

# **2005 IOWA PRIDE NETWORK SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY:**

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PROFILE OF  
LESBIAN, GAY, BISEXUAL & TRANSGENDER (LGBT)  
STUDENTS IN IOWA

## Key Findings

### 1) Iowa's LGBT students feel unsafe in school and face verbal and physical harassment or assault daily:

- **92.3%** of LGBT students in Iowa reported hearing homophobic remarks frequently in their schools.
- **83.3%** of LGBT students report being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation.
- **61.2%** of students do not feel safe at school because of their sexual orientation.
- **59.2%** of LGBT students reported some incident of having their property stolen or deliberately damaged, such as their car, clothing or books.
- **33.6%** of Iowa LGBT students reported some incident of physical harassment (being pushed or shoved) because of their sexual orientation; while nearly **18%** (17.8) of students reported some incident of physical assault (being punched, kicked or injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation or gender expression.

### 2) Iowa schools are unprepared and unresponsive when it comes to helping their LGBT students:

- **58.4%** of students reported that their schools had no protective school policies or procedures regarding harassment and assault based on sexual orientation and gender identity.
- **74.8%** of students report that faculty never or rarely intervene when homophobic remarks are made in their presence.

### 3) This hostile climate experienced by LGBT students adversely impacts their achievement levels:

- LGBT students **frequently the target of rumors, lies or physical assault had 15%-30% lower GPAs.**
- LGBT students were **2 times less likely** to go to college if frequently the target of rumors or lies.
- LGBT students were **4 times less likely** to go to college if frequently verbally harassed.
- LGBT students were **5 times less likely** to go to college if frequently physically assaulted.

### 4) Anti-harassment and non-discrimination policies with enumerated categories such as “sexual orientation” and “gender identity” do work to end bullying, harassment and discrimination in our schools. In schools with inclusive policies students were:

- **12%** less likely to hear “That’s so gay” in their schools
- **14%** less likely to hear remarks about not acting “masculine” enough in their schools
- **17%** less likely to hear other homophobic remarks, such as “faggot” or “dyke” in their schools

## Recommendations

- State legislation prohibiting harassment of, and violence and discrimination against, LGBT students must be adopted to insure that all students are taught with respect and have access to a quality education.
- Anti-harassment and non-discrimination policies that expressly cover sexual orientation and gender identity must be both adopted and implemented by school districts.
- School districts must support student efforts to create organizations, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, which seek to end violence, harassment, discrimination and isolation of LGBT students.

## **Introduction**

Iowa Pride Network is dedicated to helping Iowa's LGBT students build successful futures. The foundation of any successful future is a quality education. Unfortunately, a healthy, safe and affirming learning environment for Iowa's LGBT students is often out of reach as they face hostile and unsafe learning environments daily.

As witnessed with our survey results, the majority (92.3%) of Iowa LGBT students frequently have to endure homophobic remarks and feel unsafe in their school because of their sexual orientation. Faculty and school staff often did not intervene when these homophobic remarks were made and were even less likely to intervene when hearing negative comments about someone's gender expression. Additionally, 79.4% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation or their gender expression. One-third (33.6%) of Iowa LGBT students also reported incidents of physical harassment and physical assault.

The results from this survey are intended to inform educators, policymakers and the public at large about how violence, bias and harassment of Iowa's LGBT students continue to be the rule and not the exception. This survey demonstrates that this hostile school climate has a direct and measurable link to Iowa LGBT students' ability to learn, their academic performance and their educational aspirations; and ultimately their ability to build successful futures.

## **Methodology**

The students for this survey were obtained primarily from school based organizations serving LGBT students. The students came from 48 schools across the state. Only Iowa high school students and first year college freshmen who had attended an Iowa high school within the past year were allowed to participate in the survey. The Iowa Pride Network School Climate Survey was also available on the internet via prideNet's website: [www.iowapridenet.org](http://www.iowapridenet.org). Notices about our on-line survey were emailed out to Gay-straight Alliances and youth advocacy organizations. Data collection occurred from October 2004 through March 2005.

A total of 175 lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or allied (LGBTQA) students completed the survey. (Heterosexual youth, except those identifying as transgender, (1 student), were not included in the final statistics. Experiences of straight student allies will be detailed in a separate report).

The majority of the students identified as white or European-American (87.4%); almost two-thirds identified as female and the majority identified as gay, lesbian or bisexual. Over half the students reported being in 9<sup>th</sup>-10<sup>th</sup> grade during the 2004-2005 school year.

## **Special Thanks**

Dr. Peggy Fitch, Professor of Psychology at Central College and her team of students, for compiling the data and statistical information. Joe Kosciw at the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN) for helping us interpret data and correlations. Iowa's supportive teachers and administrators and specifically advisors of Gay-Straight Alliances, who work endlessly to ensure the safety and affirmation of all students. And, finally, to Iowa's LGBTQA students who took this survey to help us better understand what it is like to be LGBTQA in Iowa's high schools.

TABLE 1

<b>Table 1: Demographics of Survey Participants</b>	
<i>103 LGBTQ Students Surveyed</i>	
<b><u>Race/Ethnicity</u></b>	
White	87.4%
African-American/Black	3.9
Latino/a	3.9
Asian/Pacific Islander	1.9
Native American	1.9
Multiracial	1
Other race/ethnicity	1
<b><u>Gender</u></b>	
Male	38.8
Female	59.2
Transgender	1
Other gender identities	0
<b><u>Sexual Orientation</u></b>	
Gay or Lesbian	61.2
Bisexual	28.2
Other sexual orientations	10.2
<b><u>Grade</u></b>	
8th	8.8
9th	21.6
10th	29.4
11th	22.5
12th	17.6
<b><u>Average Age</u></b>	16.5

<b>Table 2: School Characteristics</b>	
<b><u>Community Type</u></b>	
Urban	39.8%
Suburban	22.4
Small Town	28.6
Rural	9.2
<b><u>School Type</u></b>	
Public	98
Religious-Affiliated	2
Other	0

TABLE 2

<b>State Comparison of</b>	<b><i>prideNet</i> School Survey of LGBT Students</b>	<b>with</b>	<b>2002 Iowa Youth Survey of ALL Iowa Students</b>
	<b><i>Because of Sexual Orientation</i></b>		
<i>Don't feel safe at school*</i>	<b>61.2%</b>		17%
<i>Physical Assault</i>	<b>17.8%</b>		5%
<i>Threats**</i>	<b>59.2%</b>		18%
<i>Schools with Protective Policies</i>	<b>41.6%</b>		
<i>Parent/Guardian Never Intervened Regarding School-Based Victimization</i>	<b>51.1%</b>		

\* The Iowa Youth Survey did not ask students to specify why they were harassed or didn't feel safe.

\*\*Threats indicate incident(s) of having their property stolen or deliberately damaged such as their car, clothing or books.

## Key Findings

In the 2005 Iowa Pride Network School Climate Survey, LGBT students from Iowa were, for the most part not significantly different from the rest of the country in their reports of harassment, assault and feeling unsafe in school. (Refer to GLSEN's full report of the 2003 survey for national results: Kosciw, J. (2004). *The National School Climate Survey: The School Related Experiences of our Nation's Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth*. New York: GLSEN.)

### **Biased Language in School**

#### **Homophobic Remarks**

LGBT Students in Iowa schools were asked how often they heard the expression "That's so gay" or "You're so gay" used in their schools. In these expressions, the word "gay" is used to mean something that is considered bad or worthless just as one might use the word "dumb" or "stupid." 92.3% of LGBT students in Iowa reported hearing the expression frequently or often in their schools and 85.4% reported hearing other homophobic remarks such as "faggot" or "dyke," frequently or often.

Students were also asked who made homophobic remarks, whether it was students, faculty/staff or both.

- Almost all students reported hearing homophobic remarks from other students – 87.4% reported hearing such remarks often or frequently from other students.
- Incidents of homophobic remarks often go unchallenged. Nearly three-quarters of the students surveyed reported that faculty/staff were only some of the time or never present when homophobic remarks were made and 74.8% of students reported that faculty/staff only some of the time or never intervened when they were present.
- Students were less likely to intervene when homophobic remarks were made. Almost all the students in our survey reported that other students never intervened or only intervened some of the time when homophobic remarks were made (97.1%).

Anecdotal reports suggest that most non-LGBT students and some school district officials and educational policymakers maintain that the expression "that's so gay" does not directly denigrate gay or lesbian people and therefore should not be seen as harmful or offensive. For this reason we asked students who heard this expression used in their schools the degree to which hearing such expressions distressed them. The majority of students (67%) reported they were pretty much or extremely distressed when hearing the words "gay" or "queer" used in a derogatory way (such as "That's so gay").

#### **Racist Remarks**

As with other students, LGBT students may also feel unsafe in their schools because of other personal characteristics, such as race or ethnicity. Well over a third (37.2%) of Iowa's LGBT students reported hearing racist remarks (such as "nigger," "kike," "gook," used in a derogatory manner) frequently or often in their schools.

Students also reported that 38.2% of racist comments frequently or often come from other students. When these racist comments are made, faculty and staff are only present 16.5% of the time. Additionally, faculty or staff intervened less than half the time (48.8%) when racist remarks were made in their presence.

#### **Sexist Remarks & Negative Remarks about Gender Expression**

The majority of Iowa's LGBT students (76.7%) have heard sexist remarks (such as someone being called "bitch" in a derogatory way or comments about girls' bodies or talk of girls being inferior to boys) in their schools. Well over half (59.2%) of teachers or staff only some of the time or never intervened when sexist remarks were made.

In our survey we also asked students how often they heard remarks about a person not acting in traditionally gender-specified ways, i.e., not acting "masculine" or "feminine" enough. LGBT students frequently reported hearing comments about masculinity more than femininity in their schools. Whereas 44.7% of students reported frequently or often hearing comments about students not acting "masculine" enough in their schools, only a quarter of students (25.2%) reported frequently or often hearing comments about students not acting "feminine" enough.

Iowa LGBT students also reported that teachers or staff was inactive when it came to remarks about gender expression. 80% (79.6) of teachers or staff intervened only some of the time or never when comments about students' not acting "masculine" or "feminine" were made.

### **Overall Safety in School**

To assess overall feelings of safety in school, we asked students whether they felt unsafe in their schools because of their sexual orientation, gender expression, gender, race/ethnicity, because of an actual or perceived disability and/or because of their religion or the religion they are presumed to be.

Students most commonly reported that they felt unsafe in their schools because of their sexual orientation or their gender expression – 61.2% reported that they felt unsafe in their schools because of their sexual orientation while 38.8% reporting that they felt unsafe because of their gender expression.

- 61.2% felt unsafe in their school because of their sexual orientation
- 39.8% felt unsafe in school because of how they express their gender
- 9.7% felt unsafe in their school because of their gender
- 4.9% felt unsafe in their school because of their race/ethnicity
- 1.9% felt unsafe in their school because of an actual or perceived disability
- 13.6% felt unsafe in school because of their religion or because people think they are of a certain religion

For LGBT students, feeling that school is a hostile or unsafe place may interfere with their ability to learn. We asked students in our survey how many times they had missed a class or missed a full day of school in the past month because they felt uncomfortable or unsafe in school. 21.6% had skipped class or had missed at least one or more days of school in the past month because they felt unsafe.

### **Experiences of Harassment and Assault in School**

We asked students in our survey how frequently in the past school year had they been verbally and physically harassed, physically assaulted or sexually harassed.

#### **Verbal Harassment**

The majority (83.3%) of LGBT students in Iowa reported at least some experience with verbal harassment because of their sexual orientation or because of their gender expression

#### **Physical Harassment & Assault**

A third (33.6%) of Iowa LGBT students reported some incident of physical harassment (e.g., being pushed or shoved) in school because of their sexual orientation and over a quarter (26.8%) of students reported such harassment because of their gender expression. Given the extreme nature of physical assault (being punched, kicked or injured with a weapon), it is not surprising that fewer students reported being assaulted in school than reported being verbally or physically harassed. Nevertheless, nearly 18% (17.8) of students reported some incident of physical assault in the past year because of their sexual orientation and 16.9% of students reported having been assaulted because of their gender expression.

#### **Sexual Harassment**

The majority of Iowa LGBT students (66.7%) reported some incident of sexual harassment (such as sexual remarks made toward them or someone touching their body inappropriately) at their school.

#### **Threats**

45.5% of students have reported some incident of having received harassing or threatening emails, instant messages or text messages from students at their school because of their sexual orientation in the past year. The majority of LGBT students (91.2%) reported some incident of having had mean rumors or lies spread about them in their school. 59.2% of students reported some incident of having their property stolen or deliberately damaged such as their car, clothing or books.

## LGBT Resources and Support in School

Another dimension of school climate for LGBT students is the availability of positive resources, about LGBT-related issues and supportive faculty or staff. Thus, we asked the students in our survey about certain school supports, such as school policies or procedures for reporting incidents of harassment or assault, and the inclusion of LGBT people, history or events discussed in classroom curricula.

58.4% of students either don't know or do not have school policies or procedures for reporting incidents of harassment or assault that specifically mention sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. The majority (78.4%) of students have never been taught about lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) people, history or events in any of their classes, while over three-fourths (77.0%) of Iowa students' textbooks contain no information about LGBT people, history or events.

## Diminished Achievement Levels

We examined how school climate was related to school performance, grade-point average (GPA) and college aspirations for LGBT students. The school performance and college aspirations are significantly diminished for LGBT students who experience harassment.

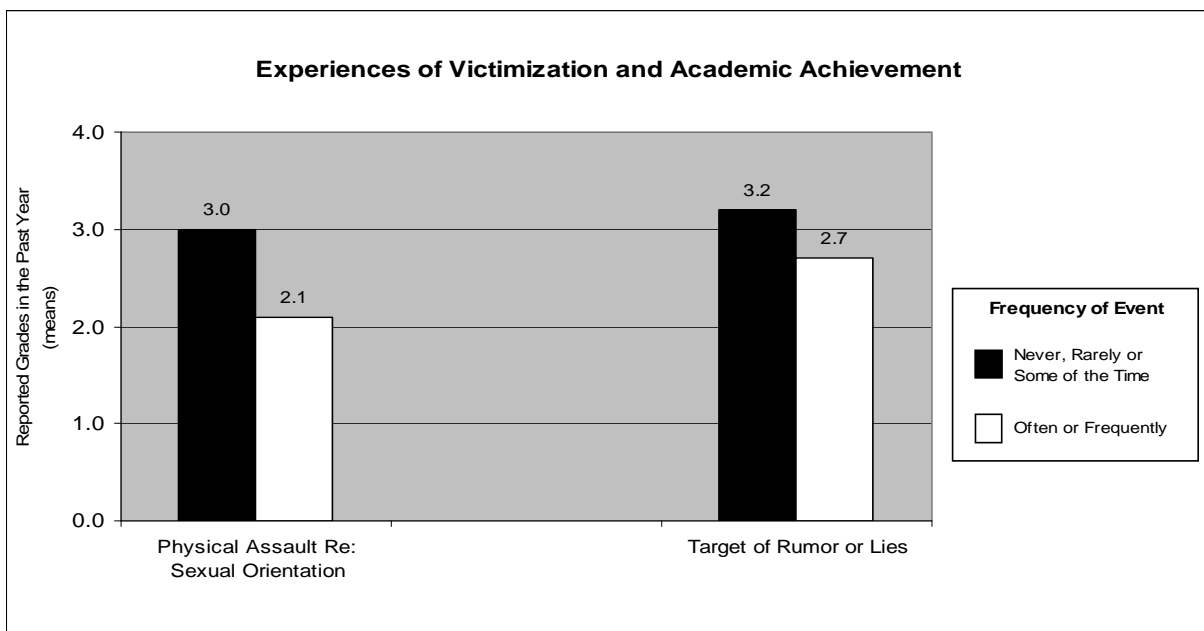
LGBT students who are frequently the target of rumors or lies had GPA's that were 15% lower than LGBT students who never or rarely experienced such harassment:

- Average GPA for LGBT students who report being frequently the target of rumors or lies: 2.7
- Average GPA for LGBT students who report rarely being the target of rumors or lies: 3.2

LGBT students that who have faced frequent physical assault because of their sexual orientation had GPA's that were 30% lower than LGBT student who have never or rarely experienced such harassment:

- Average GPA for LGBT students who report frequent physical assault: 2.1
- Average GPA for LGBT students who report only rare or less frequent physical assault: 3.0

Figure 1



## Diminished Future and Educational Aspirations

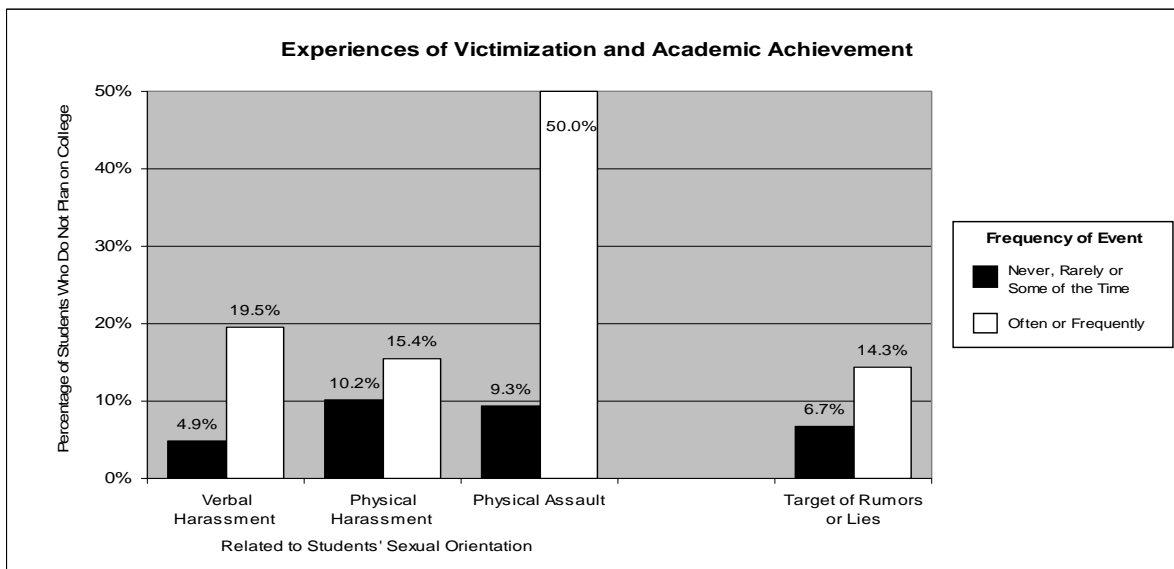
Students who experience frequent verbal harassment because of their sexual orientation are less likely than other students to plan to attend college: 19.5% of LGBT students who report verbal harassment do not intend to go to college, four times the figure of those LGBT students who report only rare or less frequent verbal harassment.

LGBT students who experience frequent physical harassment because of their sexual orientation were less likely to plan to attend college: 15.4% of LGBT students who report frequent physical harassment do not intend to go to college.

LGBT students who report frequent assault were five times (50.0%) more likely to say they did not intend to go to college as LGBT students who reported only rare or less frequent physical assault (9.3%).

In addition, students who reported being a frequent target of mean rumors or lies were less likely to plan on attending college than other students: 14.3% of LGBT students who report being a frequent target of mean rumors or lies do not intend to go to college, twice the figure of those LGBT students who report only rare or less frequent being a frequent target of mean rumors or lies.

Figure 2



## Inclusive School Policies make a Difference

Having a policy or procedure for reporting incidents of harassment in school is an important tool for making schools safer for all students. When such policies or procedures exist and are enforced, schools are sending a message to the student population that victimizing behaviors will not be tolerated.

Students were asked whether their schools had a policy or procedure for reporting incidents of harassment or assault that specifically mentions sexual orientation or gender identity. Less than half (41.2%) of LGBT students reported that their schools have a policy protecting them. 19.6% of LGBT students reported having no policy in place to protect them and a sizeable percentage of students (39.2%) reported that they did not know whether their schools had a policy or not.

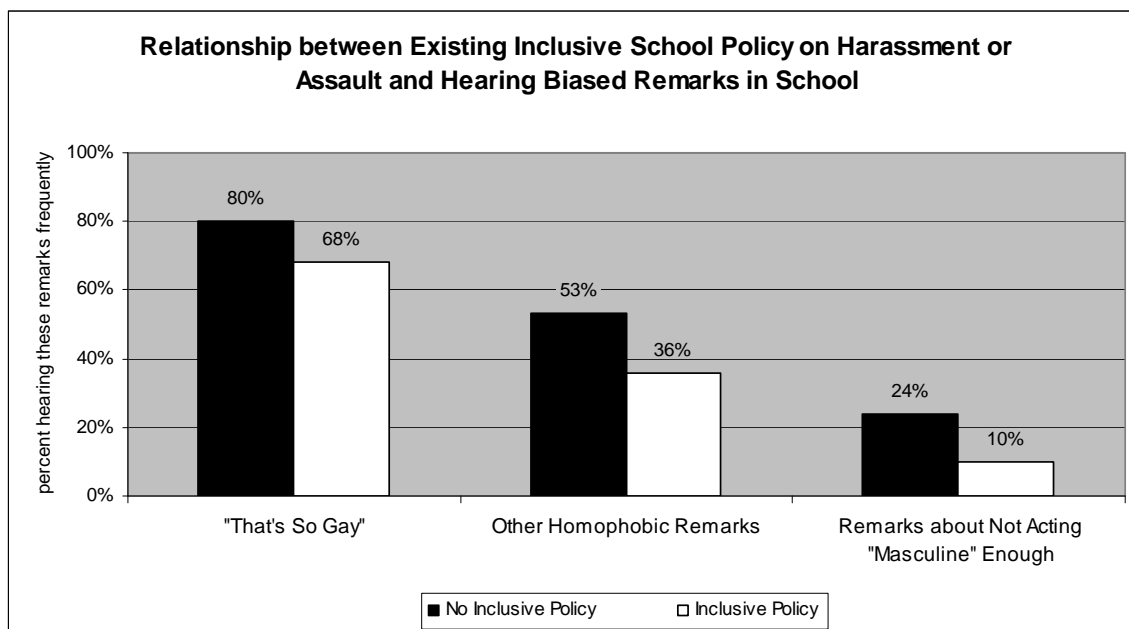
It is important to note that student reports on the existence of policy may not necessarily reflect the extent to which individual schools or school districts actually have policies. Since most of the students for this survey were obtained primarily from school based organizations serving LGBT students; it would follow that they would report a higher amount of existent policies.

Furthermore, given that such a sizeable portion did not know of a policy indicates that school officials either do not have an inclusive policy or may not be doing an adequate job of informing their students about school policies regarding harassment and assault based on sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Results clearly indicate that schools that adopt and enforce policies that include sexual orientation or gender identity/expression have a healthier and more affirming school climate than those that do not:

- Schools with inclusive policies were 12% less likely to hear “That’s so gay” in their schools.
- Schools with inclusive policies were 14% less likely to hear remarks about not acting “masculine” enough in their schools.
- Schools with inclusive policies were 17% less likely to hear other homophobic remarks, such as “faggot” or “dyke” in their schools.

As shown in Figure 3, students who attended schools that had policies that included sexual orientation or gender identity/expression were less likely to hear homophobic remarks and negative remarks about gender expression.

Figure 3



### **Summary**

The results from the Iowa Pride Network School Climate Survey clearly show that for many LGBT students in Iowa, school can be an unsafe and even dangerous place. The majority of Iowa LGBT students (92.3%) frequently heard homophobic remarks, felt unsafe in their school because of their sexual orientation (61.2%) and (83.3%) reported being verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation or their gender expression. A large number of students also reported incidents of physical harassment (34%) and physical assault (18%). Faculty and school staff often did not intervene when homophobic remarks were made (75%) and were even less likely to intervene (80%) when hearing negative comments about someone’s gender expression.

### **Conclusion:**

Inclusive Policies are needed to create the kind of learning environment that allows Iowa LGBT students to succeed academically.

## **Recommendations**

Our results indicate much work must be done in Iowa schools to create safer climates for all students, including LGBT students. The following recommendations, if adopted, will help make a major difference across Iowa in providing a safe learning atmosphere for all students.

- State legislation prohibiting harassment of, and violence and discrimination against, LGBT students must be adopted to insure that all students are taught with respect and have access to a quality education.
- Anti-harassment and non-discrimination policies that expressly cover sexual orientation and gender identity must be both adopted and implemented by school districts.
- School districts must support student efforts to create organizations, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, which seek to end violence, harassment, discrimination and isolation of LGBT students.

## **About Iowa Pride Network**

Iowa Pride Network fights bigotry and intolerance against LGBT students in Iowa. Iowa Pride Network works directly with students, empowering them to start and enhance Gay-Straight Alliances in their high schools and colleges, while building a statewide network that offers support mentoring and educational opportunities. In addition, Iowa Pride Network educates policy makers and educators on issues facing LGBT students and advocates for the interests of these students on state and the local levels.

## **Iowa Pride Network Vision**

Our vision is to educate Iowa LGBT students on their rights and available resources, end the isolation that many LGBT students face, empower students to build successful futures and transform Iowa into a state that is affirming and inclusive.