



VIRGINIA ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOL NURSES, INC.
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Joanne Corte Grossi, MIPP
Regional Director
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Region III
Suite 436
150 S. Independence Mall West
Philadelphia, PA 19106

Dear Ms. Grossi and Members of the Panel,

On behalf of the Virginia Association of School Nurses, we thank you for the opportunity to participate in this listening session which considers the report and recommendations of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) with regard to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered (LGBT) individuals and their families. Our association's position is unified with that of the National Association of School Nurses, which holds that "all students, regardless of their sexual orientation or the sexual orientation of their parents and family members, are entitled to a safe school environment and equal opportunities for a high level of academic achievement and school participation/ involvement" (NASN, 2012). It is our view that one's sexual orientation is not a choice or mental health problem.

Socialization is a major aspect of human development. The need for belonging is the same for all youth. However, over 84% of sexual minority youth are verbally harassed; 40% are physically harassed; and 18.8% are physically assaulted in school (Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2010). These students are afraid to tell their parents and often fear for their safety in school. They may choose to be absent from school for safety reasons, not because they don't want to learn (Kosciw et al., 2010). Of note, LGBT youth encounter higher rates of anxiety, depression, and physical risks than their heterosexual peers. Health issues of concern include abuse, obesity, alcoholism, smoking, and drug abuse.

In addition, students who have two parents of the same sex may experience disapproval at school from other students, parents, teachers or school staff. That disapproval may serve to stigmatize or isolate them. Sexual minority parents may also experience bias regarding policies that may prevent them from serving as chaperones and helpers for classroom and school activities.

Given the safety, health, and social issues that LGBT youth may encounter, registered professional school nurses are uniquely positioned to do the following:

- Recognize health risks that are disproportionately high for sexual minority students;
- Provide health services that are safe, private, and confidential;
- Make referrals for evidence-based care; and
- Identify and advocate for policies in the school environment to assure the physical, psychological and social safety of sexual minority students as well as students with gay and lesbian parents.

School nurses, as members of the coordinated school health team, are responsible for a safe school environment and should be actively involved in improving the safety of the school environment for all students including sexual minority students and students with sexual minority parents. They should participate in advocating for, creating, and enforcing policies about name calling, bullying and violence based on actual or perceived sexual minority status of both the students and their parents. School nurses are uniquely positioned to model respect for diversity, provide confidential health services for sexual minority students in a safe environment, and reduce stigma for students with gay or lesbian parents.

We commend HHS' actions to integrate LGBT health issues into the *Healthy People 2020* and to advance anti-bullying efforts. It is our hope that these HHS efforts will significantly improve the lives of LGBT individuals. As HHS moves forward on this initiative, consideration for the health and safety of LGBT students must be an integral part of all future plans. Thank you for this opportunity to provide comment.

Respectfully,

Deborah Zeller

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