

## Bow Valley's Queer-Straight Alliance

**Alberta Education DEFINITION:** "Gay-straight student alliances or queer-straight student alliances (GSAs or QSAs) are student-run and teacher-supported school-based groups that work to create welcoming, caring, respectful and safe spaces for sexual and gender minority students and their allies in schools."

### WHY is our QSA an important part of ensuring student well-being at our school?

The Alberta Teachers' Association *Guide for Teachers* regarding GSAs and QSAs is a great resource to take a look at the research behind sexual and gender minority educational issues. (\*see pages 12-14 attached)

Our BV QSA student members have established the following goals of our school group:

- to support LGBTQ youth AND their allies
- to offer a place for all people to feel welcome and safe
- to ensure inclusion in our school
- to raise awareness about human diversity in general
- to promote student activism on issues of equality



### How have we been working to accomplish these goals this year?

- **Weekly** – QSA meetings are held every Thursday at lunch
- **October** - Bake Sale – all proceeds going towards Aura Host Homes for LGBTQ youth in Calgary
- **November** – hosted *Fyrefly in Schools* sessions for grade nines - educational initiative developed to help reduce discrimination against sexual and gender minority youth, increase awareness of the impacts of homophobia and transphobia, and create safe and inclusive school environments for all students.
- **December** – members carried out our QSA Christmas Advent to share acts of kindness in the building; created a set of Gender Inclusive Guidelines for Students and Staff
- **January** – "Be Brilliant!" Water Bottle Initiative to launch exam week; hosted a tri-school GSA-QSA Movie Night
- **February** – Button Design Competition in partnership with Calgary GSA Network
- **Upcoming Events and Initiatives** - BV delegates attending the "Make Change Happen" conference hosted by Western Canada High School; May 17<sup>th</sup> – *International Day Against Homophobia and Transphobia*

# Sexual and Gender Minority Educational Issues at a Glance

## Health and Safety Concerns

Research indicates that there are serious consequences for many sexual minority students in our schools, including

- 1) truancy or dropping out,
- 2) drug and alcohol abuse,
- 3) withdrawal from social and school activities,
- 4) running away from home,
- 5) turning to prostitution and/or living on the streets,
- 6) depression, and/or
- 7) increased suicide ideation or suicide attempts.

(Friend 1993, 1998; Ryan and Futterman 1998)

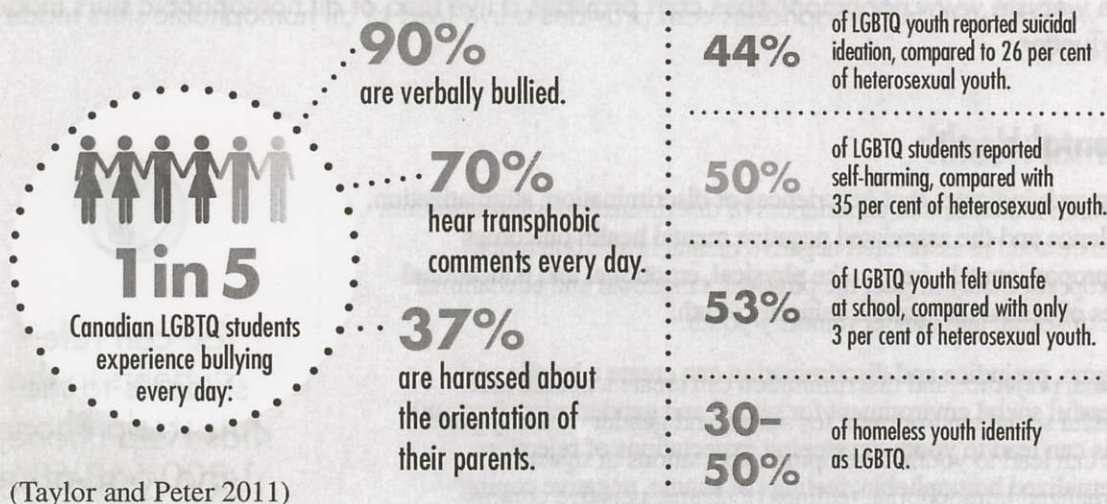
A study of 1,598 adolescents from five high schools in Ontario found that "sexual minority adolescents reported significantly higher rates of bullying and sexual harassment than did heterosexual adolescents."

(Public Health Agency of Canada 2014)

## Homophobia and Harassment

Students may be harassed for being "gay" based on their presumed sexual orientation or not conforming to gender expectations, though the harassers may know nothing of their victims' *actual* sexual orientation or gender identity. The victimized students may not be certain of their

### LGBTQ YOUTH FACE SIGNIFICANT ADVERSITY:

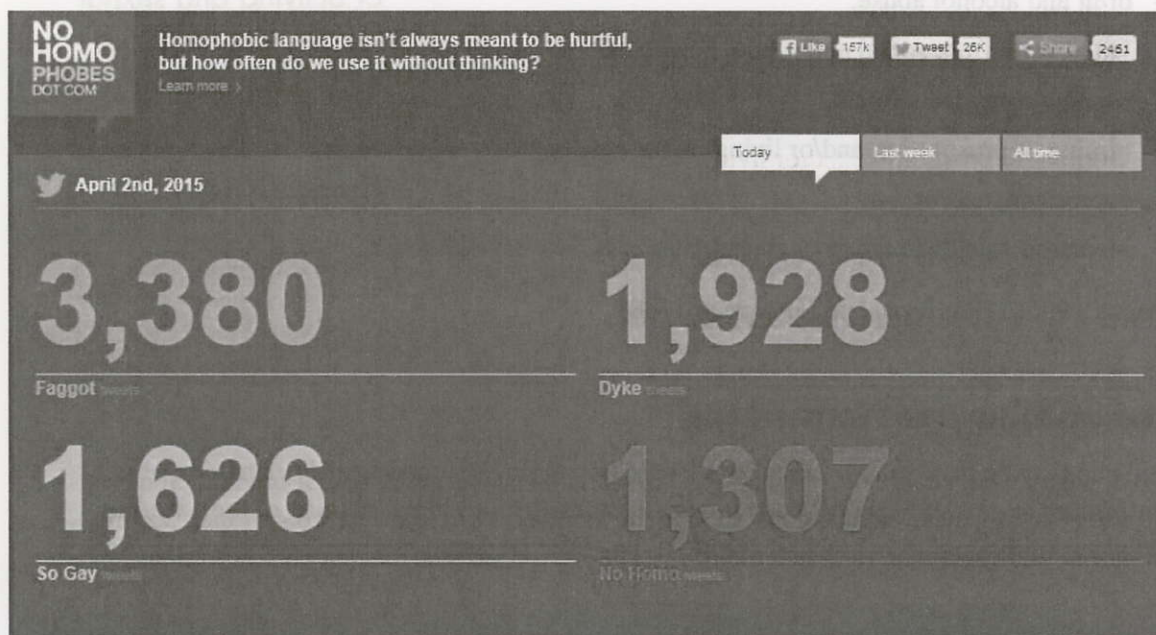




sexual orientation or gender identity themselves. Many students use words like *faggot* and *homo* without a clear understanding of how they may be affecting their peers. Often tolerated in schools, these words are one aspect of homophobic bullying and, if left unchecked, further reinforce the hostility, intolerance and negative perceptions of sexual and gender minorities.

Alberta Education defines *bullying* as a conscious, willful, deliberate, repeated and hostile activity marked by an imbalance of power, intent to harm and/or threat of aggression. It can be verbal (name-calling, put-downs, threats, homophobic bullying, transphobic bullying), social (exclusion, gossip, ganging up), physical (hitting, damaging property) or cyberbullying (using the computer to harass or threaten). It can occur within a peer group or between groups. It can occur at school and in sports (<https://education.alberta.ca/teachers/safeschools/bullying-prevention.aspx>).

The impacts of bullying and cyberbullying on the mental health of youth can be life-long and devastating. Alberta Education has created a number of tipsheets on homophobic and transphobic bullying that can be found at <https://education.alberta.ca>.



The website [www.nohomophobes.com](http://www.nohomophobes.com) provides a live feed of all homophobic slurs made on Twitter.

## Mental Health

Research indicates that experiences of discrimination, stigmatization, violence and the associated negative mental health outcomes disproportionately impact the physical, emotional and educational lives of sexual and gender minority youth.

Stigma, prejudice and discrimination can create a hostile and stressful social environment for sexual and gender minority youth. This can lead to youth developing expectations of rejection, internalized homophobia, feelings of shame, negative coping mechanisms, and hiding their sexual orientation or gender identity.



You can refer students to the Kids Help Phone, 1-800-668-6868

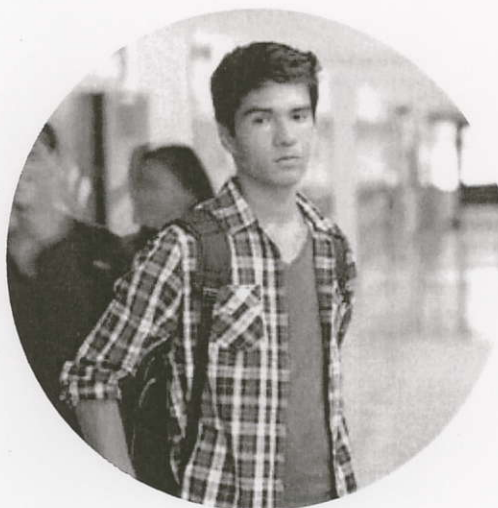
One Canadian study found that lesbian, gay and bisexual youth, when compared to their heterosexual peers, were more likely to

- have had suicidal thoughts and a history of suicide attempts,
- experience greater physical and sexual abuse,
- have higher rates of harassment in school and discrimination in the community,
- have run away from home once or more in the past year,
- be sexually experienced and have either been pregnant or to have gotten someone pregnant,
- be current smokers and have tried alcohol, or used other drugs,
- report higher rates of emotional distress,
- participate less frequently in sports and physical activity,
- report higher levels of computer usage/time, and
- feel less cared about by parents/caregivers and less connected to their families.

(Public Health Agency of Canada 2014)

## Suicide

Research studies focused on adolescent health consistently indicate that suicide is one of the leading causes of death of today's youth. For sexual minority youth, suicide *is* the number-one cause of death. Research identifies that sexual minority youth are 1.5 to 7 times more likely to attempt suicide than their heterosexual peers. Transgender youth are at an even greater risk to die by suicide. In one 2010 study in Ontario, 47 per cent of trans youth had thought about suicide and 19 per cent had attempted suicide in the preceding year (Scanlon et al 2010). Key risk factors for adolescent suicide, in general, include feelings of hopelessness, a history of family dysfunction, sexual abuse, substance abuse, and the recent or attempted suicide of a family member or close friend. In addition to these general risk factors, sexual and gender minority youth also face other risk factors, including younger age of disclosure/ coming out, lack of family acceptance and more frequent interpersonal conflict (such as bullying) regarding their sexuality or gender identity.



Schools that have established GSAs for three years or more show a reduced rate of suicidal ideations and promote mental health in ALL students, not just those who participate in the GSA (UBC study, <http://journals.uvic.ca/index.php/ijcyfs/article/view/12856>).