Making Schools Safe for LGBTQ and All Youth:

Lessons from the Contra Costa Safe Schools Coalition

2008

Foreword to the CCSSC Evaluation Series

One of the most populous counties in California, Contra Costa County is a fast-growing community, encompassing 720 square miles — from Richmond in the West to Antioch in the East. Along with population growth has come diversity, including an increasingly visible population of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) youth in the county's schools. Like youth elsewhere in the state and country, Contra Costa County youth are subject to anti-LGBTQ verbal, sexual, and physical harassment, regardless of their actual sexual orientation or gender identity. LGBTQ youth continue to face isolation from peers and a lack of accurate and culturally relevant information from adults about issues related to their health, relationships, and rights. These issues are often further compounded by the fact that many LGBTQ youth are also youth of color, underprivileged socioeconomic status, or members of other communities that regularly face ignorance or prejudice from society at-large.

> *"[W]hen someone's discriminated against, it will have an adverse effect on their health: It leads to them being stressed, depressed, and committing violence against others and themselves."*
>
> — A CCSSC member

Starting the Coalition

In response to findings that indicate grave threats to the health and well-being of a significant segment of the county's school population, The California Endowment awarded a grant to Ally Action — an organization working to eliminate anti-LGBTQ bias and violence in school communities — to lead a strategic planning process, with the aim of creating safer school environments. The process included conducting focus groups with school community constituents and working jointly with community service providers from across the county to assess community needs. The strategic planning process and later conversations with The California Endowment resulted in identification of three primary objectives for ongoing work:

- ‣ Reduce the isolation of LGBTQ youth in Contra Costa County.
- ‣ Reduce verbal harassment directed at LGBTQ youth in Contra Costa County high schools and others targeted by anti-LGBTQ bias.
- ‣ Increase LGBTQ and other young people's understanding of key physical and mental health issues, such as suicidal ideation, depression, HIV and STIs, relationship violence, and substance abuse.

The 10 members of CCSSC are:

- ‣ Ally Action
- ‣ Center for Human Development
- ‣ Community Violence Solutions
- ‣ Contra Costa Crisis Center
- ‣ Contra Costa Health Services' TeenAge Program
- ‣ Gay-Straight Alliance Network
- ‣ New Connections
- ‣ Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays
- ‣ Rainbow Community Center
- ‣ STAND! Against Domestic Violence

In 2002, a partnership of ten organizations and agencies came together to form a county-wide collaborative — the Contra Costa Safe Schools Coalition (CCSSC) — to

ensure that these objectives would be met. They agreed that there was an urgent need for cohesive action to implement standing policies and create new ones to ensure that all youth have equal access to safe and healthy learning environments. Their plans grew out of a belief that *collaborative action on the local level* would improve school communities' cultural competence and benefit youth to a greater extent than any agency operating alone could achieve.

The Coalition was fortunate to have the provisions of two recent, groundbreaking California laws, known as AB 537 and SB 71, around which to build their education, advocacy, and training efforts with youth and adults in the county. These laws give legal protection to LGBTQ and all youth from unsafe conditions in schools and mandate accurate information about sexual health in every sexuality education course. (*See accompanying text box.*)

> ### *California State Laws*
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> ‣ **AB 537**, the *California Student Safety and Violence Prevention Act of 2000*, makes it illegal for schools to discriminate against students on the basis of actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity or to allow the school environment to get so hostile for LGBTQ students or those perceived to be LGBTQ that they are, in effect, denied equal access to an education.
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> ‣ **SB 71** requires that sex education be medically accurate, age-appropriate, cover abstinence and all FDA approved methods/devices of pregnancy and STD prevention, and respect and address the needs of students of all sexual orientations. Part of the intent of the law is "to encourage a pupil to develop healthy attitudes concerning adolescent growth and development, body image, gender roles, sexual orientation, dating, marriage, and family."

Choosing Strategies

Members use a variety of strategies, including developing and delivering an integrated package of peer- and adult-led educational workshops for school communities, mobilizing youth activists and peer health educators, and providing LGBTQ-friendly counseling and support groups. CCSSC works within the framework of the seven strategies of the Contra Costa Health Services Department's *Spectrum of Prevention*:

1. Influencing Policy and Legislation
2. Mobilizing Neighborhoods and Communities
3. Fostering Coalitions and Networks
4. Changing Organizational Practices
5. Educating Providers
6. Promoting Community Education
7. Strengthening Individuals' Knowledge and Skills.

Evaluating Impact

CCSSC intentionally blends education, direct services, and advocacy to raise awareness and change accepted norms within communities, while contributing to policy change and implementation in schools throughout Contra Costa County. Since its launch, the Coalition and its evaluator have operated under the following assumptions and employed the following practices:

‣ Understanding that changes in community perceptions and policies as well as implementation of those policies are necessary for local, state, and national policies to have real effects in people's lives. Accordingly, the evaluation tracked the interplay between all of the Coalition's efforts and its overall progress toward desired outcomes.

‣ Developing evaluation tools that reflect the Coalition's progress toward its benchmarks. At the same time, since benchmarks often change during the course of advocacy work, evaluation tools remained flexible to capture new benchmarks shaped by unexpected opportunities and barriers in the Coalition's work.

‣ Designing evaluation processes and timelines that best accommodated Coalition members' needs. For instance, the burden of tracking progress toward benchmarks was kept to a minimum and revised when necessary, and interim reports for internal planning use or for distribution to outside audiences were developed in addition to larger funder-oriented annual evaluation reports.

‣ Identifying and reporting lessons learned, as well as highlighting the underlying causes for both the accomplishments and changes in benchmarks in order that the Coalition, its funder, and outside audiences may learn from the experiences of this safe schools effort.

These elements mirror many of the recommendations made to The California Endowment by stakeholders attending a March 2006 working session on the challenges of assessing policy and advocacy activities.[1]

About the Series

Each of the three reports in this series focuses on a different aspect of the CCSSC processes, experiences, and impacts. The first report examines the *formation and impact of a safe schools coalition*. The second describes the effect of the Coalition's work *engaging youth in changing school community culture*. The third report examines actions and outcomes associated with *mobilizing two communities for safer schools* for all youth.

The intentions of the Coalition and its evaluator, Korwin Consulting, are to share the successes, challenges, and lessons learned from the first four years of CCSSC's work.

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[1] K. Guthrie et al. (2006) *The Challenge of Assessing Policy and Advocacy Activities*, The California Endowment and Blueprint Research and Design, inc. Available 12/20/2007 at http://www.calendow.org/Collection_Publications.aspx?coll_id=32&ItemID=414

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Report One

Reflections on Building a Safe Schools Coalition

Introduction

The term "culture" encompasses beliefs, customs, and traits of an ethnic, religious, or social group. Adolescents who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) comprise a distinct cultural group within mainstream society. Similar to findings on the impact of racism, homophobia — the irrational fear or hatred of gay and lesbian people that often turns into prejudicial words and actions — brings psychological distress and physical endangerment, ranging in degree from manageable to fatal. As a population, adolescents who experience same-sex attraction or are gender non-conforming are at higher risk for a number of health problems than their heterosexual and gender conforming peers. Among these are sexually transmitted diseases, unintended pregnancy, substance abuse, assault, and suicide.[2]

The existence of serious physical and mental health risks within this cultural group challenges schools to expand their understanding of and commitment to the multicultural health and well-being of all the young people that make up their student communities. In fact, anti-LGBTQ bias and violence threatens the well-being of youth merely perceived to be LGBTQ and those with LGBTQ parents or family members. Moreover, LGBTQ youth themselves may also belong to one or more other traditionally oppressed or underserved populations, such as communities of color, various national origins, low socioeconomic status, or non-native English speakers. For these reasons, it is urgent that schools strengthen and expand their cultural competence to better understand and meet the needs of the LGBTQ youth community and all who suffer directly from anti-LGBTQ bias.

Similar to racism, homophobia brings psychological distress and physical endangerment, ranging in degree from manageable to fatal.

As described in the foreword to this series of reports, the Contra Costa Safe Schools Coalition (CCSSC) was formed to partner with youth, educators and other school community stakeholders to make the provisions of California laws AB 537 and later, SB 71, reality in the schools and classrooms in Contra Costa County (please see *Foreword* for explanations of the laws' provisions). The members of CCSSC worked together to develop and execute a plan of action that would bring school districts in the county into compliance with these laws so that LGBTQ and all youth would have equal access to safe and healthy learning environments.

This report, the first in a three-part series, presents key activities, challenges, accomplishments, and lessons learned from the Contra Costa Safe Schools Coalition experience.

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[2] As cited in several scholarly sources, including C. Ryan & D. Futterman (1998) *Lesbian and Gay Youth: Care and Counseling,* New York: Columbia University Press.

Strategies

A coalition is both a dynamic entity and a strategy for action. The Contra Costa Safe Schools Coalition progressed through three stages during four years of collaborative action.

Continuum of the CCSSC Coalition

Aligning and Engaging Member Agencies

Nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and community groups agree to align their work to avoid duplication, create a strengthened web of services, address cultural competency and anti-oppression needs, and become a *community of organizations* before advocating as a unified coalition with policy decision-makers. At the same time, Coalition representatives develop skills through participation in the Coalition and bring these skills and information back to agency supervisors. In turn, supervisors commit resources to participation in and support of coalition and LGBTQ-centered work.

Building Relationships

Coalition members build and/or strengthen relationships with school community insiders (youth, parents/families, teachers, staff, and administrators) and outsiders (public decision-makers and potential public and private supporters).

Advocacy and Sustainability

The Coalition communicates a unified message about its work, vision, and need for support to external entities: decision-makers, potential funders, and community leaders. It convenes and leverages the support of various stakeholders to advocate for policy change.

Laying the Foundation

Assessing Needs and Identifying Priorities

In 2001, several organizations sought to deepen their capacity to work in Contra Costa County, either explicitly on behalf of LGBTQ youth in schools or on behalf of *all* youth in schools, including those who are LGBTQ. At the time, LGBTQ and school safety issues were becoming more visible in the media, research, and public debate. Concurrently, The California Endowment (TCE) turned its attention to community-based organizations working to create safe school environments for LGBTQ youth.

This is when, according to CCSSC's coordinator, a locally-based organization with a proven track record for convening and engaging multiple stakeholders around LGBTQ safe school issues "was approached by TCE with the idea of convening a strategic planning process with several community-based organizations working in the county. TCE wished to fund this effort — supporting the development of a shared plan for addressing LGBTQ safe school issues in the county."

As the planning process launched, a needs assessment was commissioned that included focus groups and a survey with school community constituents from across the county. A group of four organizations involved in LGBTQ youth and school safety issues worked together to assess the data, out of which came two objectives to guide their collective work: (1) reducing anti-LGBTQ name-calling; and (2) reducing the isolation typically experienced by LGBTQ youth.

Why join a coalition? Representatives of CCSSC member agencies cite several reasons why their organization joined:

"Our agency is part of it because we work with a lot of youth. We believe and function under the idea that when someone's discriminated against, it will have an adverse effect on their health: It leads to them being stressed, depressed, and committing violence against others and themselves."

"It is a great, diverse group, and what the Coalition is fighting for is a part of our mission. Considering the high suicide rate among LGBTQ youth, it's really important that we be a part of something that's trying to be an ally and to help youth choose life over death."

"We decided to put our oars in the water with everyone else. We're in the trenches when we join with CCSSC. We're not just passing out literature about our organization, but actually getting the district staff to do training. The advantage of our presence is to show strength in numbers."

"It is aligned with our mission: to connect and engage community members to make schools safe, regardless of sexual orientation or gender expression."

"We wanted to partner with other agencies to provide more collaboration and services for the community we serve, particularly youth."

"It really aligns with the work that we do as an individual agency. We were looking for an opportunity to collaborate with some agencies that are more marginalized because they specifically focus on LGBTQ work, and we wanted to find ways to help support and partner with them."

Convening the Coalition

After mapping existing services and agreeing on priority needs and services for the county, these original members identified service gaps and additional organizations and agencies — inviting them to join in the formation of a coalition to advance this work. At the conclusion of a six-month planning phase, further dialogue with TCE led to the addition of a third objective for their work together: *Increase LGBTQ and other young people's understanding of key physical and mental health issues, such as suicidal ideation, depression, HIV and STIs, relationship violence, and substance abuse.* Jointly, Coalition members believed that improved cultural competence within targeted school communities, conducted in a collaborative fashion, would ultimately result in achieving the three objectives.

Creating an Internal Structure

Each CCSSC member organization or agency committed to sending one or more staff members to monthly planning meetings. Nearly all of these designated members came consistently to each meeting, although the faces changed, as there were staff changes within member agencies. The entire group functioned as a planning and action committee, advancing the Coalition's work during the first four years (the period covered in this evaluation series). Together, they determined which of their services and interventions for youth and adults fit with CCSSC's mission and objectives, and they engaged in activities to deepen their capacity to create change for LGBTQ youth. *For instance*:

‣ Members strategized ways to link their curricula and programs together at school sites.
‣ Curricula were adjusted so that members could jointly present or come in as guest presenters during multi-part training sessions for youth.
‣ Members observed each other's presentations and shared best practices.
‣ Entire staffs at member organizations were trained by other members to build on everyone's knowledge and expertise around topics specific to the experiences of LGBTQ youth, adolescent mental health, the legal requirements of AB 537 and SB 71, and helping educators learn how to address topics about which they may be uncomfortable discussing with their students.

Incorporating Evaluation

Ongoing evaluation was incorporated into the Coalition's work from the start. Funding from TCE enabled CCSSC to retain an outside evaluator, Korwin Consulting, to work closely with members in designing and implementing a multi-method evaluation capturing the Coalition's individual and collective process and outcomes. The evaluation included methods such as disseminating post-training surveys to adult and youth training participants and an online database to capture participant demographics, process outputs, and short-term outcomes.

The evaluator attended select CCSSC meetings each year, received all Coalition-wide e-mail communications, conducted analyses, and prepared evaluation reports annually. The evaluator also developed mid-year reports based on interviews with members and other key informant stakeholders engaged in the Coalition's work (i.e., teachers, district personnel, and youth and adult community members). In interviews and meetings, members express appreciation for having the structure in place to collect data on what they are doing and receiving ongoing feedback on their strengths, progress, and opportunities for increasing effectiveness in the form of an outside evaluator's reports and recommendations.

Committing to Cultural Competence

The cultural diversity of Contra Costa County schools includes various ethnic groups, as well as youth of different language and national backgrounds, socioeconomic strata, sexual orientations, and gender identities. Many young people live at the intersection of more than one of these cultural identities. From its beginning, CCSSC committed to building the cultural competence of its own member representatives, their staffs, and the adults and youth it would counsel, train, and support over the course of its work in the county. This intentional process of broadening the cultural competence of members had an effect on their work and even expanded the commitment

> *Many young people in Contra Costa County live at the intersection of more than one cultural identity.*

some of them had to addressing homophobia. As one member explains, "Before, hearing about homophobia was a nagging problem in my mind. Now, it's a serious concern. My suspicion about how bad things are was correct." Another says, "I was under the impression that you would want equality for all young people, regardless of sexual orientation or race. Now I see that districts fight to make it unacceptable to make fun of someone for their race, but pejorative terms about sexual orientation are around constantly. I didn't realize so many people bring so much of their own 'morality' in and don't think about that kind of language as being a problem."

Coalition members also sought professional support in developing their cultural competence and conducted an extensive search for a consultant in the field. Ultimately, the group worked with two different consultants before finding one at the beginning of their fourth year who felt like a perfect fit for addressing the complex, coalition-framed needs for advancing internal cultural competency. As of the writing of this report, Anti-Oppression Consultant Lynn Johnson continues to observe Coalition meetings and guide members through exercises and discussions aimed at increasing their cultural competence and ability to identify and address all types of oppression.

Expected Outcomes of CCSSC's Cultural Diversity Work

Coalition participants will...

1. Value diversity in their personal and professional lives, both within the Coalition and their workplaces.

2. Assess their own attitudes toward, and understanding of, diverse populations.

3. Gain skills to "manage the dynamics of difference," including building trust and working better with fellow Coalition member participants, their own agency staff, and students and school personnel with whom they interact.

4. Acquire cultural knowledge and competence that they then "institutionalize," by passing on what they are learning at their agencies.

5. Work effectively cross-culturally, especially at the intersections of sexual orientation and gender with race, class, age, ability, and other cultural factors (i.e., tailor services to unique needs of individuals, children, families, organizations, and communities served by CCSSC).

In interviews, Coalition members reveal the depth and breadth of impact they have experienced from their cultural competency work. They describe the trusting relationships they have built and the opportunities identified to address oppression in situations where patterns of ignorance or power are perpetuating injustice:

> *"The cultural competence/anti-oppression work has helped the whole process of working together as a coalition. More voices are heard now."*

"What we are doing here has spilled over into what I've been doing at work. At my agency, we have done really hard work on promoting social justice from within ourselves and our organization. The tools and some of the discussions I've had with my peers at the Coalition have influenced how I am at work."

"Anti-oppression work has to be part of any coalition experience, because you have so many different people coming together with so many backgrounds and experiences, and you're working with diverse populations. It's really critical."

Doing the Work

Careful planning and initial coordination are essential ingredients in laying the groundwork for policy change efforts — including advocacy for policies at the school level that will make state laws real in every student's life. At the same time, as the diagram to the right illustrates, many diverse activities contribute to changes in school culture and policies once a coalition is in motion; the road to success is rarely linear. CCSSC engaged in two or more of these strategies at any given time over the course of its first four years. Members often adjusted to new opportunities or barriers by collaboratively developing new work plans and updating strategies.
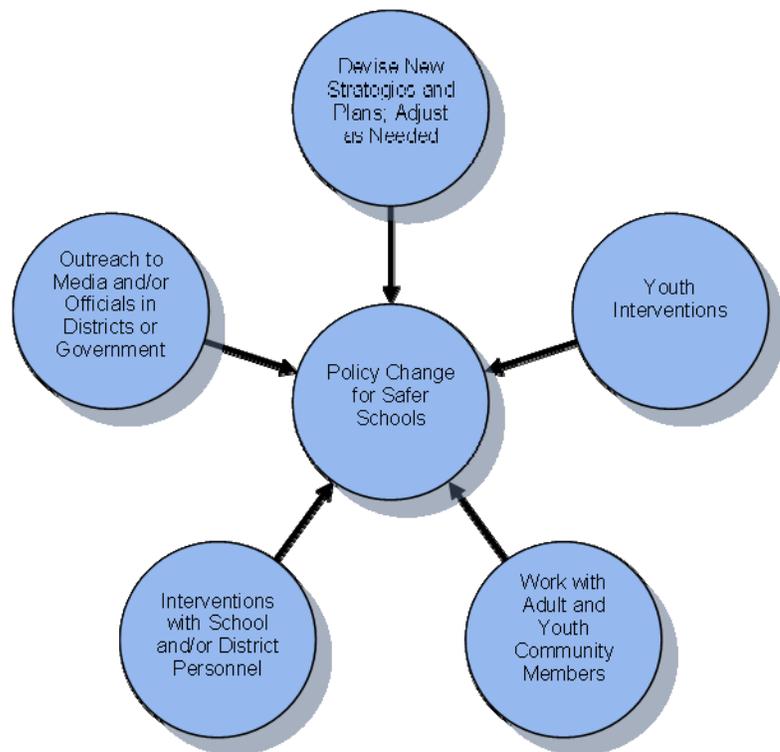
CCSSC Strategies for Policy Change to Make Schools Safe for All Youth
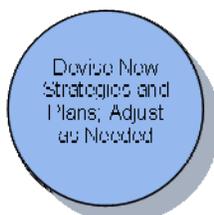
Responding to Changing Needs

The Coalition's structure and operational approaches varied over time to reflect the needs of current members. At times, CCSSC operated fairly democratically and inclusively; at other times, it functioned in a more traditionally structured and decisive fashion. CCSSC's coordinator explains that at various times in the Coalition's history, for example, when new agency representatives joined Coalition meetings, these new members sometimes advocated for changes in the Coalition's internal structure, including efforts "to share the power of leadership by not being quite as hierarchical."

During CCSSC's fourth year of work, members revised their structure — to be implemented at the beginning of CCSSC's fifth year — in order to update divisions of work, enable quick

decision-making and action when needed, and remain inclusive of all voices. The new structure consists of three entities: the *general membership*, a *program committee*, and a *sustainability committee*. (*See box on next page for a description of each*.) The coordinator explains that this new structure will serve the Coalition well as it moves into what she sees as "a phase of building and communicating" with public decision-makers and potential funders about the identity, mission, and vision of the Coalition and as members continue to support each other's efforts to engage school districts in making changes.

CCSSC's Revised Structure

General Membership: Individuals with the capacity and commitment to conduct and support CCSSC's work. They may attend any monthly Program Committee meeting.

Program Committee: Members of the general membership who have access to decision-making authority for their host organization and expertise related to program development, implementation, and evaluation. Members meet monthly and implement Coalition priorities.

Sustainability Committee: Members of the general membership that have decision-making authority for their host organization and/or expertise in leadership, strategic planning, policy development, administration, and operations. Nominated by Program and Sustainability Committee members, they meet regularly to oversee Coalition administration and operations, develop policy, and lead strategic planning.
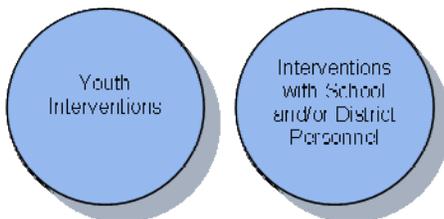
Youth and Adult Interventions

During the first two years of the Coalition's work as a formal entity, the primary function of TCE's funding was to enable CCSSC members to reach LGBTQ and other youth in Contra Costa County through multiple educational and support interventions, with the belief that exposure to consistent and comprehensive interventions would result in improved health outcomes for LGBTQ and other youth.

Ongoing discussions, as well as a review of evaluative data, convinced CCSSC members to broaden their approach to incorporate adult interventions in addition to the youth strategies. Members understood that just as important as directly engaging youth in a variety of interventions and other activities was the intentional outreach by members to the adults who come into contact on a day-to-day basis with those youth. Adults in school systems are essentially gatekeepers to the students. By addressing adults' need for knowledge and cultural competence with regard to LGBTQ youth, providing them with teaching tools to reach their students with critical information, and forging relationships with these adults, the Coalition was able to reach more young people in more ways than they could have if they had limited their efforts to youth-specific interventions alone.

Adults in the school system are gatekeepers to the students. By providing them with tools for reaching their students with critical information, CCSSC was able to reach more young people in more ways than would have been possible otherwise.

The table on the next page lists the interventions that CCSSC members delivered to youth and adults in Contra Costa schools. While each activity may involve one or several member agencies, the timing and locations of interventions were coordinated by the Coalition as a whole.

Interventions that Directly Engage Youth	Interventions for Adults Working with Youth
▸ Classroom workshops on AB 537, healthy sexuality, sexual harassment, relationship violence, and HIV/AIDS and STI prevention. ▸ Trainings for youth leaders and peer educators on the provisions of AB 537 and SB 71. ▸ Technical assistance for Gay-Straight Alliance clubs. ▸ "Safe haven" events, such as dances and celebrations.[3] ▸ Creating safe spaces by providing LGBTQ-friendly counseling and support groups. ▸ Crisis intervention services and classroom workshops on youth violence prevention.	▸ Trainings for educators and other school personnel about the provisions of AB 537 and SB 71 and the impact of anti-LGBTQ bias and harassment in school communities. ▸ Workshops on identifying, addressing, and preventing sexual harassment in the context of a school environment. ▸ Trainings to raise the awareness and capacity of school counselors to work effectively with LGBTQ and all youth. ▸ Trainings for educators and staff on addressing HIV and other "hot topics" with youth.

Outreach to Media and/or Officials in Districts or Government

Devise New Strategies and Plans; Adjust as Needed

Interventions with School and/or District Personnel
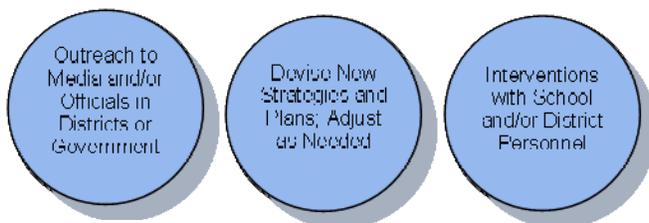
Mobilizing Communities

Coalition members collectively understand that community members are the link between what happens inside school walls, what happens in students' homes, and what happens in policymakers' offices. CCSSC applies a broad definition of "community" that includes district administrators, teachers, parents, current and former students, religious leaders, and individuals who may have an "in" to school board members or other local leaders. CCSSC adopted several strategies for engaging community members in targeted school districts in order to bring about universal implementation of AB 537 and SB 71.

The Coalition developed a *community forum* strategy, with the express purpose of increasing community members' cultural awareness and sensitivity to the many issues facing LGBTQ youth (e.g., issues related to the intersections of gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, race, ethnicity, and class), expanding their knowledge about the mandates of AB 537 and SB 71, and increasing their awareness of available CCSSC

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[3] Please see Report Two of this series for a full explanation and discussion of "safe havens."

resources for Contra Costa youth. CCSSC members convened the first set of community forums in a Central Contra Costa County school district in 2005–2006, and a second set of forums in an East Contra Costa school district in 2006–2007. All CCSSC member organizations took part in designing these forums. (Please see *Report Three* in this series for case studies of community mobilization in each district.)

In addition, Coalition members developed and launched a second key mobilizing strategy, the ***District Policy Implementation Survey***. This assessment tool, designed to mobilize school personnel and administrators, consists of questions related to AB 537 and SB 71 policies and practices within their schools and district. Rather than administering this tool to large numbers of school and district personnel in a way that would feel like a test or a "report card," the Coalition arrived at the decision to administer it in a face-to-face conversation style with district personnel with whom the Coalition has developed positive working relationships. Coalition members see the survey as a tool to engage staff and administrators in a reflective assessment process regarding the survey content, "to assess understanding and implementation" of the laws, and to identify "opportunities for the Coalition to support them" in their ongoing work toward compliance. Coalition members piloted the survey with nine people in two Contra Costa County school districts during the 2006–2007 school year. They intend to assess over time the relationship between administration of the survey and subsequent district compliance with AB 537 and SB 71, in order to refine the survey and develop other strategies to deepen its impact.

Achievements

⇨ **CCSSC members jointly build a solid coalition to change school culture.**

Successful coordination by nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and community groups is necessary in order to lay a solid foundation for collaborative work on behalf of LGBTQ and all youth. *Ongoing strategies include*:

- ‣ Providing cross-training to one another's staff, raising all member agencies' understanding of — and deepening capacity to work competently with — LGBTQ youth.
- ‣ Co-designing training materials to ensure sensitivity and inclusion of LGBTQ youth experiences.
- ‣ Facilitating greater access to school environments by coordinating educational offerings and by partnering agencies perceived of as more "mainstream" with LGBTQ-focused agencies and others that would normally have difficulty gaining access to students and school staff. [4]

⇨ **CCSSC mobilizes grassroots support for safer schools for LGBTQ and all youth.**

Coalition members collaborate on curricula and hold trainings for educators, district and school-site staff, and mental health professionals. In addition, they jointly plan and lead community forums for a broad range of local stakeholders, including parents, graduates of local high schools, district staff, school board members, and faith-based community leaders.

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[4] "Mainstream" here refers to organizations that address general youth health and safety issues. These organizations typically find it easier to access youth in school environments than ones that address issues specific to LGBTQ youth, youth and sexuality, or youth and relationship violence.

▸ Local stakeholders participating in CCSSC trainings and other activities report an increase in knowledge about the challenges facing LGBTQ youth, the laws that should protect them, and the impact of homophobia on all students.

▸ Teachers, staff, district administrators, and community members deepen their commitment to take action to improve safety in schools for LGBTQ youth and their allies.

⇨ **CCSSC's consistent messaging leads to new school and district policies aimed at creating safer school environments.**

▸ Community members join Coalition members in offering support while pressing for accountability by districts and school personnel under federal and state policies designed to protect all youth in schools.

▸ Community forums in a Central Contra Costa County district gained the immediate attention of district administrators and, within months, launched the first of several trainings to large groups of district and school-site personnel about issues facing LGBTQ youth and the legal provisions of AB 537.

▸ Community forums in an East Contra Costa County district helped to build the capacity of local youth and adults to engage in effective activism, including mapping out a plan to involve a local high school principal in efforts to bring CCSSC trainings to the adults and youth of that school.

⇨ **CCSSC engenders greater community understanding and support of LGBTQ youth.**

Through community forums, trainings for students and the adults who work with them, and support groups or other activities for LGBTQ youth and their allies, **CCSSC members have already reached 45,912 youth and 2,713 adults — a total of 48,625 individuals — in Contra Costa County**. *Evaluation findings indicate that*:

▸ *Students* learn about the rights of all students under state law AB 537, the risks and challenges LGBTQ youth face, and resources to support LGBTQ youth and their allies.

▸ *Students* indicate a new awareness of the effects of homophobia on their peers and a willingness to act as allies to LGBTQ individuals.

▸ *Students* are better informed about how HIV and STIs are transmitted and better prepared to talk to their partners and friends about practicing safer sex.

▸ *Students* gain the knowledge and confidence needed for them to identify, confront, and prevent abusive relationships.

▸ *Educators and other youth service providers* gain the knowledge, skills, and resolve to create safer classrooms and schools.

▸ *Mental health professionals* report a greater willingness to act upon the knowledge that the root of an LGBTQ youth's difficulties often lies in the behavior of others.

> *"I will be more aware of my own internalized homophobia and better able to help LGBTQ youth in counseling."*
>
> –A mental health professional training participant.

All of these Coalition achievements point to changes that have already happened, with the promise of more to come, contributing to the creation of safer school environments for LGBTQ and all youth.

Challenges

The Coalition's significant achievements have come in the face of many challenges. These fall under four categories.

Ongoing External Challenges: CCSSC began its work specifically because the county environment — reflecting the broader social climate — was hostile to the rights of LGBTQ students, something the Coalition set out to change. The strategic planning process that preceded the formation of CCSSC identified five obstacles to school safety for LGBTQ youth in Contra Costa County school communities:

‣ Pervasive anti-gay comments and name-calling.

‣ A lack of awareness by students, educators, staff, administrators, parents, and communities-at-large regarding LGBTQ youth and the issues they face.

‣ A lack of intervention by teachers and administrators to uphold the provisions of state and federal laws relevant to LGBTQ youth.

‣ Students, educators, staff, administrators, and parents wanting to be allies but fearing locally organized religious and political extremists.

> *"The Coalition has given a voice to the LGBTQ youth community. I know that because of the resistance from the school districts. When the LGBTQ youth didn't have a voice and everything was supposedly OK, district leaders did not feel threatened. But now it's clear: They know we're going to be allies for these people, and now they're showing resistance."*
>
> – A CCSSC member

‣ Widespread isolation of LGBTQ youth, due to lack of access to resources, lack of safe spaces for support and advocacy training (for GSAs and for individuals), and lack of access to openly gay adult role models on school campuses.

New External Challenges: Once in action, the Coalition encountered further obstacles:

‣ Resistance from administrators and teachers uncomfortable allowing youth to talk about sexuality in class or fearful of allowing peer-led workshops and trainings to take place.

‣ A combination of limited resources and competing priorities in the schools, including *No Child Left Behind* mandates. As a result, CCSSC members had to work to convince school administrators that safety for LGBTQ and all youth, as well as life skills development of all students, should be at or near the top of any list of priority actions.

‣ Difficulty getting all community stakeholders to commit to supporting the Coalition's work, for instance, business leaders, political leaders, and local institutional funders.

Factors within Member Agencies: While CCSSC's effectiveness is due in large part to the diversity of missions, experience, and expertise that its member agencies bring to the work,

shifts in staff and in priorities within those agencies also translated into challenges for the Coalition. *Among them were*:

‣ High staff turnover, which makes maintaining a sense of community and purpose difficult. As one member explains, "Because of turnover, the group is not able to focus as well as it could on advancing programmatic strategies."

‣ Struggles that LGBTQ-specific agencies have in finding institutional funding for their work, which may limit their ability to participate fully in CCSSC's work or lead to their withdrawal from the Coalition.

‣ Similarly, agencies with broader mandates sometimes terminate positions or programs carrying out LGBTQ-specific work, or at least work that overlaps with the Coalition's goals. This is usually due to cut-backs in these agencies' funding, a shift in internal priorities, or both.

‣ Motivation for participating in CCSSC has varied among organizations and agencies, with some agencies being "mission-driven" to participate in the Coalition and others being "resource-driven." Members of mission-driven organizations have been more likely to remain in the Coalition, even with a reduction or elimination of funding; others' participation is contingent on getting enough funding through the Coalition or other sources to justify their participation to their agencies' administrators or board of directors.

‣ The "hub" agency of the Coalition — where CCSSC's coordinator serves as executive director — has simultaneously faced challenges building its own infrastructure and capacity. As the coordinator explains, "It's been a challenge to expand our capacity to be able to succeed further as a convener, with the role of maintaining and strengthening all of the relationships within and outside of the Coalition, especially given all of the turnover of member agency staff within the Coalition."

‣ Those who attend Coalition meetings are rarely the individuals with power in their agencies, either by position (e.g., they are not executive or development directors) or culture (e.g., they do not match the class, ethnicity, gender, age, or sexual orientation of the dominant population of their agency, the Coalition, or society at-large). Issues of power are factors in the level of safety members feel and the contributions they make at Coalition meetings or in planning activities touching on CCSSC's work at their member agencies.

Challenges Inherent to Coalition-building: Agencies were invited to join CCSSC largely based on their commitment to engaging in a coalition process to create safer school communities in Contra Costa County. The aim has been to develop a cohesive program of services and other efforts to effect policy implementation and change (e.g., of AB 537) within school districts. Working together, members draw on each others' strengths, personal connections, and expertise, and avoid duplication of efforts. *Some of the challenges the Coalition regularly addresses are*:

‣ Defining and forging a coalition, not a network. This includes determining the need to create more formal programmatic links between agencies, rather than informal connections and resource-sharing, as well as identifying what conditions support a coalition and when a coalition approach is most useful.

‣ Distinguishing the work of individual agencies from that of the Coalition.

‣ Maintaining commitment to the Coalition by member agencies and to sending participants to Coalition meetings and contributing to Coalition efforts.

‣ Developing a structure for the Coalition that allows each agency to participate in a way and at a level that will be most effective and sustainable, both for the individual members and for their agencies.

‣ Addressing different expectations around communication: When members do not respond to requests for input or decisions, the Coalition's work slows down, and the feeling of community and mutual engagement declines.

‣ Coping with turnover of program staff attending Coalition meetings and the lack of institutional memory in agencies that have not always informed staff of why they are CCSSC members, what is expected of them, and what support they can expect from their agency.

‣ Acting as a coalition is not a simple task, and building the sustainability of a coalition and its work is even more complex. The difficulties of working toward sustainability are further compounded by the oppressed status of the target population of this Coalition: LGBTQ youth, especially those who are of color and of low socioeconomic status.

In order to have an impact, the Coalition has needed to explicitly and creatively address each of these challenges with all of its efforts, often aiming for and celebrating incremental progress.

Lessons for the Field

The Contra Costa Safe Schools Coalition has reached significant benchmarks in the implementation of state and federal policies at the school level and in the development of new policies and greater commitments by youth and adults to create safer schools for LGBTQ and all students. Some lessons from the Coalition experience will be of interest to other groups considering forming a safe schools coalition and to funders considering supporting such an endeavor.

Flexibility is necessary to address local needs and build on local assets. The Coalition referred to the lessons learned from its ongoing work over a four-year period in one school district to launch its work in a second district. However, members realized early on that while the two districts have some common characteristics, this new community would require a different approach. By keeping in mind the twin goals of *advocating for change* while *building supportive relationships* with those in positions to create that change, the Coalition was able to take positive steps and see incremental results in both school districts.

Some tasks lend themselves to coalition efforts more than others. Reflecting on their experience as members of a Coalition at a meeting shortly after their fourth year of working together, members described sensing that the Coalition worked best when there was an event or special project (like cross-training or developing joint curricula) around which to unite, or "coalesce." One participant remembers a time when "a lot of groups in the Coalition" did work that resulted in getting them into the juvenile correction system. Another refers to the Coalition's early work to coordinate and collaborate on services, outreach, and best practices, saying members got "a better understanding of who does what, who's got the capacity, who to turn to, and what referrals to make." There is a sense that a school district is "more likely to work with us as a united front than it would with one or another of us as an individual agency."

Coalition work can be cumbersome. Seeking consensus within the Coalition can slow down decision-making, leading some members to feel that time for joint planning or simply delivering their agency's services is lost. Also, there are times when the Coalition may wish to work with an administrator or educator who already has a relationship with a member agency and prefers simply to work with that agency. Members feel that the Coalition model plays an important role in joining organizations that are LGBTQ-oriented and those that are inclusive of LGBTQ issues and populations. That strength leads to a challenge, too: It can be hard for agencies with different missions to "focus on the issues being addressed by the Coalition." As one points out, "It's hard to steer that many agencies."

Funding matters, but priorities matter more. When faced with tough funding decisions, LGBTQ agencies may prioritize service work over policy work, and more mainstream agencies may cut LGBTQ-dedicated positions and programs. Because of these harsh realities, it makes sense for a coalition designed to conduct interventions and effect policy change on behalf of LGBTQ youth to put into place a formal fundraising and sustainability group that includes key decision-makers from member agencies as early as possible. CCSSC's new three-part structure is a good example of what that might look like.

Report Two

Engaging Youth in School-based Change

Introduction

LGBTQ youth have unique needs: Not only are they navigating the challenging transition from childhood to adulthood with the rest of their peers, they are doing so under circumstances that are often confusing and intensely hostile, whether in schools, families, communities, or society at-large. Many live in daily fear of being discovered or singled out for harassment and violence. Studies conducted in Contra Costa County schools in 2001 matched those elsewhere in the country in terms of treatment of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) youth: The vast majority of students heard anti-LGBTQ slurs from students, teachers, and staff every day.[5] Nearly half of all students had never heard a teacher or other staff person intervene to stop anti-LGBTQ harassment, and fewer than one out of ten knew how to report such harassment in their school. A needs assessment conducted by the organizations and agencies shaping a strategic plan for Contra Costa County safe schools work identified five issues impacting school safety for LGBTQ youth:

- Anti-gay comments and name-calling.
- Lack of awareness or sensitivity regarding LGBTQ people and issues among students, educators, staff, administrators, parents, and broader communities.
- Lack of implementation of policy meant to protect the rights of LGBTQ youth and lack of intervention by teachers and administrators.
- Fear — on the part of students, educators, staff, administrators, and parents — of locally organized religious and political extremists.
- LGBTQ youth in isolation, with little to no access to nearby resources, support, advocacy (i.e., for Gay-Straight Alliance clubs and for individuals), and openly gay adult role models on school campuses.

The passage of two California laws, AB 537, and later, SB 71, provided the Contra Costa County Safe Schools Coalition (CCSSC) with a means to channel school districts' desire to be in compliance with the law and the genuine desire of many youth and adults within these districts to safeguard the rights of all students. (Please see the *Foreword* to this series for explanations of the laws' provisions.) The member agencies of the Coalition agreed that it was critical to engage all sectors of the school community, with a particular focus on engaging the young people, themselves, in transforming the school environment.

This report, the second in a three-part series, presents key activities, challenges, accomplishments, and lessons learned from CCSSC's work to engage youth in school-based change.

Strategies

The member agencies of CCSSC engage in several concurrent strategies to transform educational communities into environments where LGBTQ and all youth are safe, where they gain important knowledge and life skills to keep themselves healthy, and where they are able to learn. One of the most important strategies is to involve the youth in the work of

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[5] The studies in Contra Costa County included a 2001 report from the Fremont Unified School District and surveys in 2001 of students in the West Contra Costa and San Ramon Valley Unified School Districts.

changing school culture from within. Most Coalition agencies use the majority of their resources for reaching young people in educational and other youth-focused settings: schools, community centers, juvenile hall, alternative educational settings, and their agencies' own offices. Over the period covered by this evaluation, eight CCSSC member agencies conducted 20 distinct youth-focused activities throughout Contra Costa County, including:

- Activist training sessions
- Activist training camp
- Peer-led anti-homophobia trainings and conferences
- Peer-led health outreach trainings (HIV/AIDS and STI prevention)
- Peer-led "trainings of trainers" on activism, outreach, legal rights, and other topics
- Support groups and discussion groups
- Group counseling sessions
- Individual counseling sessions
- Relationship violence prevention workshops
- Sexual harassment awareness and prevention workshops
- LGBTQ-safe events, such as dances and other social activities
- Technical assistance for school-based activist groups

These Coalition-sponsored youth activities fall under three main categories: *safe spaces*, *education*, and *leadership and activism*.

Providing Safe Spaces

Safe spaces — places that are apart from a dominant or oppressive population — often serve as incubators for addressing social injustice. Their importance during the last century is well documented with respect to the Civil Rights movement (e.g., churches), Women's Liberation (e.g., consciousness-raising discussion groups), and the Gay Rights movement (e.g., gay bars). Today, safe spaces allow young LGBTQ people and their allies to take a break from the fear of persecution in school — whether by attending a support group or LGBTQ-friendly dance or encouraging one another to participate in activities that explicitly prepare them for leadership and activism.

Safe Havens: In the strategic planning process that led to the formation of CCSSC, participating organizations identified the need for local safe havens where youth could "'hang out, socialize, and receive peer support and counseling." Two Coalition agencies create "safe havens" for LGBTQ youth and their allies in Contra Costa County by hosting various support groups and events. They also work collaboratively to expand their existing services to include a daily after-school drop-in group and to host bi-monthly dances for LGBTQ youth. For some, the safe havens are a point of entry into LGBTQ and activist communities. They are spaces where youth learn to find their voice and become more open or active in fighting for justice in their communities. In fact, many youth go on to become agents of change by participating in community forums, advocacy trainings, and outreach activities to their peers.

Other Safe Spaces: Another way the Coalition creates safe spaces is by providing counseling to individuals and small groups that is particularly sensitive to LGBTQ youth. A CCSSC agency that provides community-based mental health services offer individual,

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group, and family counseling for LGBTQ youth and professional training for mental health professionals, to build their capacity to work with LGBTQ youth in a culturally-sensitive manner.

Delivering and Supporting Education

CCSSC members understand that education can be a foundation for societal change. The AIDS Memorial Quilt, a community art project that serves to commemorate those who have died and to educate the living, and advertising campaigns addressing the need to prevent and cure breast cancer or the health risks of smoking are examples of educational efforts that have increased the voice and visibility of communities touched by these issues. In doing so, they have fostered changes in societal attitudes about certain issues.

A CCSSC member explains what makes the Coalition's educational efforts special: "Although some Coalition members do work on general issues, like pregnancy prevention and tolerance, when we present now, we actually name the issues: homophobia and transphobia[6] in school." The significance of this difference is that, by naming such issues in classrooms throughout the county, CCSSC members bring greater awareness about the plight of LGBTQ youth to students and the larger school community.

Adults Teaching Students: Coalition agencies present trainings independently and in collaboration with one other. For example, two of the agencies jointly trained youth how to identify, prevent, and stop relationship violence and sexual harassment that they or their peers are experiencing. These trainings helped youth make connections between gender-based violence and violence toward youth who are or are perceived to be LGBTQ, as they come to understand how both should be unacceptable in their communities.

"Now, every single member of our staff will stand up against homophobic remarks, and all materials are inclusive and are explicit about whether someone is having sex with someone of the same sex or different. We see students in the classroom during our presentations whose eyes say, 'They know I exist.'"

– A member of CCSSC

A participating public health agency leads efforts in delivering an eight-part curriculum on sexuality and human development in several schools. Perceived by school administrators and teachers as "mainstream," it gains access to schools more easily than some of its CCSSC partners. At the same time, its curriculum design is enriched in part by cross-trainings with these other agencies that help its entire staff to think in terms of greater LGBTQ inclusiveness. In addition, less mainstream Coalition members (i.e., specifically those focused on relationship violence or LGBTQ issues) serve as guest presenters during the course of the eight-part program, gaining entry to school sites that were inaccessible to them before, due to teachers' or administrators' assumptions about them or fears of parental or community backlash. Each agency brings information about all CCSSC services to its own presentations, which, combined with the likelihood that youth will interact with more than one member agency through different presentations, makes the array of CCSSC services more accessible to LGBTQ students and their allies.

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[6] Fear, hatred, or harassment of transgender individuals.

Students Teaching Students: Peer education is well-recognized as an effective model for educating populations; this may be especially true for youth.[7] One such CCSSC program, administered by a participating community counseling agency, is a youth-led health education group dedicated to teaching peers about HIV prevention and the provisions of SB 71. The group meets at least twice each month to familiarize participants with the curriculum, develop their leadership skills and community-based outreach strategies and prepare them to conduct trainings for other students through health outreach workshops. Another program builds the capacity of participating youth to conduct peer workshops through their "trainings-of-trainers" programming. These newly trained youth, in turn, lead workshops for peers in their own school communities on the mandates of AB 537 and SB 71, as well as the right of LGBTQ and all students to be safe in school. The training and support provided through these peer-based programs complement classroom-based strategies of other CCSSC members in empowering youth by continuing to build the knowledge and skills students will need to transform school environments.

Fostering Leadership and Activism

Peer education trainings are inherently trainings in leadership, as youth learn to present important information about health and rights to their peers. The Coalition also supports youth specifically in gaining the leadership skills and knowledge they will need to become activists and advocates. These trainings, in the form of workshops, youth forums, and activist camps, incorporate education on activist strategies, leadership skills, networking, problem solving, working against all forms of oppression (e.g., racism, sexism, ageism, and classism), and implementing AB 537 and SB 71. Follow-up support and additional resources are made available to the youth who participate. One CCSSC member points out that, while not usually classified as education, "The process of fostering leadership and activism is also a form of education, especially for those youth who seldom see themselves reflected in the curriculum that most teachers use."

As described above, one member agency leads a program that prepares youth to conduct peer-led anti-LGBTQ bias and awareness workshops in the schools. By then going on to conduct trainings-of-trainers, these young people

> *"I don't like to just sit back and hope there's a change. I'd rather be a part of something and I'm standing up for something I believe in."*
> – A youth activist

are learning to be community leaders, passing on important information and teaching others to speak up to their peers about the rights of LGBTQ youth. Another agency trains a team of LGBTQ youth and their peer allies about the provisions of AB 537 and helps them gain the skills they need in order to advocate for school policies that protect LGBTQ youth against harassment. At least one of the team's participants assumed a leadership role within the larger community by becoming a regular participant in community forums in a district in East Contra Costa County. (*See Report Three in this series for a full discussion of the community forums.*) Meanwhile, a nationally-based LGBTQ advocacy organization supports LGBTQ youth and their allies in becoming activists in their schools and communities by conducting an activist summer camp and activist trainings during the school year, and by providing technical assistance to individual Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) chapters in Contra Costa County throughout the year.

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[7] According to the National Institutes of Health and several peer reviewed journals.

All three of the Coalition strategies for engaging youth in school-based change are closely linked: Leadership training and activism support are often outgrowths of safe spaces and peer education training; peer educators, by definition, are trained to be leaders among their peers, and by speaking out about the need to overcome ignorance, they are activists for change within schools, as well. The strategies also provide opportunities for youth who are more familiar with some CCSSC agencies to gain access to others: While three organizations directly deliver leadership and activist training curricula, they rely on other Coalition agencies and each other to spread the word about upcoming trainings through e-mails on the Coalition's Listserv, or by distributing post cards and flyers to youth about each training.

Achievements

⇨ **Youth show gains in knowledge and understanding.**

Close to 46,000 youth participated in CCSSC-related educational workshops and trainings during the four years the Coalition was evaluated.[8] Those youth increased their awareness and understanding of LGBTQ youth and learned about key physical, mental health, legal, and supportive resources and information. As a result, notable numbers of students report that they are:

- ‣ Aware of students' rights under AB 537.
- ‣ Aware of the impact of homophobia on all students and the special risks LGBTQ students face.
- ‣ Informed about resources available to LGBTQ youth and their allies.
- ‣ Better informed about HIV/AIDS and STIs.
- ‣ More confident about talking to partners and friends about practicing safer sex.
- ‣ Aware of student support services available to them.
- ‣ Better able to make healthy and safer sex choices.
- ‣ Able to recognize gender stereotypes.
- ‣ Able to identify characteristics of a healthy relationship.
- ‣ More knowledgeable about the prevalence of and ways to prevent relationship violence.
- ‣ Informed about the cycle of violence and barriers to leaving an abusive relationship.
- ‣ Less likely to blame someone being abused for an abuser's behavior.
- ‣ Less likely to intimidate or threaten their partners.
- ‣ Aware of places to get help to address relationship violence.

As one CCSSC member comments, "In their evaluations of the trainings, students tell us that they have more knowledge. Anecdotally, from feedback in our classes or what they write to me, I know that students are more aware and are thinking more critically about these issues."

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[8] These and all numbers of youth in this report represent a duplicative count. By design, many youth participated in more than one Coalition intervention or participated in a training that occurred over a number of days. The number of participants was counted at the time of each activity or training day.

⇨ **CCSSC interventions lead to changes in attitude and intended behavior toward LGBTQ peers.**

Participants in trainings that specifically cover anti-gay harassment and the provisions of AB 537 indicate on post-training surveys that they intend to change their behavior. Consistent majorities indicate that, because of the training, they are *more likely* to:

  ‣ Stop using anti-gay slurs.
  ‣ Accept others that are "different" from themselves.
  ‣ Become an ally to LGBTQ individuals.

Smaller numbers (about 20 to 50 percent) are:

  ‣ More willing to intervene when they hear people using anti-gay slurs.
  ‣ Less likely to use violence or abusive language.

⇨ **LGBTQ youth and allies are feeling more confident, empowered, and safe.**

Nearly 40,000 youth have participated in CCSSC efforts. Even more important than raw numbers are the accompanying stories of young people whose lives have been changed by their involvement in one or more CCSSC trainings. Coalition members and LGBTQ youth offer many examples of increased confidence, empowerment, and safety for these young people:

> *"One young man first became involved in his school's GSA. There, he learned about a support group at [a member agency]. He attended regularly and also went to an activist camp in the summer. The next year, he served on a nationally-linked youth council and started attending another organization's outreach team meetings. He spoke at a community forum about SB 71 and then planned a Transgender Remembrance Day with his GSA at school. Over the course of one year, he blossomed into a true community activist, thanks in part to the close connections CCSSC agencies have with one another."*

> *"The classroom based services not only provide resources but educate students on their rights and what recourse they have. For example, AB 537 is explained in a few of our presentations, and youth learn how to file a complaint if they need to. Additionally we all act as advocates on their behalf. I had the experience of making the principal aware of AB 537 at one school. This was after a student had reported harassment and the school did nothing to reprimand the harasser. This being the very day after I had presented on AB 537, the student who had been harassed told me what happened, and I went to his principal. She was unaware of AB 537, but not anymore."*

> *"Youth receiving individual or group counseling report strong gains in emotional resiliency — knowing they are not alone in the problems they experience and feeling like they can handle those problems."*

In evaluation-related LGBTQ youth and ally focus groups conducted at several Contra Costa schools, participants reported that their schools felt increasingly safe for LGBTQ youth. Some described their relief at *coming out* at school and finding that they were accepted and "rarely" or "less often" harassed than in the past. A youth interviewed early in the 2006–2007 school year echoed that sentiment:

> *"I do feel they [LGBTQ youth] are more accepted now. Two of my friends came out at school. It was harder for them to come out to their family."*

These changes in individuals' experiences are helping to shift attitudes and behavior in the larger school communities.

⇨ **Coordination of CCSSC programs increases youth access to support.**

CCSSC members appreciate the opportunity to collaborate on outreach efforts and to learn enough about each others' programs to confidently refer clients to one another. They also point to youth benefits resulting from their joint strategies:

▸ Rather than agencies developing duplicative services and competing for funds, CCSSC members work together to maximize community resources.

▸ Each month, CCSSC members come together to develop and strengthen strategies that help LGBTQ youth feel safe and represented. As a result, members feel they are better able to meet the needs of youth collectively than they would be working alone.

> *"The formation of the Coalition has created a network of service providers. Each member contributes different strengths to the Coalition, and being a part of it gives us access to one another's expertise."*
>
> *– A CCSSC member*

▸ Coalition agencies are able to gain access to school sites by leveraging relationships that the schools already have with other member agencies.

▸ Professional and interpersonal connections among CCSSC agencies increase the number of venues in which they can reach and serve LGBTQ youth.

▸ There are more opportunities for youth to get support not only inside but also outside of school, because of CCSSC's expanded referral network, which links youth to programs previously unknown to them.

▸ Some youth are seeking more than one way to get involved in their communities, and they now have easy access to several agencies' programming.

▸ Greater collaboration on publicizing CCSSC agencies' events helps to make them more visible to LGBTQ youth in the county which, in turn, leads to more youth attending these events and accessing all Coalition offerings.

One CCSSC member illustrates the benefits of the interdependent nature of the Coalition by explaining:

> *"By working alongside [another CCSSC member agency that provides mental health services], we are better able to help LGBTQ youth access specialized care for their mental health needs. Likewise, we have a deeper understanding of the needs and specialized resource referrals available for LGBTQ youth who are involved in relationship violence, for LGBTQ youth who experience sexual harassment and can be empowered by self-defense training, and for LGBTQ youth who experience depression and are contemplating suicide. Working alongside direct service providers within the Coalition has increased our understanding of the safe haven and safer sex workshop services those organizations offer."*

⇨ **LGBTQ youth and their allies are less isolated than before.**

Observations by Coalition members and youth point to decreasing isolation among LGBTQ youth, resulting from the Coalition's adult and peer-led work:

> *"Young folks see we're out here working. On an individual basis, that makes a difference. I see youth accessing more than one service and wanting to be a part of this coalition. Just the fact that there's a postcard with our numbers on it — I grew up queer in this community and had no idea these groups existed."*

> *"Many groups offer many resources for these youth now, so that they do not feel separated and alone. Schools are now more aware of the needs, offer support groups, presentations, counseling, and education to staff and people who work for schools."*

Several participants of LGBTQ youth and ally focus groups emphasize that involvement in their local GSA chapters and a safe haven support group (jointly led by two CCSSC agencies) has reduced their own sense of isolation by providing a forum for talking openly about LGBTQ issues and raising concerns about discrimination. As one participant puts it, having the support of an organization means "we're official and acknowledged." Advocacy trainings, safe havens, support groups, events, and trained and accessible mental health specialists contribute to a sense of legitimacy, safety and self-confidence among LGBTQ youth.

Two more youth, who started out attending a safe haven support group and moved on to speaking and planning at community forums in East Contra Costa County, explain why they feel less isolated now. One says, "There are actually members of the community, business owners, and people on the city council that are there and they're trying to see what's wrong. They're showing us that not all hope is lost." Another explains, "If there are some youth that are having trouble, they know now who else they can talk to. Before, the lack of help from adult allies was the biggest problem. Now, they know where to look; there are these adults here who are a part of the city."

⇨ **CCSSC and youth are changing schools from the inside.**

Each informed and empowered student can have a positive impact on her/his peers, family, and even on adults at school. One peer educator reports that, almost immediately after the peer-led workshops were introduced on school campuses, "people were becoming more aware and accepting," and "there were a lot less homophobic slurs." Another peer educator states that more teachers in schools are "calling students on it if they say 'that's so gay,' or 'faggot.'" One commented, "When students at one school were asked the previous year, 'Is your school a safe place to be openly gay?' more than 90 percent said, 'no.'" Once the peer education program came to the campus, a much higher percentage of students thought it was a safe place to be openly gay. CCSSC members give other examples of how CCSSC's work — including coordinated services for youth and intentionally-created safe spaces — helps change school culture:

> *"[One school] has very much utilized the Coalition for intervention services as well as prevention. All CCSSC members have been contacted for classroom programming. Most critically, there is support from the staff who actually know that the Coalition exists and are actively using us as a resource for students."*

"In addition to direct LGBTQ-dedicated counseling services, the funding has allowed our LGBTQ-designated counselor/trainer to provide training and ongoing consultation to other staff at our agency on working effectively with LGBTQ youth. This has improved our capacity to address the needs of LGBTQ youth in our school-based services at 18 middle and high schools throughout Contra Costa County."

Challenges

The Coalition and youth educators, leaders, and activists have jointly faced many challenges as they work to change school cultures.

Homophobia and Ignorance: The two-part challenge presented by homophobia and ignorance not only served as an impetus for the formation of CCSSC, but continues to drive its work. Adults and youth report:

▸ *There are still countless examples that point to significant overt and covert discrimination, in spite of the laws against it*. A Coalition member reports that in one district, "Two or three of the youth dropped out because of the harassment they received. They didn't feel they had the support of the administration, teachers, or even GSA members." Some youth focus group participants say discrimination is so prevalent that they have come to think of a school as "safe" if LGBTQ youth and allies "only" encounter verbal harassment and not physical assaults.

▸ *Some adults are openly hostile to advocacy efforts on behalf of LGBTQ youth*. For example, students in one school report that their GSA adult adviser has verbalized opposition to the group and only allows its use of a classroom for meetings because s/he is "required" to do so by the principal.

▸ *It is still fairly common for LGBTQ youth to find themselves blamed for others' harassment of them*. A member gives an example, explaining that "in one school, a girl who was being harassed on the basis of sexual orientation was told to be less obvious about her affections, for her own protection. The administrators meant well, but they did not understand that it was inappropriate to put the onus on the student being harassed."

Hurdles in Gaining Visibility: There are still adults in educational facilities and in the larger community who are surprised to hear about the harassment and violence LGBTQ students face every day in their schools. Coalition members report that some adults even seem surprised to hear that there are LGBTQ youth in their community. The Coalition aims to make schools safer at the same time as it helps LGBTQ students become more visible in all aspects of the school environment. A part of this work also involves engaging adults who will be supportive of LGBTQ youth and work with them to change the school, district, and community cultures.

There are still adults who are surprised to hear about the harassment and violence LGBTQ students face every day in their schools.

Challenges in Reaching Youth: Coalition members know that they must build relationships with the "gatekeepers" — those adults who can assist or prevent agencies' entrance into the classroom — before they can reach the youth. This is often difficult, primarily due to one or more of the following reasons:

‣ Personal prejudices of educators.

‣ Severe lack of leeway in instruction time to devote to anything other than preparing to meet testing performance mandates of the *No Child Left Behind Act*.

‣ Fear by administrators in districts or at school sites that there will be a backlash from parents and public officials in the community, either because of homophobia and ignorance or because of demands for district resources to go toward other specific populations or issues.

‣ Many individuals question the need to build "cultural competence" in working with LGBTQ youth, resisting the designation of LGBTQ people as a "culture." Others would like more cross-cultural discussions from CCSSC agencies. Although CCSSC members clearly communicate that they are primarily addressing LGBTQ cultural competence in their work, it is sometimes difficult to justify to school staff the Coalition's focus on one aspect of oppression when broader school communities are experiencing oppression on multiple fronts.

Coalition members devote significant energy to hearing gatekeepers' concerns and communicating the ways in which a safe schools agenda helps all students in the school. The fact that the Coalition, itself, is made up of a diverse group of individuals from a diverse group of agencies sometimes helps to get that message across. One result of this particular challenge, though, is that CCSSC has had to adjust its initial strategy of targeting schools thought to be less informed about — or even hostile toward — LGBTQ youth. Instead, the Coalition has focused primary efforts on gaining entry to more "hospitable" school environments, hoping that it will be able to leverage results achieved in these schools and districts to gain access to less welcoming environments.

Increasing Cultural Competence: The LGBTQ movement has been accused of excluding people of color and the voices of the poor, the young, or those lacking a higher education. In fact, some students have suggested that, because GSAs on many school campuses are predominantly white, LGBTQ and ally youth of color may not feel comfortable even there. Coalition members continually raise each other's awareness of the experiences and challenges faced by LGBTQ youth that relate to characteristics other than gender identity/expression and sexual orientation. By working with a cultural competence consultant and raising related issues in discussions and planning sessions, CCSSC members strive to help each other conduct interventions that embrace the diverse nature of the LGBTQ community.

Inadequate Resources: Finding funding that targets LGBTQ youth — especially LGBTQ youth of color and those with low socioeconomic backgrounds — is difficult. Limited resources impact various aspects of the Coalition's work including: the number of school sites and districts the Coalition can target, the staff and programming each agency can dedicate to LGBTQ-specific activities, and which agencies are able to fully participate in the Coalition's work.

‣ *Limited resources* for the Coalition as a whole and for member agencies impact the number of school sites in which CCSSC members can offer services and support. One member points out, "It's hard. The Coalition wants to be in 10 schools, but we only have the capacity to be in three." Another says it is difficult to find funding for networks and coalitions. Other members express concern that the Coalition might not be able to follow-through with long-term commitments for a full, coordinated menu of services if it takes on more than two districts at a time.

▸ *Insufficient staffing* at member agencies can create tension as participants struggle to balance the need to allocate time to CCSSC meetings and committees with the need to deliver their agency's program services. The reasons for staffing shortages at agencies range from an inability to find funding for LGBTQ-focused programs to a reduction in overall funding for an agency with a broader constituency that has programs serving LGBTQ youth. During the fourth year of the Coalition, two organizations terminated their LGBTQ-specific programs and another postponed plans to update curricula to incorporate CCSSC goals.

▸ *Declining support for coalition work* at member agencies — sometimes due to a decline in those agencies' funding or the departure of personnel involved in the Coalition since its beginning — may result in a reduction or elimination of the staff time and agency resources available for CCSSC activities and outreach. As one member participant explains, "The time I spend in Coalition meetings is time I no longer have to work directly with the youth at the schools." At the beginning of the fifth year of working together, one member organization withdrew from the Coalition and three reduced their Coalition work to a minimum. (*Please see Report One for an explanation of the Coalition's structure as it entered its fifth year.*)

The remaining members of CCSSC, especially those in the Sustainability Committee, are currently seeking new sources of support and strategies for long-term sustainability of the kind of vibrant and multi-faceted coalition that they believe Contra Costa County's youth still critically need.

Lessons for the Field

The Contra Costa Safe Schools Coalition was designed to connect LGBTQ youth and their allies to innovative and collaborative programming by Coalition member agencies. With the understanding that school culture change will only be successful if students, themselves, support it, CCSSC implemented several strategies to help empower youth to make healthy decisions for themselves and to confront the prejudice, harassment, and violence that they may encounter from youth and adults. The lessons the Coalition learned in this process should help to inform other groups' efforts at fostering changes in youth culture from within.

Facilitating cooperation between organizations leads to more effective work. Several CCSSC members comment that they are able to reach more youth and do better work as part of a tightly connected coalition than they could on their own. The Coalition's greatest strength is its ability to bring several organizations with different but *complementary* missions and expertise to the table to problem-solve around the issue of safety and well-being for LGBTQ and all youth. A member explains, "It worked well that we had a lot of different kinds of organizations — those only working with LGBTQ youth, those working with all youth, those training youth in advocacy....We know who has expertise in what, and we get a great perspective."

It is important to set reasonable goals. One member says, "There's not a single person in the room from all our agencies who doesn't fall prey to the desire to do more than is actually possible. If you put us in the same room, the effect multiplies, since all of us have more ideas than we can actually follow through on." With so many challenges to overcome

and so many youth that are unsafe in school, it is tempting to take on more work than personnel and financial resources would permit to do well or to sustain over time. The Coalition saw its most measurable success when it was able to concentrate efforts on a small number of school sites, including sites with allies who could open the door for member agencies. That way, they were truly able to offer the full menu of services and reach youth through many different types of interventions.

Cultural competence is complex and essential. A safe schools coalition for LGBTQ youth must include explicit goals for raising the cultural competence of all advocates for change — including coalition members, their agency staff, and all youth and adults they wish to mobilize in this work. Advocates must acknowledge that the LGBTQ community includes individuals of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic status, ages, and genders. It should incorporate culturally responsive approaches that address the multiple characteristics and meet the needs and assets of this diverse population.[9] For safe school efforts to be successful — resulting in environments that foster the health and well-being of all students — advocates should ensure that the intersecting identities within the LGBTQ community are acknowledged and that injustices relating to any of these identities are explicitly addressed.

LGBTQ youth feel safer when they know they have adult allies. Reflecting on how things have changed at a high school in Central Contra Costa County since the Coalition began its work in the district, a GSA member says, "I do feel it has gotten better with the staff. I think the staff treat students equally now." When asked to what this might be attributed, the student continues, "A lot of teachers are openly gay or lesbian now, and the rest of the staff have to learn to work with these people." Another youth has noticed that teachers address the use of anti-gay slurs in the classroom now — something they did not do in previous years. These examples highlight the importance in a student's mind of a network of adult allies within the school community, including adults who know they, themselves, have a right to be openly LGBTQ and adults who respect them. Encouraging adults to be allies to any LGBTQ individual and giving them the knowledge and skills they need to speak up against anti-gay harassment is a key element in making schools safer for all youth.

LGBTQ youth and allies need long-term support for the risks they are taking. While participating in supportive programming can reduce isolation and bring positive change to individuals and communities, the situation for LGBTQ youth and their allies is inherently complicated. For some, being seen at a GSA meeting or speaking out against discrimination serves to "brand" them as LGBTQ. As one youth comments, "I was afraid to join [GSA] because, by joining, I thought everyone would know." Other students offer mixed reports about whether efforts to increase LGBTQ visibility give rise to greater student support or more visible homophobia. The experience of the Coalition, however, is that with continuity of support by adults, the stigma youth face diminishes. A member explains, "Some youth feel that by being in a GSA they create awareness and verbal harassment goes up at first, but if you have continuity and consistency, the harassment goes down. For example, I've been involved [in one district] for the past two years, and graduates come back and support the younger students, too. That's building continuity. The youth feel more equipped now to stop or fight harassment."

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[9] Please see *Reports One* and *Three* for fuller discussions of CCSSC's commitment to cultural competence within the Coalition and its member agencies.

Report Three

Engaging Multiple Stakeholders in Institutional Change:

Two Case Studies

Introduction

The Contra Costa Safe Schools Coalition (CCSSC) was launched in 2003 to respond to the harassment and isolation experienced by LGBTQ youth in Contra Costa high schools, as well as the lack of accurate and culturally relevant information about issues related to LGBTQ students' health, relationships, and rights.

As described in the *Foreword* to this three-part series, CCSSC employs a variety of strategies to create safer schools for LGBTQ and all youth; the community forum is one such strategy. The Coalition convenes community forums in order to mobilize neighborhood and community stakeholders to

Devise New Strategies and Plans; Adjust as Needed

Youth Interventions

Policy Change for Safer Schools

Outreach to Media and/or Officials in Districts or Government

Interventions with School and/or District Personnel

Work with Adult and Youth Community Members

CCSSC Strategies for Policy Change to Make Schools Safe for All Youth

advocate for policy change and implementation that will lead to safer school environments. Through these forums, the Coalition aims to help community members to:

▸ Increase their cultural awareness and sensitivity to all lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer or questioning (LGBTQ) youth issues. [10]

▸ Expand their knowledge about the mandates of AB 537 and SB 71. [11]

▸ Increase their awareness of available CCSSC resources for Contra Costa youth.

The strategies used in the community forums complement and, at times, include approaches used by the Coalition in its other service, leadership development, and advocacy work. (*See diagram of strategies above.*)

CCSSC began holding community forums in a Central Contra Costa County school district ("Central County") in 2005–2006, and in an East Contra Costa County school district ("East County") in 2006–2007. The experience in each district has been unique in terms of timelines, community characteristics, follow-through, complementary activities and

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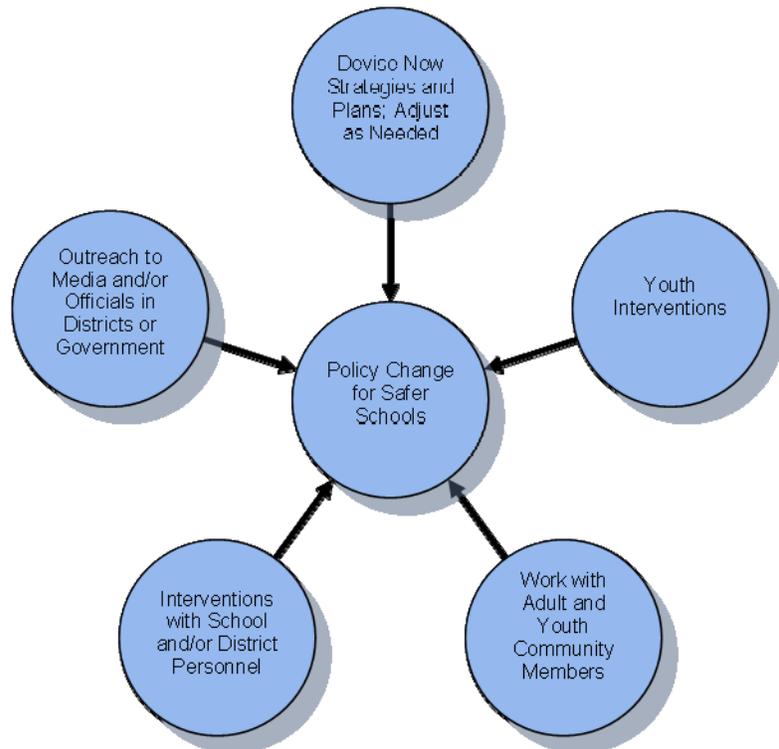
[10] LGBTQ youth issues include those related to the intersections of gender identity/expression, sexual orientation, ethnicity, and class.

[11] Please see the *Foreword* to this series of reports for explanations of the provisions of these laws.

interventions by CCSSC member organizations and agencies, and the overall shape of the forum and mobilization process.

The following report, the third in a series of three, presents the story of the Coalition's work — and the lessons learned — within each targeted district as a separate case study.

Strategies

Community organizing is a strategy for uniting members of a community in action around issues that are important to them. A prominent grassroots leader points out, "The best policy emerges from the concerns, ideas, and values of people at the community level."[12] By listening to two very different communities in Contra Costa County, CCSSC has been able to tailor the strategies of its community forum approach so that stakeholders in each community collectively set their own priorities and agendas for action.

Case Study: A Central Contra Costa County School District

Convening Community Members

The first district targeted for action by CCSSC, "Central County," encompasses close to 40 schools (including high schools, middle schools, and alternative schools). CCSSC members decided to hold two community forums in this district during the 2005–2006 school year. The purpose of the forums would be to support community members — local school officials, parents, students, and others — in deepening their understanding of the challenges that confront LGBTQ youth, in sharing a commitment to creating positive change, and in increasing their awareness of CCSSC resources and support services. Coalition members were aware that some parents and activist groups in the district had strongly opposed policies and curricula supportive of LGBTQ rights in the past. By convening community members to educate them about the laws and the daily experiences of hostility and violence experienced by LGBTQ youth, CCSSC hoped to foster a more vocal and effective majority in favor of positive change on a district-wide level.

Coalition members planned presentations and recruited youth leaders to speak about AB 537 to a broad audience of adults and youth from the communities served by Central County. They assisted the youth — who were participants in leadership and advocacy programs of CCSSC member organizations — in developing talking points and public speaking skills and committed to attending and providing support to the youth presenters during the community forums.

During the planning process, CCSSC members decided it would be important to convene the first community forum with "allies" — people already known to be supportive of upholding the rights of LGBTQ youth and who could provide constructive feedback on the content and style of the community forum. The *Community Forum for Allies* was held in January 2006 with 23 participating adult and youth community members. Presentations by Coalition members and youth addressed district responsibilities and possible strategies to

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12 Jim Keddy, executive director of PICO California Project, as quoted in S. Sukop (2006) *PICO California Supports Grassroots Advocates for Change*, CenterScene, Fall 2006, The California Endowment's Center for Healthy Families, p. 4.

make schools safer for actual or perceived LGBTQ youth. Feedback on evaluations disseminated after the forum helped the Coalition to prepare for its next convening that would target a larger and more diverse audience.

The second community forum was held four months later, in April 2006. Fifty-two individuals participated, including several school staff members, volunteers, and administrators from Central County.
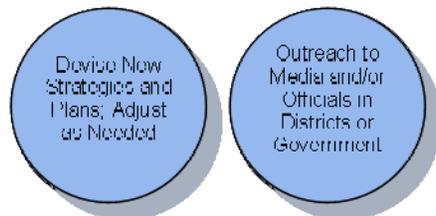
Partnering with Non-Coalition Stakeholders

After the second community forum, a small number of Central County administrators raised concerns that the Coalition was highlighting the district's shortcomings rather than acknowledging the efforts it had already made regarding AB 537 implementation. This, they feared, would have the dual result of publicly embarrassing the district (unfairly, they believed) and paving the way for a backlash from community members who would react by demanding that Central County stop allocating resources for AB 537 compliance, either because of hostility toward LGBTQ youth or because of demands for other priorities for district resources.

A CCSSC member explains the delicate balance the Coalition tried to maintain between strengthening compliance of AB 537 implementation and fostering relationships with the district based on cooperation and trust: "The administrators' concerns were a reminder to the Coalition of the unique niche we are working to fill by building a dual relationship of accountability and support with individual school districts." Over the next several months, the coordinator and other Coalition members undertook intensive outreach efforts to engage administrators in dialogue about ways in which the Coalition might partner with them to bring Central County into full compliance with the mandates of AB 537. Gradually, the relationship between the Coalition and the concerned administrators shifted to one of cooperation and even trust. A mutual decision was made to move from the community forum model to sensitivity and compliance trainings for district staff throughout the coming school year.

Educating District Personnel

CCSSC's community forums within the district were catalysts in mobilizing the administration to call for staff trainings. Conversations between the CCSSC coordinator and Central County administrators were instrumental in motivating the district to bring in a legal adviser who, in turn, helped to move the district toward training all personnel on the legal mandates related to LGBTQ youth and school safety. In partnership with district administration, CCSSC led three district-wide trainings on understanding and meeting the mandates of AB 537 for nearly 200 district personnel during the 2006–2007 school year. The CCSSC coordinator worked with the legal adviser to plan the content and assist with implementation of these trainings.

CCSSC Trainings for Central County District Personnel		
When	**Who**	**Number Trained**
October 2006	School psychologists, special education staff, and social work interns and staff	65
October 2006	All district administrators	85
November 2006	All district co-administrators/vice principals and student service coordinators	49

Integrating Cultural Competence and an Anti-oppression Framework

From its earliest planning sessions, CCSSC made a commitment to expand the cultural competence of its members so that they would be able to reach youth at the intersections of LGBTQ, ethnic, and other cultural identities. Cross-trainings by member agencies whose mission is centered around LGBTQ youth raised the understanding and capacity of other members to adjust curricula and talking points to better reach those youth and educate others (non-LGBTQ students and teachers, for instance) about an oppressed and often invisible population in their midst.

At the beginning of the 2006–2007 school year, the Coalition contracted with a specialist in anti-oppression work, Lynn Johnson, who helped them to notice the fears and biases they brought to their work and to replace those with healing and connection. As Ms. Johnson's summative report of their work together explains:

> *CCSSC members have a collective commitment to work on developing an anti-oppression framework and increasing their cultural competence. A heightened understanding of various power-based relationships and "-isms" (racism, ethnocentrism, ageism, ableism, et cetera) that exist in their own agencies will enable members to become catalysts for change within these organizations. Organizational awareness will, in turn, allow the Coalition to more effectively serve the diverse populations within Contra Costa's LGBTQ youth community and to create the kind of lasting change they wish to see in school communities.*

Coalition members drew on the insights they gained from this work as they discussed the power and points of view of the individuals within the district, approaches that CCSSC members might take individually or collectively to initiate a positive relationship with these

Coalition members drew on the insights they gained from their cultural competence work as they discussed the power and points of view of the individuals in Central County.

representatives, and how to conduct their work with one another and with district personnel in ways that affirm each other's experiences and needs while creating safer schools for all youth.

Further Partnering and Next Steps

CCSSC met with and supported Central County administrators over the 2006–2007 school year. As of July 2007, the Coalition was in discussion with the district about delivering a training-of-trainers presentation during the fall of 2007 for district personnel, who will then train all site-based personnel (including classroom teachers) in the district during the 2007–2008 school year.

Case Study: An East Contra Costa County School District

Convening Community Members

The second district targeted by the Coalition, "East County," is comprised of approximately 25 schools (including high schools, middle schools, elementary schools, and alternative schools). The district is described by several individuals — Coalition members and members of the broader community in East Contra Costa County — as being economically depressed and "conservative." There is also a common belief that families in the community that might be allies currently lack the time, experience, platform (i.e., a supportive group or other entity with which to rally support and discuss the needs of the community's youth), or inclination to step forward and become effective advocates for the needs of LGBTQ youth.

With Central County training and mobilizing well underway, the Coalition turned its attention to East County at a regular monthly Coalition meeting in early November 2006. Members discussed the likelihood that the community forums in East County would need to be different from the ones in Central County. There were early concerns about whether the Coalition would have "the capacity to follow up with whatever needs or response may arise out of the forum experience," while continuing to dedicate follow-up resources to Central County. In addition, they were informed by their experience in that district, which had highlighted for them the slow pace at which school districts implement change and the importance of post-community forum work by the Coalition to bring about real change. The decision was made to hold an initial ally forum for East County youth (youth from one of the districts in East County who already had participated in safe haven activities by Coalition member organizations) and adult allies in February 2007. *The goal of the first East County community forum was to ensure that youth voices were heard by more of that district's adult allies who could partner with them in addressing issues in the district.*

Six students from East County, two former students, and two adults came to the *Ally Community Forum*. The low number of adult community members was a stark contrast to the turnout at Central County community forums. The forum quickly shifted from a formal presentation of laws and strategies to an opportunity for the youth to share their stories about what it is like for LGBTQ students in their district. They reported:

▸ Absence of administrative response to complaints of LGBTQ-related harassment.
▸ Lack of adult support in school.
▸ Inactive GSA adviser.
▸ Censorship of GSA club announcements.
▸ Lack of consistency in the approval process of GSA materials.

‣ Suspension for "vandalism" after GSA drew chalk outlines on campus grounds in honor of transgender murder victims on Transgender Day of Remembrance.

CCSSC members noted that this first forum helped the youth to learn more about CCSSC, introduced them to a small number of supportive adults, and gave them a "test run" for future presentations.
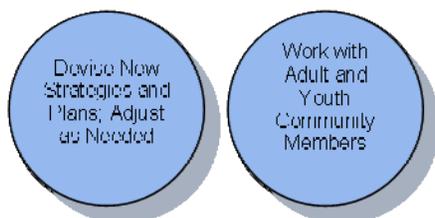
Partnering with Non-Coalition Stakeholders

After the first forum, CCSSC refined its articulation of the goals for future East County community forums. These became: *story-telling, bringing adults to hear the youth, making connections and links between youth and adults in the community, and generally expanding the "ally network" that will be ready to take action for change in the near future.*

CCSSC members conducted concerted outreach efforts via e-mail, flyer, phone call, and in-person requests to bring more community members and recruit new allies before and after each of the next four forums. Gradually, other youth and more adult allies attended:

‣ **March 2007**: Seven current East County students, five former students, and ten adults.

‣ **April 2007**: 11 current East County students, three former students, and nine adults. Adult participants included members from the local faith-based community (including two "open and affirming" churches, whose mission includes publicly welcoming persons of all sexual orientations and gender identities) and one adviser from an East County high school.

‣ **June 2007**: Five current East County students, two former students, and seven adults.

CCSSC members made formal presentations at the forums, covering several of the same topics addressed in Central County community forums, including AB 537. At each meeting, youth shared their stories, adults asked questions and shared their ideas for bringing in more community allies, and Coalition members supported participants in articulating plans of action. Since most of the youth attending East County forums had experience with one particular high school, the stories they told were specific to the young people and adults in that school.

Unlike the Central County experience, these community convenings were designed as invitation-only events to preserve the safety of the students involved. Only identified ally district staff and other adults in the community were invited to the East County community forums. Part of the intention of these ally forums was to build a network of community support needed to plan and implement a more public community forum in the future. A district social worker, the director of special education, and a GSA adviser attended at least one of these East County convenings.

Integrating Cultural Competence and an Anti-oppression Framework

The Coalition's cultural competence training and anti-oppression work may have been an important factor in the development of the East County forums as productive, community-building meetings. During early forums, adult participants from the community had difficulty listening to the youth participants; they identified offensive language and interruptions by the youth as the problem. Coalition members knew they would need to address dynamics related to power, privilege, and the different cultural realities of both groups of community

> *"[W]e've gotten good communication skills between everyone. It was harder for youth and adults since we were so used to talking to our sides. I'm glad we're now looking at what the other side has to offer."*
>
> – A youth participant in East County community forums

members to help them communicate before any substantial planning could occur. While they worked with adults to set aside age biases that might prevent them from valuing the ideas youth brought to the table, they provided extensive coaching to help the youth learn how to constructively engage people of privilege and power — something these youth had not seen modeled in their relatively low-income families and neighborhoods. (The adults were primarily from more affluent communities in East Contra Costa County.) The process gave the youth the support of trustworthy adults, something else to which they had had little prior exposure.

Further Partnering and Next Steps

At the June 2007 meeting, youth and adult participants together drew up specific action plans to address the needs prioritized by the youth, including support for GSA chapters, an end to censorship and bias against LGBTQ youth, and the immediate goals of staff training and youth education regarding AB 537. They decided that the next step should be to contact the principal of the high school to discuss the issues students are facing, introduce the work of the Coalition, give examples of AB 537 non-compliance at the school, and arrange a meeting to discuss these matters and offer CCSSC trainings for the school-site staff. Forum participants decided that the response to this effort would determine future tactics and next steps. A fifth *Ally Forum* was scheduled for just before the beginning of the 2007–2008 school year. At that time, community members planned to share the principal's response to their outreach efforts and to strategize how to proceed from there.

Achievements

⇨ **Community members are learning about issues facing LGBTQ youth.**
   Community forum participants completed surveys measuring knowledge gained from the events. *Participants of the Central County community forums learned*:
   ‣ Risks that LGBTQ youth face in school and at home.
   ‣ The school-wide impact of homophobia, anti-gay harassment, and related violence.

‣ Steps the district can take to prevent harassment and create a safer school environment for real or perceived LGBTQ youth. (They show the greatest gain in this area.)

‣ The district's responsibilities under state and federal laws protecting LGBTQ youth in schools.

Participants of East County community forums began with less understanding about how they might help to create safer school environments and about their district's responsibilities under state and federal laws than their Central County counterparts. East County participants show gains *across all four topic areas* that both districts' forums addressed. The *biggest gains* in East County are in participants' knowledge of:

‣ Steps that their district can take to prevent harassment and create a safer school environment for real or perceived LGBTQ youth.

‣ Their district's legal responsibilities under state and federal laws to protect LGBTQ youth in school.

⇨ **Community members are participating in meaningful dialogue.**

Whether the community members are district personnel, community faith-based leaders, or former high school students, CCSSC members understand that they need to build relationships in order to begin to bring about change at the district level. Their efforts in both districts often involved slow and difficult work to forge and deepen relationships with these stakeholders. Evidence of their success includes:

‣ The CCSSC coordinator and a leading Central County administrator both report that their working relationship is positive and leading to — or at least supporting — ongoing changes in the district.

‣ Coalition members report that the progress the youth in East County have made in learning how to listen to others' views and work in a way that strengthens their ties with allies has been one of the principle gains of the forums so far.

> *"People showed up and we got to talk, and the people did seem concerned about what was going on at the school and they're willing to help."*
>
> – A youth participant at East County community forums

‣ Youth in East County report feeling like they are making progress in hearing and being heard, in part because of their strengthened communication and presentation skills. These new skills contributed to the concrete strategizing that was possible at the June forum, and they are a critical part of the groundwork necessary for the youth to be heard when they speak to their community at-large (not just committed allies) and district representatives.

⇨ **Central County community forums helped to catalyze action.**

Extensive conversations between the CCSSC coordinator and Central County district administrators were instrumental in moving the district toward mandating trainings for all district personnel (co-facilitated by CCSSC members) on the legal mandates related to

LGBTQ youth and school safety. At least one staff member credits the Coalition's work for getting the district's formal harassment reporting systems in place.

While Coalition members understand that change in a school district takes time, they see signs of greater openness to training and the willingness of adults to support students' rights. As one explains, "It's a step-by-step process. For example, the community forums happened last year in [Central County]. We trained administrators earlier this year, but it took all year to get to a point where training would be implemented throughout the entire district. As a result, all district staff will be trained next year." Another observes, "[Central County] is the first district we focused on. Last year, there was a lot of reluctance from them, and now they've come around and agreed on the problem and are willing to accept the Coalition's help." One member expresses the view that the Coalition will be able to leverage the positive relationship and outcomes in Central County to gain entry into other districts, anticipating that once they see how constructive the relationship with CCSSC has been for Central County, administrators elsewhere will more readily accept or, perhaps, even invite the Coalition's presence in their district.

⇨ **East County community forums helped to mobilize stakeholders.**

The steady attendance and participation of East County youth, the increase of adult allies at each community forum, and the current action planning among forum participants reflect a community mobilization effort designed to bring about policy change and the creation of safer schools for LGBTQ and all youth. *For instance*:

▸ One adult participant with several connections on the local school board has volunteered to speak with board members if and when the community forum participants feel that would be helpful.

▸ After a CCSSC member talked to community forum participants about starting a local PFLAG chapter in East County as a community-building tool, two adult community members started planning local chapters. They are drawing on CCSSC members' support throughout this process.

▸ Youth community forum participants are actively engaged in plans for the forums' next steps. One expresses the belief that the youth, themselves, should be involved in any district or school-site training effort.

Considering how little community voice or stakeholder collaboration existed before the Coalition's efforts, these signs of community members starting to take initiative denote important progress. The outcomes of the community forums in East County are early signs of the potential for the Coalition's positive impact. In the coming year, the Coalition will continue to support Central County in training its workforce, while looking for ways to make more inroads into East County.

Challenges

Engaging multiple stakeholders is a critical component of grassroots work to change community norms. CCSSC made significant progress although it encountered challenges in each targeted community, both expected and unforeseen.

Lack of Information and Awareness: In both Central County and East County communities, CCSSC found that many teachers, administrators, community members, and youth are unaware of the existence of

> *"Now I understand that AB 537 has no implementation guidelines. Since the only monitoring is lawsuits and formal complaints, the complaint process must be made clear to all."*
>
> – An adult participant in Central County community forums

AB 537. Those community members outside of the schools who are familiar with it are likely to be unaware of its lack of meaningful implementation within districts. A youth participant in East County community forums explains, "Our parents, families, and teachers know that there are LGBTQ issues going on in the community, but it's mainly ignorance by choice here: Unless something is affecting people directly, they don't want anything to do with it. That's how the hatred is continuing. We want to show that there is a problem and something needs to be done about it." An adult community member in the same district says, "I didn't even know there was a need for this. I know AB 537 is a law, and I assumed it had been put into place."

This lack of awareness is compounded by the general invisibility of LGBTQ youth culture to those outside it and by the large number of school and district personnel that do not know about CCSSC and its work. One non-Coalition stakeholder says, "[CCSSC] needs to be seen as a Coalition. Part of it is their name — 'safe schools' can be so many different things, and 'the Contra Costa Safe Schools Coalition' is so long. They need to come up with something short that can describe what they're talking about. If they're going to be working around an underrepresented population, which is very appropriate, then they have to figure out how to communicate that better."

The lack of awareness and visibility are important hurdles for the Coalition to overcome in order to make progress.

Complexities Involved in Changing Community Norms: The task of changing what is "acceptable" or who is visible in a community can be slow and difficult. Some of the issues CCSSC encounters are:

- ‣ Some administrators emphasize the need to work at a pace that will allow for the most positive change and instigate the least community backlash.
- ‣ Right-wing political or religious groups are organized and powerful in some communities. Their actions and likely reactions are important to consider when developing strategies that acknowledge the rights of LGBTQ youth to be safe in school.

> *"I think the challenges are working with school districts as institutions and all that entails. It's a daunting experience, particularly with wanting to see change happen and happen quickly. Systems are slow."*
>
> –A non-Coalition stakeholder

- ‣ People often do not make the connection between other forms of oppression that are widely believed to be unacceptable and oppression related to LGBTQ youth. That needs to be highlighted in order to reach the most people.

‣ When there are competing issues, such as ethnic violence, classism, and other demands on educators' time (such as *No Child Left Behind* mandates), safety for LGBTQ youth can seem less urgent to district personnel and community members.

‣ Some adults are uncomfortable being taught by youth presenters and hearing them speak about sexuality.

Different Youth and Adult Priorities: Sometimes youth and adults have different agendas and priorities. Because of ingrained biases in American culture, it can be difficult for adults to give the same weight to young people's priorities as they would to those of other adults. As one youth community forum participant reflects, "The only problem that we really had with the forum for the youth was that the youth and adults did not see eye to eye about what the problem was for the school. The adults wanted to stop homophobia between student peers, but most of us felt like the biggest problem is the faculty, because we can't change peers by law. We had a hard time with that."

Helping youth get heard also entails thinking about the best ways to engage and inform them. Another youth explains, "Youth spread information by talking to people we know and gossiping. Adults use more professional things, like fliers and the Internet. We need more funding or resources so we can do things like bigger ads on the Internet or posters — something visual we can show people instead of talking. When you talk to people they feel uncomfortable, but if it's visual, they have time to think about it without feeling like they have to defend themselves."

Various Stakeholder Needs: Several Coalition and non-Coalition stakeholders have commented on the need to be sensitive to stakeholder needs and the corresponding challenges involved in engaging all community stakeholders in a safe schools movement. For instance:

‣ District leaders may acknowledge anti-LGBTQ harassment as a problem, but they have many other problems to address.

‣ Educators have so many "testing and accountability" demands on their time that they do not feel able to prioritize the time needed to attend a CCSSC-sponsored training.

‣ Educators and administrators may feel that they will be judged or accused of being homophobic if they acknowledge that they are unaware of the laws protecting LGBTQ youth. Their discomfort can bring strong resistance to taking in new information and committing to change.

‣ Cultural differences within community groups (e.g., age, socioeconomic status, or ethnicity) can present barriers to constructive dialogue and developing shared agendas.

Yet another challenge is related to stakeholders who, because of their affiliations or role in the community, could provide financial support for the Coalition's work but do not. Two stakeholders bring up the issue of sustainability and the question of why local funders are not involved in this movement yet. They suggest that the Coalition needs to be more visible in the communities it serves and to engage in strategic networking with community business and philanthropic leaders, a task currently being undertaken by the Coalition's Sustainability Committee. (*See Report One for details about CCSSC's structure*.)

Lessons for the Field

The members of the Contra Costa Safe Schools Coalition deliberately chose to follow time-tested strategies of community and grassroots involvement, knowing that lasting change must involve the efforts and honor the priorities and concerns of those who will be most affected by it. Several lessons from their experience in the community forum process are important for others planning similar work elsewhere in the state or country to consider.

Mobilizing grassroots action requires diverse strategies. The Coalition's community forum experience illustrates what community organizers can do to help create change when they pay attention to the concerns, strengths, and goals of their constituents. By listening to the youth in Central and East County and responding to the needs of administrators afraid of political backlash and adults struggling to understand youth issues, the Coalition has been able to facilitate two very different yet strong movements for community change.

Changing community policies and practices requires flexibility and reflection. Policy change requires flexibility among agents for change — ensuring that they are ready to shift strategies when windows of opportunity or barriers appear. After encountering district resistance to the community forum process in Central County, the Coalition was able to forge positive relationships and help bring about training in AB 537 compliance for all district personnel. In East County, the Coalition realized that intensive work on communication and engaging stakeholders was necessary before any school-based action (like trainings for staff) or other building blocks to creating safer schools could take place. The strategy shifts the Coalition made in each district occurred because CCSSC members discussed, evaluated, and jointly developed solutions to problems they encountered at monthly meetings and through committee work and frequent communication.

Agents of change need support to build their own cultural competence. The Coalition's work on its own cultural competence assists it in addressing issues encountered during the community forum process. By perceiving power dynamics and societal biases in their own lives, their workplaces, and the communities they serve, members are able to address roadblocks to collaborative work among stakeholders. By providing technical assistance to stakeholders, in the form of printed materials and presentations to inform and support them in understanding what cultural competence means with regard to LGBTQ youth, or even in the form of coaching for better communication, CCSSC has been able to achieve many successes that would not have been possible otherwise.

Conclusion to the Series

The Contra Costa Safe Schools Coalition has made significant progress in changing school environments for LGBTQ and all youth. Contributing to the Coalition's success are the careful groundwork and flexible structure of the Coalition, coupled with the commitment of its members to bring cultural competence to their work together, to their agencies, and to the populations they serve. CCSSC found that the process of changing school and district culture is often slow and always incremental. Nevertheless, through joint and complementary activities over a four-year period, the Coalition's interventions have led to positive outcomes in policy change, expanding relevant knowledge and understanding among youth and adults, increasing districts' compliance with laws protecting the rights of youth, decreasing the isolation of LGBTQ youth, and engaging youth and community members in advocating for systems-level change.

Appendix

Methods

CCSSC contracted with Korwin Consulting to conduct an evaluation of its work from May 2003 through June 2007. Recognizing the rare opportunity to learn about a community initiative from its inception, Korwin Consulting worked closely with Coalition members to design and implement a multi-method evaluation that could best capture this comprehensive effort. The evaluation methods included:

▸ **Activity Tracking Log.** This activity tracking form, created at the online data collection and analysis site, SurveyMonkey.com, captures the number of individuals participating in each of the CCSSC youth and adult interventions.[13] It was completed by all CCSSC member organizations.

▸ **Retrospective Pre-Test.** An evaluative survey was disseminated to adult and youth participants at the end of each training, workshop, and community forum, asking them to compare their attitudes, knowledge, and understanding regarding specific topics before and after the event they had just attended. CCSSC members entered the results into an online data collection tool at SurveyMonkey.com.

▸ **Key Informant Interviews.** The experiences and perspectives of individuals involved in long-term policy and institutional change work are indispensable to understanding the impact of their efforts. Korwin Consulting conducted 29 key informant interviews with CCSSC members, local school officials, parents, community members, and students.

▸ **Youth Focus Groups.** Korwin Consulting conducted focus groups with LGBTQ youth in four Contra Costa County schools in May 2005. A total of 45 youth participated, exploring issues including their perceptions of school safety, levels of inclusion, acceptance, and visibility at school, opportunities for LGBTQ leadership, and the impact of participating in CCSSC trainings and activities.

▸ **Observation and Review of Internal Communications.** Working for lasting community and political change is seldom linear. In between planned actions, there are myriad meetings and conversations to assess impact and plan new strategies in response to unexpected opportunities or barriers. Because of the nature of the Coalition's work, Korwin Consulting observed *Coalition meetings and outreach activities.*. Notes, e-mail communications, investigative conversations, and memoranda regarding the day-to-day workings of the Coalition were also used to inform the evaluation of CCSSC's work and impact.

Korwin Consulting analyzed the above data annually, and in the interest of fostering a culture of self-evaluation, also trained CCSSC members on accessing their individual and collective process outputs and outcomes on the SurveyMonkey.com site.

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[13] "Interventions" is used as an umbrella term covering different kinds of events, activities, workshops, and trainings.

Data Limitations

Korwin Consulting and Coalition members made every effort to collect meaningful data throughout the evaluation period. Focus groups and interviews with various stakeholders and observations from meetings and electronic and printed communications served to triangulate findings from surveys and the Activity Tracking Log.

At the same time, there are limitations to the data. Because of the need to ensure youth and adult participant confidentiality and the difficulties in assigning unique identifiers that they would remember and use during each retrospective pre-test, it was not possible to track each individual youth across all interventions and over time. Therefore, the data presented describes a duplicated count of youth reached by CCSSC's various program interventions.

Another limitation in determining the impact of the Coalition's work is that CCSSC agencies were not always able to enter all retrospective pre-test data into the online data collection tool, due to staffing and resource limitations; therefore, some data about short-term impacts from trainings and other events were not available for the formal evaluation process.