

## Safe Spaces for Queer Teachers

by Daniel Blinn and Sue McKay, Co-leaders Metro Teachers' GSA

To be out or not to be out? Are LGBTQ+ teachers really safe in the school system? Over the years, many things have improved for LGBTQ+ youth. For example, schools cannot deny students the right to create a GSA (Gay–Straight Alliance, Gender–Sexuality Alliance). Not that long ago, GSAs were few and far between, but now, most secondary schools have an active group. Despite these improvements for queer youth, many queer teachers live in fear of prejudice and discrimination if their identity is discovered.

Although there are school board/district/regional centre and human rights' policies intended to protect people in the queer community, it is impossible to protect people from bigotry. Many people assume that society has evolved and that public opinion is more accepting in 2020; however, policy and public opinion do not protect one from the harm that may be caused by a bigot, especially if that person is in a position of power. It only takes one bigot to ruin someone's career.

In education circles, we often talk about “putting students first”; however, if we do not also consider the safety of teachers, we *cannot* put students first. Schools are a reflection of society, and therefore the issues we face in schools are systemic—and to make these kinds of changes can feel overwhelming, if not impossible. However, school systems could lead the charge on creating safe school environments by

not only creating environments where LGBTQ+ teachers feel safe, but where they are actually encouraged to be open, positive role models for the youth they serve. It is generally accepted that self-actualization and meeting one's full potential are unattainable goals if basic needs are not met first. Likewise, many students will struggle to be successful academically if their well-being is not secure. For many LGBTQ+ students, their physical safety is threatened and their sense of social, emotional and mental welfare is often fragile. If LGBTQ+ students do not feel protected, their academic achievement and, indeed, their futures will be affected. As educators, we have an obligation to create safe spaces for all students, including LGBTQ+. However, how do we create safe spaces for students if we do not also create safe spaces for teachers?

So, how do we get there? Like any large goal that seems overwhelming in the beginning, it is accomplished by taking one small step, and then another and another. However, before any teacher can be expected to take these steps, there needs to be assurances from those in positions of power that LGBTQ+ teachers will be supported and protected from prejudice and discrimination. Beyond that, LGBTQ+ teachers also need to feel that they bring a valuable perspective that diversifies and enriches the climate of the school.

The Metro Teachers' GSA, in the Greater Halifax area, is an example of a grassroots organization started by

queer teachers. This group provides a safe space, and a sense of community and support for LGBTQ+ teachers and their allies. There is safety in numbers and comfort in being part of a group that understands and shares the same concerns. Teachers may not feel safe attending a teachers' GSA meeting, but may feel some security just knowing that such a group exists. The Metro Teachers' GSA is an organization that attempts to meet this need.

There are many LGBTQ+ teachers in our schools who do not feel safe to be who they are. In our present environment, it takes a great deal of courage to risk your career, no matter how much you might want to be a desperately needed role model for our LGBTQ+ youth. To be out or not to be out? In our present environment, this remains a very personal decision.

*Daniel Blinn is a school counsellor at John Martin Junior High and South Woodside Elementary. He has been teaching for 16 years.*

*Sue McKay is a school counsellor at Smokey Drive and Sycamore Lane Elementary Schools in Lower Sackville.*

