

# Allies Matter: Creating Safe School Environments for North Carolina's LGBT Youth

## Problem Overview:

In North Carolina, 54% of HIV diagnoses among 13–24 year olds were among young men who have sex with men (YMSM). In addition to increased risk for HIV infection, sexual minority youth also are at greater risk for suicide. According to 2011 Youth Risk Behavior Survey results for the state,

- 14.3% of its high school students seriously considered attempting suicide in the past year.
- 13.5% made a plan about how they would attempt suicide.
- 5% reported attempting suicide that resulted in injury that had to be treated by a doctor or nurse.



Negative attitudes toward lesbians, gays, bisexuals, and transgender (LGBT) youth put these students at increased risk for experiences with violence, compared with other students. Violence can include behaviors such as bullying, teasing, harassment, physical assault, and suicide-related behaviors.

## Program/Activity Description:

The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI)/Healthy Schools program, funded in part through the CDC's Division of Adolescent and School Health, partnered with the NC Division of Public Health/Youth Suicide Prevention program to create a 5-hour "How to be an Ally" training program for school counselors, social workers, teachers, and administrators. The training was designed to teach staff how to create a supportive school environment for sexual and gender minority youth. Studies have shown that the presence of school-based supports—such as supportive staff, safe spaces, gay-sensitive HIV instruction, gay-straight alliances or other student-led clubs for LGBT youth, and protective anti-bullying and anti-harassment policies—are associated with a healthier school environment for LGBT students. These school-based supports also can result in students having a greater feeling of school connectedness, higher GPA, and a reduced likelihood of victimization and suicidal thinking and behavior.

The objectives of the Ally training include —

- describing the experiences of LGBT (and questioning) youth in schools;
- identifying the disproportionate rates of HIV among YMSM;
- examining the high rates of suicides, suicide attempts, and other self-destructive behavior among LGBTQ youth, and practicing behaviors of how to be an ally.

The Ally trainings, funded jointly through the NCDPI and a special grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), open with a video, **Allies Matter**, created specifically for this professional development initiative. The video features North Carolina LGB high school students talking about their experiences in schools and the difference it makes having supportive adult allies. A values-clarification exercise helps participants examine their personal feelings towards homophobia. Participants review how the critical public health issues of HIV and suicide impact youth, and learn more about gay terminology and stereotypes. The workshop also challenges participants to problem-solve difficult scenarios that LGBTQ youth might experience throughout a school day.

## Program/Activity Results:

During the 2011–2012 school year, the training was implemented in six school districts with approximately 100 counselors, social workers, administrators, and teachers in attendance—representing student body enrollments of about 120,000 students. Results from a post-training on-line survey show that, after the training, participants were —

- more aware of the mental and emotional health issues that confront LGBTQ students;
- more appreciative of the need for allies in schools, and
- committed to demonstrating their support as allies by posting “ally” stickers at their offices and classrooms, noting their availability to students to be their allies.

Local TV stations in western North Carolina have promoted the **Allies Matter** video, further raising awareness for addressing bullying of LGBTQ students in schools. Additional success of the Ally training program is evident in the selection of **Allies Matter** by Answer, a Rutgers University-sponsored national organization that provides and promotes access to sexuality education for young people and to the adults who teach them. The video is used in Answer’s online *LGBTQ Issues* workshop for middle and high school health professionals to increase their knowledge of LGBTQ issues and ways to make the school environment more inclusive for all students.

During the 2012–2013 school year, the NC program is working with SAMHSA to conduct six new district “How to be an Ally” trainings—designed to reach about 180 education professionals serving 250,000 students. NCDPI funding also supports scheduling of substitute teachers to enable more classroom educators to participate in these trainings. The North Carolina Injury Prevention Research Center will conduct a formal pre-, post- and 3-month evaluation of these trainings.



*Note: This success story, including background data and outcomes, reflects information as reported by the participating program.*