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Creating an Inclusive School Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students

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Creating an Inclusive School Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students

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A Capstone Project submitted in partial fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Master of Science Degree in

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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

CAPSTONE PROJECT

Creating an Inclusive School Climate for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Students

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

Tosha Farrell

Has been approved by the faculty advisor and the CE 695 – Capstone Project

Course Instructor in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the

Master of Science Degree in

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Review of Literature	1
LGBT Youth and Mental Health.....	1
LGBT Curriculum.....	3
LGBT Programs	5
Gay-straight alliances.	5
Safe space training.....	6
Anti-Discrimination Laws and Policies	7
The influence of school.	9
Other Interventions.....	10
Two School Districts in Minnesota.....	11
Independent School District 196, Minnesota.	11
Anoka-Hennepin School District, Minnesota.....	12
Student interview.....	14
Limitations to Implementation.....	16
Conclusion	16
References	18

Introduction

In a study completed in 2009, only 88 out of 400 school districts surveyed showed support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students (Rienzo, Button, Sheu, & Li, 2006). Some of this may be due to a lack of support by society, family, and friends, or a lack of advocacy in school for support services for the LGBT population. There are many ways in which a school can contribute to supporting LGBT youth. These ways include, but are not limited to, education about sexual orientation for students, faculty, parents, school board members, and the community, support groups for LGBT students, gay-straight student alliances, counseling services for LGBT youth, policies that enforce strict anti-LGBT language and behavior, and policies that prohibit discrimination against LGBT in hiring and promotion of faculty (Rienzo et al., 2006). Support in the schools for all students, especially sexual minority youth, is imperative. Without it, students' personal, social, and academic lives may suffer.

Review of Literature

LGBT Youth and Mental Health

LGBT youth face many additional stressors throughout adolescence. Therefore, according to Hansen (2007), LGBT students may experience feelings of depression, anxiety, fear, low self-esteem, self-blame, and even Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Students may also harm themselves, use illegal substances, have suicidal ideation, or attempt suicide (Weiler, 2003). Although it is not possible to gather statistics on suicides completed by only LGBT youth (National Institute of Mental Health, 1999), it is possible to look at the likelihood based on attempts. It has been reported by multiple sources that gay and lesbian youth are between two and four times as likely to attempt suicide compared to heterosexual youth (Weiler, 2003; Macgillivray, 2000; CDC, 2011).

These feelings and actions may come about after acts of verbal, physical, or sexual harassment at school. In a climate survey done in 2001 by the Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), nearly 83 percent of LGBT students experienced some type of harassment and assault at school. This number is a significantly higher rate than for heterosexual students. The Human Rights Campaign (2014a) reported that LGBT youth are twice as likely to experience verbal or physical harassment at school as compared to non-LGBT youth. Fifty-one percent of LGBT students testified of being verbally harassed, 48 percent of students recall being excluded, and 17 percent have been physically attacked, all while being present at school (Human Rights Campaign, 2014a). More specific acts of school violence include being urinated and ejaculated on, being attacked with weapons, receiving death threats, having their clothes pulled off, and being gang raped (Weiler, 2003).

Being a student and focusing on school is hard enough as it is. The challenge becomes even more difficult when the student is trying to figure out a social identity and sexual orientation. It is important for adolescents to feel accepted and supported in both their family and circle of friends. It can be especially difficult for LGBT youth to be open and honest with those around them because of their identity. Some live in fear of being misunderstood, rejected (Weiler, 2003), or isolated if they come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender (D'Augelli & Hershberger, 1993). They will prolong telling anyone which allows for discrimination or bullying, if present, to continue. While some families may be supportive, others may become very hostile. Remafedi (1987) reported that 26 percent of gay and lesbian youth are forced to leave home because of conflicts with their families about their sexual orientation.

All students should feel safe and comfortable within their school. As a result of discrimination at school, LGBT students may begin to skip classes, allow their grades to decline, or stop attending school altogether (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1995; Human Rights Campaign, 2014). In a survey of more than 4,000 students, gay males and lesbians were five times more likely than their heterosexual peers to skip school out of fear for their safety (Massachusetts Department of Education, 1995). When LGBT students were asked about their concerns at school, they identified family rejection, bullying, and fear of being “outed” as their top three, whereas non-LGBT students identified academic success, college acceptance/career success, and financial pressures as their top three (Human Rights Campaign, 2014a). It is clear that the issues students face in schools are not the same from one adolescent to the next. The presence or lack of interventions described in this paper could tremendously impact a LGBT student’s high school experience. If schools implement LGBT curriculum, LGBT programming, and anti-discrimination laws and policies, LGBT students may feel safer in schools. School Counselors can support LGBT students by ensuring that inclusive curriculum, programming, and policies are a part of each school’s comprehensive school counseling program.

LGBT Curriculum

The first type of intervention that could be implemented in schools to create a positive school climate is education on the LGBT population. According to the 2005 National School Climate Survey, 81 percent of students reported never having been taught about LGBT history, people, or events in school (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). Curriculum about sexual orientation does not, and should not, be solely about physical interactions; it entails much more. Educators who are molding young minds should support LGBT students as best they can by teaching others about the issues they face. This does not mean that educators should teach morality, however,

they should give students the opportunity to discuss their points-of-view. Sexuality, sexual orientation, and different family structures are important topics to discuss in schools. It is also important to realize that a stereotypical family from the 1950's consisted of a father, mother, and children; whereas today, a family may consist of single parents, step-parents, same-sex parents, grandparents raising grandchildren, or siblings raising siblings (Etuk, 2008).

In addition to teaching basic sexual health, the Future of Sex Education Initiative (2012) describes the National Sexuality Education Standards which are a set of guidelines that educators are expected to follow when teaching students about sexuality and sexual orientation. They are broken into four different grade levels and span over seven sexuality topics, including, but not limited to, "puberty/development, pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases and safety within relationships" (p.10). These topics are then further organized into sub-topics detailing concepts that students should understand by the end of a given grade level (Future of Sex Education Initiative, 2012). Even with these guidelines, only 9 out of 50 states in the US include sexual orientation curriculum within health classes (Guttmacher Institute, 2012). According to an article by Rienzo et al. (2006), the authors write describe that "Only 39% of school districts offered any education about sexual orientation. Where such curriculum existed, it was most commonly offered only through nonrequired health education classes at the high school level and amounted to less than 5 hours of instruction" (p. 94).

There are two limitations when it comes to educating students about LGBT individuals and issues. One article stated that while funding for sex education exists, how states and districts use that funding is unregulated; therefore, sexual orientation education may or may not be a part of the high school curriculum (Hamilton, Sanders, & Anderman, 2013). While seven states expect inclusivity to be a part of the sex education curriculum, another article stated that seven

states currently have legislation in place that prohibits schools from positively portraying LGBT individuals or activities (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). Therefore, many states have a long way to go before sexual orientation is a part of each school district's curriculum.

LGBT Programs

Gay-straight alliances. The second intervention that assists LGBT students in feeling welcome in school is the creation and implementation of supportive programs. One program that many schools have created as a student club or organization is a gay-straight alliance (GSA). Currently, there are 4,000 gay-straight alliances in the United States (Currie, Mayberry, & Chenneville, 2012). A gay-straight alliance is a student-led group that meets on a weekly or monthly basis, as well as for special events in which the group participates. At its core, a GSA is a support group for individuals who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender, and individuals who are straight allies. They discuss issues that relate to the LGBT community and fight to end homophobia and transphobia. They also promote activism in the school and participate in national campaigns to raise awareness about LGBT issues (GSA Network, 2009).

By creating social cohesion, students will feel safe and comfortable and have a peer support network. Many students look forward to GSA meetings because they feel a sense of camaraderie, especially those students who skip classes because of how they feel or are treated in school. As I was researching for this capstone, I interviewed several individuals who identified as LGBT. One individual shared their thoughts on GSA's:

It was nice to have a group of individuals that I could freely relate to and would not question me as a person and who I chose to be with. It brought everyone closer with

another type of connection and being able to be themselves without worry of judgment (N. S., personal communication, August 25, 2014).

Szalacha (2003) found that homophobic comments and hate speech were reported much less frequently in schools with GSA's than in schools without them. Researchers also found that LGBT students were less likely to cut classes (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006), showed higher GPAs, and had a better overall sense of belonging in schools where GSA's and supportive teachers were present than in schools where they are not (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Szalacha, 2003). Schools with GSA's demonstrated better relationships among students with both adults and peers, allowed students to develop a sense of pride, and decreased harassment (Lee, 2001).

One constraint of gay-straight alliances is that the problem is framed around LGBT students (Currie et al., 2012). Although GSA's seem positive in a broad view and students generally respond positively to them, Currie et al. (2012) suggests there may be some students who feel separated from other students. The focus needs to shift to what the school can do as a whole to ensure that all students feel safe and welcome in their school environment; more specifically, to challenge the heterosexist culture. Currie et al. (2012) suggested three ways to make a change in schools. These methods include education and discussion in the classroom, enforcing negative consequences for discrimination towards LGBT individuals (instead of silence), and extending the support network outside of school and into the community by having other groups, such as Parents, Families & Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG), advocating for LGBT students.

Safe Space training. Another way to provide positive programming for LGBT students is for school counselors to support the adherence of anti-discrimination policies by presenting

lessons to both staff and students on basic social skills and how to treat others. They could also encourage the school and students to participate in Coming Out Week or Safe Space training, which are two events that show support for LGBT students. Safe Space is a program created by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN). In 2010, they launched the Safe Space Campaign which aimed to ensure that every school is a safe and respectful place where students can thrive. By 2013, the Safe Space Kit was sent to every middle and high school in the country to support educators and LGBT students. Each Safe Space Kit included a 42-page *Guide to Being an Ally to LGBT Students*, 10 Safe Space stickers, and 2 posters. By placing a sticker or poster in a classroom or office, it signifies that the location is a safe place and that support is there. A student's safety should be of the utmost important and by making the Safe Space stickers and posters visible, students will know that their safety will not be compromised (Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2014).

Anti-Discrimination Laws and Policies

The third method of intervention to create a more inclusive school climate for LGBT students is to set and strictly enforce anti-discrimination and anti-bullying policies. According to GLSEN, there are two distinct types of laws that protect LGBT students in schools. The first type focuses on fully enumerated anti-bullying laws. These are laws that specifically prohibit bullying and harassment of students based on sexual orientation and gender identity (Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2014). In May of 2014, only 19 out of the 51 United States (including DC) enforced fully enumerated anti-bullying laws. These states included: Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oregon,

Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington. Many other states prohibit bullying in schools; however, they do not have specific categories of protection (Human Rights Campaign, 2014b).

The second type includes non-discrimination laws, which provide protection from discrimination to LGBT students in schools. These laws can protect students on the basis of either sexual orientation alone or both sexual orientation and gender identity together. States that hold laws that protect on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity include: California, Colorado, Connecticut, District of Columbia, Illinois, Iowa, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington. Wisconsin is the only state to protect students solely on the basis of sexual orientation (Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2014).

When examining which states have implemented some type of law, 20 states enforce either of the first two types aforementioned while 21 states have no laws in place. This leaves 10 states unaccounted for. Although these laws are meant to protect students, there are some that may harm LGBT students. The laws are referred to by GLSEN (2014) as “no promo homo” laws, which are local or state education laws that prohibit teachers from discussing gay and transgender issues (including sexual health and HIV/AIDS awareness) or require them to portray LGBT people in a negative or inaccurate way. These laws stigmatize LGBT students by providing K-12 students false, misleading, or incomplete information about the LGBT population. States that enforce these types of laws include: Alabama, Arizona, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah. Finally, there are state laws that prevent bullying and harassment, but prohibit local school districts from having enumerated anti-bullying policies. The two states which hold these laws include Missouri and South Dakota (Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network, 2014).

The influence of school. Though the number of policies has increased in the last twenty years, they are useless if school administrators and faculty do not uphold them (American Association of University Women, 2001). Though hate speech such as racial, religious, or ethnic slurs is taught to be intolerable, homophobic name-calling and anti-gay taunts, such as “fag” or “you’re so gay,” are often tolerated by adults (Weiler, 2003). If school policies included verbal or physical harassment and bullying based on factors such as one’s sexual orientation and gender (Russell, McGuire, Laub, & Manke, 2006), in addition to one’s sex, race, culture, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, school administration could have stronger influence over the faculty and other school personnel employed within their organization.

Another key recommendation for these policies is to ensure that they are clearly written and visible within the schools (Hansen, 2007) to establish a climate of support within the school. The results of the 2005 National School Climate Survey showed that nearly 64 percent of students felt unsafe in their schools due to their sexual orientation (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006). According to Kosciw (2004), students were more likely to report incidents of discrimination if they thought their school enforced an anti-discrimination policy; however, Kosciw and Diaz (2006) recounted that approximately 59 percent of students surveyed in 2005 did not report the incidents to school authorities. Heck, Flentje, and Cochran (2011) suggested that teachers include the school’s anti-discrimination policy in the syllabus that they hand out at the beginning of each term or semester and spend a good amount of time discussing it with students. As the American Association of University Women (2001) said, the policies are of no use unless it is made very clear that any negative behavior will not be tolerated.

Other Interventions

Other interventions not mentioned above that would also support the LGBT population in a school include counseling services and training for teachers, counselors and school staff members in crisis intervention, violence prevention, and the issues and concerns of LGBT+ students (McFarland, 2001). Black and Underwood (1998) suggest that school counselors coordinate staff development strategies to advocate for LGBT youth. This could include: a) annual presentations about gay and lesbian youth for all teachers, b) expert speaker presentations and panels to speak with teachers and other faculty, c) facilitated discussions of homophobia and its effects on all students, and d) regular resource distribution for staff who have a difficult time overcoming their homophobia and prejudice (Black & Underwood, 1998). While Safe Space training was discussed, faculty and staff should also be trained in how to assist students when they have questions related to LGBT health, employment/career opportunities, personal/social needs, etc. The school should also participate in a bullying prevention program to support all students inclusively.

Finally, in an article discussing the legal duty to protect students from violence in school, the author suggested nine additional ways for creating an inclusive environment for LGBT students (McFarland, 2001). These suggestions include:

use inclusive language, challenge anti-gay epithets, designate resource people in the schools for gay and lesbian students, make resources and materials on homosexuality visible and accessible, educate staff members of homophobia, support gay and lesbian colleagues, use gay and lesbian colleagues as role models, refer self-identified gay and lesbian students to appropriate services, and refer parents of gay children to organizations

such as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (Strategies to Provide Safe Schools section, para. 1).

Two School Districts in Minnesota

In reviewing the literature for this capstone project, two school districts in the state of Minnesota were more closely examined. The following information was gathered for the purpose of this paper. In addition, the author interviewed a student that identifies as LGBT.

Independent School District 196, Minnesota. In Independent School District 196, there are policies against illegal harassment, discrimination, violence, and hazing. These policies include many items but a few to note include name-calling, unwelcome touching of body or clothing, bullying or intimidation, and other words or actions demeaning or hostile. In the document that outlines these policies, each area addresses sex, race, religion, color, creed, national origin, marital status, disability, status regard to public assistance, sexual orientation, age, and membership or activity in a local human rights commission as bases of violating the policies. The document goes on to describe that all reports of illegal activity are taken seriously and appropriate action will be taken based on the report. Finally, the district disclaims that privacy will be respected as much as possible and further action will be taken if anyone tries to intimidate or harm the reporter (Independent School District 196, 2009).

During the past two months, the author carried out her practicum experience at Eagan High School (EHS). This served as a credible source for gathering information on a given school within a district in regards to their support for LGBT individuals. According to the Eagan Independent website, “There have been multiple attempts to start a GSA Club [at Eagan High School] in the past, most of which have failed to result in a long-lasting club. However, the current GSA group was started last spring and is still standing strong” (Noethe, 2014). While it

can be difficult to create and maintain a club that could potentially have stigma around it, having strong student leaders and faculty advisors that are the driving force behind the club is necessary. In the author's practicum experience, she was able to talk to one school counselor at Eagan High School about the administration's feelings of LGBT inclusivity and the role of a GSA at EHS. While the school is fairly welcoming of all students, the administration stresses that a GSA must be student-led and only have a faculty member as their advisor. In the same conversation, it was confirmed that the Gay Straight Alliance club at EHS has struggled to maintain a strong following for several reasons. The counselor felt that the biggest hindrance to having a successful GSA falls on the lack of students to lead the group. In the past, she explained that the club has turned into a social-emotional "chatty" group and less of an advocacy and alliance group.

Finally, this author wanted to know: "Since the school's GSA was unsuccessful, how else the school has been supporting LGBT individuals?" The counselor shared that many faculty members were Safe Space supporters and displayed the GLSEN provided rainbow sticker proudly. She also credited the school's openness to the amount of support the principal shows, particularly to the arts. Here, the counselor suggested that that arts seem to be correlated with LGBT individuals in EHS (S. O., personal communication, December 1, 2014).

Anoka-Hennepin School District, Minnesota. Between 2009 and 2011, the Anoka-Hennepin School District experienced eight student suicides. While only two of the students were known to be gay, parents, teachers, and former friends confirmed that at least four of them identified as LGBT and faced ongoing harassment. Several of these students were shoved, taunted, and threatened, all while teachers looked the other way (Eckholm, 2011).

A Pennsylvania film-director by the name of Josh Sweeny is creating a documentary entitled *Same Difference* that chronicles the student suicides in the Anoka-Hennepin district. As he was flying to Minnesota to meet the family of one of the students who had committed suicide, he picked up a magazine which had an article on the story of the Anoka-Hennepin School District (Alveshere, 2014). In the article, Olivia Alveshere (2014) describes the district's "neutrality" policy on sexual orientation curriculum that asked for teachers to "remain neutral on matters regarding sexual orientation but not limited to student-led discussions." The author goes on to report that the policy was repealed just over a week after the article went to the press (Alveshere, 2014).

In researching further on what the policy currently states, recommendations are in place and progress is slowly being made. According to the Anoka-Hennepin Anti-Bullying/Anti-Harassment Task Force Report from 2013-2014, a task force comprised of students, district employees, parents, and additional community members was created in 2012 following a federal lawsuit regarding bullying and harassment of LGBT students that began in 2011. The lawsuit required the district to outline a five-year plan of action and monitoring, as well as to form a community task force. One of the recommendations outlined in the report is to "honor and celebrate the contributions of diverse people and families in our community, country, and world, including the LGBT community" (Anoka-Hennepin Schools, p. 5). More specifically, the district aims to "recognize, affirm, and assess specific LGBT activities including, but not limited to, continuing support student-led Gay Straight Alliance clubs; hosting school-related family nights for our diverse populations, including LGBT families and LGBT students and their parents; and creating public displays honoring LGBT history month each October beginning in 2014" (Anoka-Hennepin Schools, 2014, p. 5).

The Task Force Report mentioned several updated statistics once the action plan had begun. The percentage of students who felt that bullying is the most serious issue that the district is facing decreased from 12 to 10 percent. One statistic that is quite alarming is that while the most students report never being bullied, approximately two percent report being bullied on a daily basis. The number of students who report bullying to an adult also dropped (Anoka-Hennepin Schools, 2014). For a district that has seen eight student suicides in a two year-span, it would appear as though bullying happens much more often than is being reported. It is possible that the district is truly making an effort to create a more welcoming environment for all students, but it is unfortunate that it took several student deaths to put such a strong policy into place.

Student interview. This author wanted to highlight an individual that they know personally who has experienced growing up in schools as someone who identifies as LGBT. The author interviewed a student who attended and graduated in 2007 from a high school in Minnesota. An excerpt from that interview is below. This student is currently working in Oregon. All other identifying information has been removed for confidentiality before the quotation.

I went to elementary school and part of middle school in Ohio, and there were absolutely no resources for queer students, and I am pretty sure that the high school where I grew up also lacked in queer resources, but I know that there were a couple of people that my sister went to school with (she's older) that were queer [who] didn't come out until after high school. I think that was more of a product of the area that we grew up in because it is on the outskirts of the "Bible Belt." Needless to say, that puts all sorts of unneeded stress and fear into the lives of young queer people. [After I moved to Minnesota in 7th

grade], there was no official GSA/Queer resource center but there were definitely a handful of teachers that provided safe spaces for people who identified as anything other than straight/cisgender. That made all of the difference to me. Even though there wasn't a group of other students that got together to talk about these issues, these teachers taught acceptance and provided a place to go and talk issues out that I may or may not have been comfortable discussing with parents or friends. [At my high school, there was a GSA]. It wasn't very helpful at all. Pretty sure it was student run, and it seemed that the school wasn't exactly behind them. The only awareness thing they did was the day of silence which just turned into a shit show every year that they did it. But then again, there were a few teachers that created safe spaces where students could go talk. Most of the resources I had come from outside of the school, but that really sucked sometimes. I think that if schools tried harder to provide support for queer students, there would be far fewer young people having incredibly negative high school experiences. I came out early in high school as lesbian, then a little later as just queer with nothing taking preference over anything else. Then when I was 20, I came out as transgender (trans-masculine). I haven't been involved directly with any of the GSAs or Queer Resource Centers in college, but they do provide a lot of useful information on finding queer-friendly healthcare around town. The QRC at my school here [in Oregon] just started a project to create a more trans-inclusive school, focusing first on bathroom policies and gender neutral bathrooms and also working to make the school's administrative policies more trans-inclusive, which has done a lot for that school in just the last year (S. H., personal communication, August 25, 2014).

Limitations to Implementation

Schools counselors may face a variety of barriers when it comes to implementing a supportive plan of action to include all students. When surveying the needs of students, geographical location of schools, diversity (or lack) of students, and expected response rates due to students not being “out” or fear of further discrimination need to be addressed (Hanson, 2007). In addition, Rienzo et al. (2006) reported that faculty members may be hesitant to participate in policies or activities because they fear that being involved with a controversial topic in education may be detrimental to their career. To reduce these barriers, it is important to have an administrator that will enforce the policies set forth and hold anyone, students or faculty, who violates them accountable (American Association of University Women, 2001). It is also important to create unity and camaraderie among both the faculty and students (GSA Network, 2009). If educators shed positive light on LGBT-related activities instead of making LGBT individuals feel like outcasts (Currie et al., 2012), students will come together as one instead of bullying others who are different. By promoting positive programs and policies, schools will become, as one high school senior Amanda Schlesinger said, “a place where acceptance and openness can become universal values” (Rienzo et al., 2006, p. 97).

Conclusion

Previous research has showed that inclusive curriculum, programs, and policies generally show positive outcomes for LGBT students in the schools (Szalacha, 2003; Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Lee, 2001; Lehr & Christenson, 2002). When schools have an inclusive curriculum, gay-straight alliances are present, and anti-discrimination policies are enforced, students are less likely to experience homophobic comments or hate speech (Szalacha, 2003), less likely to skip classes (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006), have higher GPAs and a better overall sense of belonging in

schools (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006; Szalacha, 2003) have better relationships among students with both adults and peers (Lee, 2001), have higher rates of achievement, more positive feelings of self-concept, and have fewer absences (Lehr & Christenson, 2002). Therefore, it is important for school counselors to advocate for systematic implementation of the recommendations suggested in this paper to potentially decrease negative student outcomes, and increase student attendance, achievement and interpersonal relationships for all students attending school.

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