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"Leadership experts in the K-12 field Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers write about challenges and possibilities for administrators in the 21st century."

## **Gay in Our Schools**

**By Jill Berkowicz and Ann Myers**

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"The Boy Scouts of America have delayed the vote on banning gays" was a **headline** in national print, television and Internet news last week. At the same time, the military repealed "Don't ask. Don't tell." they are still kicking around the idea about whether or not they should extend benefits to same-sex partners. (**USA Today Article**) This public reveal of a societal prejudice allows for voices to be heard and changes to be made. However, this discussion happens in front of our children. Just as in the days when segregation was ending, these children are impacted by the painful language of separation as the struggle continues.

The point is, whatever these organizations decide to do, we have children, teachers and administrators who are gay in our districts. Our role as public school leaders is to create environments in which they belong, contribute and experience success. Yet, in the larger society, we see churches, military and civic organizations debating whether they are even welcome. Whatever our personally held beliefs, we must acknowledge this is the newest form of segregation, based on sexual orientation rather than race, religion or ethnicity. Segregation is a part of our history as a nation. People marched and, yes, died, to end it in its insidious forms at water fountains, lunch counters and schools. But, also, let us remember there were times when the signs read "No Irish Need Apply" or "No Jews or Dogs." Must there always be someone we want to exclude? Are we that fearful or vengeful as a people? We think not.

The biggest challenge for leaders and policy makers is to know our own bias and confront our own ignorance. It is all of our responsibility to look within. Children are involved here. Not just heterosexual children, but questioning children, and yes, gay children. To remain silent and ignore any aspect of diversity in an organization is dangerous. Standing up and accepting and supporting gay students and colleagues is courageous and necessary.

We are living in a time of opposing viewpoints - conservative right, liberal left, for guns, against guns, for higher taxes, against higher taxes, etc. But none of these issues stands alone. We would be much better off as a democracy if we took the time to deconstruct each issue and the many facets attended to each of them. In this case the issues are clear.

- We live in a society that still confronts its bias on the front pages of newspapers and on the internet. It reveals one way we can marginalize a group of people and tweaks our conscience.
- We lead schools filled with children - some gay, some straight, some questioning.
- What we need to do is create the safe and trustworthy environments where all are welcome.
- It is our obligation as public school leaders.