should make a special effort to get involved: Students and adult advisors in GSAs and other diversity/multicultural clubs, guidance and health staff, school administrators, PTA leaders, coaches/athletic staff, and classroom teachers.

**Is this program only about LGBT students? What about other groups who experience bias?**

*Safe Zone* programs focus on LGBT students for protection because this issue remains largely invisible in our classrooms and in the law. Homophobia and heterosexism are socially acceptable in many schools. Even in classrooms where bigotry is not tolerated, LGBT issues are considered taboo and an inappropriate topic for discussion.

While there is a need for programs that specifically address anti-LGBT bias, it is also important to acknowledge the interconnectedness of all prejudices. The same conditions that allow homophobia to develop most likely promote racism, classism, sexism, ableism, and other forms of prejudice. Any effort to reduce one type of bias will likely help to suppress other forms, and to make individuals from a variety of backgrounds feel safer. In this way, a *Safe Zone* program focused on LGBT students may serve as a springboard for work in other areas.

Just as all forms of oppression are interrelated, so too are the many identities within each of us. None of us are just one thing—we all have sexual, gender, religious, racial, ethnic, class and other identities that mingle in complex ways. Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people are also Black and Latina/o, Jewish and Muslim, rich and poor, deaf and mentally retarded. When LGBT people are targeted for harassment, it is often about more than just sexual orientation or gender identity. A *Safe Zone* program that protects LGBT people should therefore be designed to incorporate other "isms" through coalitions and partnerships with other groups both on and off campus.