IN FOCUS

RIGHT WING WATCH

BIG BULLIES:
HOW THE RELIGIOUS RIGHT IS TRYING TO MAKE SCHOOLS SAFE FOR BULLIES AND DANGEROUS FOR GAY KIDS

Back to School. Back to Bullying?

The Right Wing's Anti-Anti-Bullying Strategies:

- The Indoctrination Myth
- The "Special Rights" Smear
- Playing the Victim
- Blaming the Victims

A joint project of People For the American Way and People for the American Way Foundation
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Introduction

Students deserve an education that is free from bullying and harassment, and in many districts parents, teachers, principals, community members and students are working together to create a safe and welcoming environment for all children. Bullying can impede learning and ruin lives. As Education Secretary Arne Duncan has said, “bullying is doubly dangerous because if left unattended it can rapidly escalate into even more serious violence and abuse.” Close to nine in ten Americans believe that bullying is a “serious problem,” and many communities are directly challenging harassment and violence in schools.

However, many Religious Right activists want to derail efforts to combat bullying. An increasing number of conservative leaders and organizations have fiercely opposed anti-bullying programs developed by schools and education groups for the sole reason that such programs identify and combat the widespread bullying of LGBT youth.

Rather than recognize and address the problem of bullying against students who are gay or perceived to be gay, Religious Right groups want schools to embrace a policy of inaction. Many resort to repeating discredited lies about sexual orientation and vilifying the LGBT community and its allies to back up their opposition to anti-bullying programs that mention anti-gay bullying. Concerned students, families, teachers, education professionals and public officials should not be fooled by the far-right’s attempt to smear anti-bullying programs and should instead ensure that schools address bullying with a direct, honest and comprehensive approach.

Facing the Problem

Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students and those perceived to be LGBT, encounter unique problems at school. LGBT youth are often not open about their sexual orientation to their families or friends, who are often an important support network for young people who are bullied. In many cases these children even face hostility from their families, other students and school officials because of their sexual orientation.

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The bullying of LGBT students has become a full-scale crisis: the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network’s 2009 National School Climate Survey found that close to 85% of LGBT students reported harassment because of their sexual orientation or gender identity, and nearly 20% reported “being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation.” GLSEN found that peers and school officials frequently dismiss or mistreat LGBT youth who seek out help. According to GLSEN, more than six in ten LGBT students “reported that they felt unsafe in school because of their sexual orientation,” and LGBT youth were far more likely than other students to miss class or school “because of safety concerns.” Not only does bullying damage academic and social prospects and emotional wellbeing, it has also contributed to dramatically higher rates of homelessness and suicide among gay and lesbian youth.

The Suicide Prevention Resource Center reported in 2008 that lesbian, gay and bisexual youth “are nearly one and a half to three times more likely to have reported suicidal ideation” and “nearly one and a half to seven times more likely than non-LGB youth to have reported attempting suicide.”

“It would be difficult to overstate the impact of stigma and discrimination against LGBT individuals in the United States,” the researchers said, adding that “stigma and discrimination are directly tied to risk factors for suicide.”
Just in the past month, numerous stories have emerged about the harassment gay and gay-perceived youth face every day at schools. A North Carolina girl who was president of her school’s Gay-Straight Alliance club was physically attacked by a fellow student and the school failed to conduct a serious investigation; a gay Wisconsin teenager encountered death threats but received no support from his school or law enforcement; a gay Florida student’s teacher openly mocked and criticized his sexual orientation in class; and a California teacher “drew an ‘S’ on a student’s hand and repeatedly referred to the student, who was wearing a T-shirt that read ‘Gay is Good,’ as a sinner throughout class.”

But Religious Right groups demand that schools deliberately ignore the harassment of gay and gay-perceived students and believe schools should pay no attention to anti-gay bullying when formulating bullying reduction plans. This resistance to building an amicable and nonthreatening environment for LGBT youth in schools has its origins in right-wing conspiracies about the gay community and the education system.

The Indoctrination Myth

The crux of right-wing opposition to comprehensive bullying prevention programs is that by addressing bullying directed towards gay and gay-perceived students, schools may engage in “homosexual indoctrination.” While modern scientific research and reports from the American Psychological Association confirm that sexual orientation is not a choice, anti-gay activists have a long record of arguing that people, especially youth, become gay as a result of “recruitment.”

During her notorious campaign in the late 1970’s to overturn anti-discrimination ordinances and ban gay couples from adopting children, Anita Bryant said, “Since homosexuals cannot reproduce, they must recruit; it’s the only way to swell their numbers.” Tom Minnery, the head of Focus on the Family’s political arm CitizenLink, said the passage of California’s Proposition 8 “helps protect millions of children from radical indoctrination in the homosexual lifestyle.”

Focus on the Family founded the misleadingly named True Tolerance campaign, led by Candi Cushman, the group’s education analyst, to fight anti-bullying programs and safe schools initiatives across the country. Cushman dubs such programs “homosexuality lessons,” which she blames on “activist groups who want to promote homosexuality to kids” in order to “capture the hearts and minds of our children at their earliest stages.” Cushman labeled efforts to reduce anti-gay bigotry and harassment on school sports teams as “radical policies and teachings that fall in line with homosexual and transgender political activist goals.”

In 2001, James Dobson, founder of Focus on the Family, warned of the “national homosexualization of schools,” and two years later the Traditional Values Coalition’s Louis Sheldon claimed that “homosexual militants are pushing for aggressive recruitment programs in public schools.”

“Homosexuals cannot reproduce, so they have to recruit; it’s the only way to swell their numbers.”

Bryan Fischer, American Family Association

Such views have changed little in the contemporary Religious Right, as the movement’s major leaders continue to parrot such false claims. Indeed, this indoctrination myth is at the center of the Religious Right’s opposition to anti-bullying efforts.

Bryan Fischer, the American Family Association’s Director of Issues Analysis, in October argued that “homosexuals cannot reproduce, so they have to recruit; it’s the only way to swell their numbers.” Tom Minnery, the head of Focus on the Family’s political arm CitizenLink, said the passage of California’s Proposition 8 “helps protect millions of children from radical indoctrination in the homosexual lifestyle.”

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White House convened a summit to address the problem of bullying in schools, Focus on the Family immediately criticized the gathering, claiming it would “promote pro-homosexual curriculum.”

A staffer for Focus’s California branch, the California Family Council, denounced the “homosexual message” of anti-bullying programs and dismissed the “gay activists in California [who] have been making a big to-do about ‘bullying’ because of sexual orientation.” Focus on the Family is even working with the far-right Alliance Defense Fund on legal plans to block “efforts to indoctrinate our society into supporting homosexual behavior.”

But Focus on the Family is far from the only group promoting the indoctrination myth.

The Family Research Council is a major propagator of the falsehood that bullying prevention initiatives are attempts by gay rights activists to “recruit” students, and lobbies states to pass laws curbing students from joining Gay-Straight Alliance clubs. Peter Sprigg, FRC’s senior fellow of public policy, authored a booklet on how the “pro-homosexual movement” is “indoctrinating impressionable school children” through safe schools initiatives and anti-discrimination rules. He regularly criticizes organizations like the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), which helps formulate safe schools programs, for allegedly trying to “promote a homosexual agenda in schools.”

Like the FRC, the American Family Association (AFA) uses the indoctrination myth when lobbying lawmakers to oppose anti-bullying bills. In Kentucky, the AFA called on legislators to vote against bullying prevention legislation, declaring, “The intent of this bill is re-education and indoctrination.” Gary Glenn, the head of AFA’s Michigan chapter, described to the rabidly anti-gay extremist Peter LaBarbera of Americans For Truth About Homosexuality his group’s strategy to oppose anti-bullying legislation: “On the bullying issue, the Republicans were floundering in the Michigan legislature as to how to stop this, we just simply framed it a different way” and developed the message that “homosexual activists are using the bullying issue, as you indicated, as a ‘Trojan Horse.’”

Not to be outdone, Concerned Women for America claimed that the “radical homosexual lobby has done a masterful job of infiltrating our government schools to gain control of the minds of America’s youth. Their propaganda tactics are time-tested.” The group, which says that “homosexual acts are unhealthy” and “like smoking, alcohol, and drug abuse, they should be discouraged,” argues that acknowledgment of sexual orientation in anti-discrimination codes leads to the “indoctrination of very young children.”

The Protect Kids Foundation, a California-based group, suggests that gay rights activists are “focused on radically transforming society by using our children as pawns for social change,” and when “radicals sympathetic to the LGBT agenda have taken over school boards, the indoctrination is overt and aggressive.” “Since directly promoting homosexual lifestyles to children is too controversial,” the group says, “LGBT activists hide their agenda behind the ‘safe schools’ and ‘anti-bullying’ curricula.”

Religious Right commentators are also broadcasting the indoctrination myth.

David Barton is a self-proclaimed historian and prominent Religious Right figure who Glenn Beck has called “the most important man in America today.” On his radio show, Barton derided bullying prevention programs, saying: “Unless you’re willing to monitor what’s going on in that classroom, I guarantee you they are getting homosexual indoctrination.”

“Historian” David Barton
Back to School. Back to Bullying?

The Indoctrination Myth

Candi Cushman: Said anti-bullying programs are “homosexuality lessons.”

Bryan Fischer: “Homosexuals cannot reproduce, so they have to recruit; it’s the only way to swell their numbers.”

Concerned Women for America: The “radical homosexual lobby has done a masterful job of infiltrating our government schools to gain control of the minds of America’s youth.”

A North Carolina girl who was president of her school’s GSA was physically attacked by a fellow student. The school failed to conduct a serious investigation.

A gay Wisconsin teenager encountered death threats but received no support from his school or law enforcement.

Texas Eagle Forum: Said anti-bullying bill; “It’s a religious catechism.”

Students urge lawmakers to act on bullying.
Special Rights” Smear

Tony Perkins:
Anti-bullying programs create “inequity” by “promoting homosexuality.”

The Liberty Institute:
On a bullying prevention program’s intent is to create special categories and special rights.

The Forum:
“Banning legislation that constrains the rights of all Americans to homophobia.”

Playing the Victim

Matt Barber:
Anti-bullying programs are an “Alinsky-style, homo-fascist tactic to stifle any dissent.”

Tom McClusky:
Claimed that President Obama’s efforts on preventing bullying push religious student “in the closet.”

Shawn Akers:
Called bullying prevention efforts “a form of indoctrination and reeducation that smacks of socialist and communist countries.”

Brian Camenker:
“Homosexual activists” represent “a very aggressive, fascist type of movement and these guys define the term ‘bullies.’”

Blaming the Victims

Linda Harvey:
Said that LGBT students feel “utterly hopeless” after undergoing a process of “cruel sexual manipulation.”

Matt Barber:
Said gay youth commit suicide because they intuitively know what they are doing is “immoral.”

Bryan Fischer:
Said encouraging LGBT students to come out “would be just like an adult encouraging a young student to experiment with injection drug abuse.”

Day of Dialogue:
Program started by Focus on the Family because “students who oppose gay rights face a ‘discouraging’ environment and ‘one-sided’ views on sexual orientation.”

California teacher “drew an ‘S’ on a student’s hand and repeatedly referred to a student, who was wearing a T-shirt that said ‘Gay is Good,’ as a ‘sissy’ throughout class.”
classroom, I guarantee you they are getting homosexual indoctrination. I don’t care whether you’re in a rural area or not, because this is so much a part of textbooks, so much a part of curricular stuff, so much a part of what goes on with other kids.”

Linda Harvey, a radio personality who leads the organization Mission America, frequently condemns the “brainwashing of young people” and asserts that President Obama and gay rights advocates are “hiding a depraved agenda behind the bullying issue.” Harvey is a noted supporter of discredited “reparative therapy” for gays and lesbians. She believes “young people who have homosexual feelings are really in need of heterosexual friends” and calls on parents to “separate your child” from their gay and lesbian friends.

The “Special Rights” Smear

Just as dangerous as the indoctrination myth is the false claim that anti-bullying programs are schemes to give LGBT youth “special rights” over their peers.

Religious Right groups falsely describe measures from workplace protections to health insurance benefits for gays and lesbians as “special rights,” even though they simply attempt to end discriminatory policies. Now, the right-wing is deploying the same illogical argument against bullying prevention efforts.

According to Focus on the Family’s Candi Cushman, addressing anti-gay bullying will ultimately lead to “reverse discrimination”

Most bullying prevention programs consider a variety of reasons for bias and harassment in school: for example, discrimination due to a student’s race, age, gender, religion, or physical and mental abilities. When Religious Right activists deride “special rights” or “special protections,” they try to make gay students appear more powerful than others, including their bullies. Their real objective is to drive teachers, school officials and policymakers to intentionally ignore the problem of bullying against gay and gay-perceived students and create or maintain a policy of inaction.

Focus on the Family’s Cushman slams anti-bullying policies as “policies that single out certain characteristics for special protections,” calling them “counterproductive.” According to Cushman, addressing anti-gay bullying will ultimately lead to “reverse discrimination.”

Listing certain categories creates a system ripe for reverse discrimination, sending the message that certain characteristics are more worthy of protection than others. Instead of bringing more peace and unity, this can politicize the school environment and introduce divisiveness among different groups of students and parents.

Why not emphasize instead the things we have in common as Americans? For example, we can unite around the teachings of our Founding Fathers—in particular, the principle that all men are created equal and that they are endowed with unalienable rights.

Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, alleges that safe schools initiatives create “inequity” by “promoting homosexuality,” and Sprigg of the FRC acknowledges that while such programs recognize many characteristics that play a role in bullying, he only finds “sexual orientation” to be a problematic “special protection.”

Writes Sprigg in Homosexuality in Your School: “singling out
‘sexual orientation’ for special protection (along with the usual categories of ‘race, color, national origin, sex, and disability’) is illogical. The latter qualities are usually inborn, involuntary, immutable, and innocuous—one of which is true of homosexual behavior, despite the claims of its advocates.”

Religious Right groups consistently employ such rhetoric while campaigning against anti-bullying laws. The Liberty Institute, a far-right Texas organization, blasted a state bullying prevention bill, saying, “It’s about gay rights. Its intent is to create special categories and special rights.” The Texas Eagle Forum similarly stated that anti-bullying legislation would “grant special rights and protections to homosexuals.” In Kentucky, the AFA opposed a bullying prevention bill, claiming that “the homosexual movement” was trying to get the government to “recognize them as a special group with special protections.”

The erroneous “special rights” rhetoric is all about trying to make some of the most vulnerable, marginalized and victimized students appear to be repressing others—primarily, the Religious Right.

Playing the Victim

The Religious Right’s campaign against bullying utilizes an upside-down version of reality where the bullied are the bullies. Just as right-wing activists falsely predicted that hate crimes laws would lead to the arrest, prosecution and imprisonment of people of faith and the criminalization of religion, now they say that anti-bullying programs will force religious students out of schools.

Tom McClusky, FRC’s Vice President of Government Affairs, audaciously claimed that President Obama’s efforts on preventing bullying push religious students “in the closet,” saying the President’s efforts will lead to “bullying by the federal government and by a homosexual agenda that seeks to make children hide their Christianity and their religion in the closet and to silence those who would speak out against what they don’t believe.” Cushman of Focus on the Family even implied that groups like GLSEN want school sports teams to “ban athletes using their freedom of speech to voluntarily share the Gospel with those who disagree with their viewpoint.” Matt Barber, Liberty Counsel’s Director of Cultural Affairs, who is also an Associate Dean of the Liberty University School of Law, recently said that anti-bullying programs are an “Alinsky-style, homo-fascist tactic to stifle any dissent.” Shawn Akers, the Public Policy Analyst for Liberty Counsel and a professor at Liberty University, agreed, and called bullying prevention efforts “a form of indoctrination and reeducation that smacks of socialist and communist countries.”

Brian Camenker, the head of the anti-gay group MassResistance, said on David Barton’s radio show that “homosexual activists” represent “a very aggressive, fascist type of movement and these guys define the term ‘bullies.’” The Protect Kids Foundation even argues that anti-bullying efforts will “homosexualize” children and “trample” on the civil rights of heterosexuals:

The civil rights issue actually runs in favor of the estimated 96% of the population who are not homosexual. Having LGBT activists homosexualize their children will trample upon their civil rights. For the first time in our history, America is faced with a powerful movement that defines its alleged “rights” in terms of the deprivation of the fundamental rights of others. As a result, the homosexual movement is depriving other Americans of civil liberties guaranteed by the Bill of Rights.
After Illinois Gov. Pat Quinn signed a law that addressed bullying based on “race, color, religion, sex, national origin, ancestry, age, marital status, physical or mental disability, military status, sexual orientation, [and] gender-related identity or expression,” the Illinois Family Institute cried that the inclusion of ‘sexual orientation’ and ‘gender identity’ in anti-bullying programs will allow “homosexualists to use them as cultural battering rams to destroy First Amendment speech and religious protections” in order to “censor the expression of traditional moral beliefs and ultimately eradicate them.”

When the Religious Right isn’t trying to distort reality by claiming that anti-bullying programs are meant to hurt instead of help students, they allege that supporters of gay rights and gay students themselves are responsible for bullying and anti-gay violence.

**Blaming the Victims**

In one of the crudest aspects of the Religious Right’s desperate efforts to block schools from putting anti-bullying programs in place, many right-wing activists are suggesting that the LGBT community should be blamed for bullying. Their stigmatizing and demonizing rhetoric only exacerbates problems by making bullies feel justified when they torment their gay peers while pushing gay youth on a path of shame, depression and self-hatred.

AFA’s Bryan Fischer blames LGBT suicides on gays and lesbians who allegedly “recruit” students through “brainwashing” in school. “I’m suggesting that adults that pressure these students to declare a disordered sexual preference when they are too young to know better, that they share some culpability for those who take their life,” Fischer explains, “it would be just like an adult encouraging a young student to experiment with injection drug abuse.”

Barber of Liberty Counsel maintains that gay youth commit suicide because they intuitively know what they are doing is “immoral.” Barber claimed: “Kids who are engaging in homosexual behavior often look inward and know that what they are doing is unnatural, is wrong, is immoral, and so they become depressed and the instances of suicide can rise.”

FRC’s Perkins wrote in the Washington Post that gay rights groups are “exploiting [youth suicide] tragedies to push their agenda.” He said that the gay rights community is to blame for cases of suicide among gay teenagers, rather than the people who condemn and attack them:

Some homosexuals may recognize intuitively that their same-sex attractions are abnormal--yet they have been told by the homosexual movement, and their allies in the media and the educational establishment, that they are ‘born gay’ and can never change. This--and not society’s disapproval--may create a sense of despair that can lead to suicide.

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Matt Barber, Liberty Counsel

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Like Perkins, Barb Anderson of the Minnesota Family Council suggested that safe school organizations such as GLSEN “are creating an environment where these children that are sexually confused suddenly become affirmed as a homosexual or that they are born that way, and then these kids are locked into a lifestyle with their choices limited, and many times this can be disastrous to them as they get into the behavior which leads to disease and death in some cases.”

Linda Harvey of Mission America said that LGBT students feel “utterly hopeless” after undergoing a process of “cruel sexual manipulation.” “As the supporters of homosexuality nudge kids into a known risky behavior,” Harvey said, “they simultaneously suppress, marginalize or mischaracterize traditional views that discourage homosexuality.”

Proponents of discredited ex-gay “reparative” therapy believe that rather than addressing anti-gay bullying, schools and society should stop tolerating and affirming LGBT students and instead encourage them to alter their sexual orientation.

Focus on the Family’s True Tolerance campaign launched what it calls a “Day of Dialogue” to challenge GLSEN’s April 15 “Day of Silence,” an existing program designed to allow students to bring awareness to the issue of bullying targeting gay and lesbian students. On the “Day of Dialogue,” taking place on April 18, Focus encourages high school and college students to speak to their peers about their opposition to gay rights. According to Jim Daly, head of Focus on the Family, the Day of Dialogue is needed because students who oppose gay rights face a “discouraging” environment and “one-sided” views on sexual orientation.

The Day of Dialogue is the successor to the “Day of Truth,” which was founded by the Alliance Defense Fund and then led by the “ex-gay” ministry Exodus International. One of the Day of Dialogue’s top coordinators is Jeff Johnston, a prominent “ex-gay” activist and past director of Exodus, who sees the Day of Dialogue as an opportunity to encourage students to help those who are “messed up sexually” and for gay students to take “the road out of homosexuality.”

**Conclusion**

Identifying, addressing and tackling the problem of anti-gay bullying is an essential part of any bullying prevention program. The Religious Right’s staunch opposition to comprehensive anti-bullying programs is symptomatic of the movement’s opposition to any recognition of the rights and dignity of LGBT people. The movement’s efforts to block anti-bullying programs by perpetuating groundless myths of indoctrination, special rights and reparative therapy should be rejected by school officials and other policymakers.

Ignoring the clear signs of bullying directed towards gay and gay-perceived students does more than perpetuate the problem and lend undeserved credibility to Religious Right attacks on LGBT people and their allies. It undermines the creation of safe and welcoming schools and puts the well-being and the very lives of American students at risk.

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The Indoctrination Myth

Since directly promoting homosexual lifestyles to children is too controversial, LGBT activists hide their agenda behind the “safe schools” and “anti-bullying” curricula.” – Protect Kids Foundation

“Unless you’re willing to monitor what’s going on in that classroom, I guarantee you they are getting homosexual indoctrination.”
– David Barton, WallBuilders

“They started introducing homosexuality lessons…in the name of things like ‘tolerance’ or under the cover of so-called ‘safe school initiatives’ or even ‘anti-bullying’ programs.” – Candi Cushman, Focus on the Family

“Most people say ‘Oh, great! We’re teaching our children not to bully each other’ -- which is a good thing. But it’s being used instead to push the homosexual message.” – Rebecca Burgoyne, California Family Council/Focus on the Family

The "Special Rights" Smear

“By issuing a “protected class” status for homosexual students, the homosexual movement seeks to communicate homosexuality as an acceptable alternative to school children and recognize them as a special group with special protections.”
– American Family Association, Kentucky Chapter

Playing the Victim

“The civil rights issue actually runs in favor of the estimated 96% of the population who are not homosexual. Having LGBT activists homosexualize their children will trample upon their civil rights.” – Protect Kids Foundation

“It’s ironic that when the President was trying to push this bullying program that he cited that he was once bullied as a child, because that’s exactly what his policies are leading to, is bullying by the federal government and by a homosexual agenda that seeks to make children hide their Christianity and their religion in the closet and to silence those who would speak out against what they don’t believe.” – Tom McClusky, Family Research Council

“The inclusion of [sexual orientation and gender identity] in anti-bullying policies and legislation allows homosexualists to use them as cultural battering rams to destroy First Amendment speech and religious protections.” – Illinois Family Institute

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