

January 13, 2004

**Largest Ever Study of Anti-Gay Harassment in Schools Shows the Problem is Widespread,
Dangerous and Preventable**

*Study Proving That Schools Can Take Steps to Improve Student Safety Has National Implications for
Addressing Harassment on the Basis of Sexual Orientation and Gender Identity*

Media Contacts: Courtney Joslin, (415) 392-6257 x305, joslin@nclrights.org
Jason Riggs, (415) 871-7351, jason@jasonriggs.org
Molly O'Shaughnessy, Director of California Safe Schools Coalition, (415) 626-1680

Note to Editors/Reporters: For more information on the report, see www.casafeschools.org.

Despite an anti-harassment law that took effect four years ago this month, harassment and bullying based on sexual orientation remain persistent and pervasive in California schools. **7.5%** of California's middle and high school students, more than **200,000 students** every year, are targets of harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation, according to a study released by the California Safe Schools Coalition. The *Safe Place to Learn* study found that widespread bullying has dangerous academic, health and safety consequences for students.

"The *Safe Place to Learn* study confirmed what we knew to be true – that LGBT youth continue to face rampant violence and harassment in California schools," said Courtney Joslin, staff attorney for the National Center for Lesbian Rights (NCLR), a member organization of the California Safe Schools Coalition. "Fortunately, it also confirms that schools can significantly reduce this abuse by taking a few simple steps, such as passing an inclusive anti-harassment policy."

NCLR's Youth Project has been addressing the needs of LGBT youth for over a decade. Last week, NCLR announced the settlement of a lawsuit brought on behalf of six students against the Morgan Hill School District, alleging years of anti-LGBT harassment and discrimination. As part of the settlement, school staff must take part in a mandatory annual training on issues of harassment and discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity. The district is also implementing an age-appropriate training program for students and an anti-discrimination policy that bars harassment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity. Substantial damages will also be paid to the plaintiffs. For more information about the lawsuit, see www.nclrights.org.

"When 200,000 students are suffering the devastating consequences of harassment each year, schools can't ignore the problem any longer," said Molly O'Shaughnessy, Director of the California Safe Schools Coalition. "This is an epidemic in California schools that needs immediate attention from state and local school officials."

The *Safe Place to Learn* study, including 26-times more respondents than any other survey on the issue in the nation, is the first comprehensive statewide analysis of harassment based on sexual orientation and gender nonconformity in California, where more than one-in-eight of the nation's children are growing up. The report analyzes data from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), a broad-based state survey, and an independent companion survey conducted by the California Safe Schools

Coalition measuring the effectiveness of school anti-harassment practices. The data were analyzed by the California Safe Schools Coalition and researchers at UC Davis' 4-H Center for Youth Development.

Among the findings in the *Safe Place to Learn Study* are:

Data from the CHKS show that these 200,000 students harassed on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation are three times more likely to miss school because they feel unsafe, more than twice as likely to be depressed, to consider suicide, or to make a plan for suicide. Students harassed on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation are also more likely to have low grades, use drugs, smoke, drink alcohol, or be victims of violence. In addition, these students report weaker connections to peers, community, teachers and other adults—critical safety nets for any young person.

The in-depth companion survey found that school campuses in California are hostile climates for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students and gender non-conforming students. Two in every three LGBT students reported harassment based on sexual orientation, and 47% of LGBT students experienced repeated harassment. Almost half of their peers agree that their school is not safe for LGBT students. These findings are supported by the fact that 91% of all students report hearing their peers use slurs about sexual orientation and more than 40% reported hearing teachers making such negative comments or slurs. In addition, 27% of students reported being harassed because they weren't "masculine enough" or "feminine enough," and more than half of all students said their schools are unsafe for boys who aren't as masculine as other boys.

The *Safe Place to Learn* study proves the effectiveness of several specific steps schools can take including posting and enforcing anti-harassment policies that specifically include sexual orientation and gender identity, training teachers and staff to intervene when slurs are used, and supporting efforts to establish Gay Straight Alliance clubs on campus. These steps result in reducing harassment and name-calling, improving students' feelings of safety, and strengthening their connections to community and adults.

Students who know of a school policy specifically prohibiting harassment based on sexual orientation are 19% less likely to be harassed based on sexual orientation and 25% more likely to feel safe at school. Students who say their teachers step in when they hear name-calling based on sexual orientation are 35% less likely to be harassed because of sexual orientation and 9% more likely to feel safe at school. Students whose schools have a Gay-Straight Alliance club are 16% less likely to be harassed because of sexual orientation and 23% more likely to feel safe at school. These steps are also connected to stronger student connections to school, community and supportive adults - crucial tools for students' safety and healthy development.

California is among nine jurisdictions with laws against discrimination or harassment in schools based on sexual orientation or gender identity.

The California Safe Schools Coalition is a statewide network of experts and advocates working to implement the California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act, which became law on January 1, 2000. Members of the California Safe Schools Coalition include the American Civil Liberties Union of Southern California; Anti-Defamation League; California Teachers Association; Equality California; Gay-Straight Alliance Network; Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network; Human Rights Watch; L.A. Gay & Lesbian Center; National Center for Lesbian Rights; Parents, Friends and Families of Lesbians and Gays; San Diego LGBT Community Center; Transgender Law Center; and Women's Educational Media.

##