

Ally Action (California)
 American Friends Service Committee
 Capital District Gay & Lesbian Community
 Council
 Charles Wright Academy (Tacoma, WA)
 Delta Lambda Phi at University of Washington
 Diversity Productions
 Equality New Mexico
 Families United Against Hate
 Gay Straight Educators Alliance of the National
 Council of Teachers of English
 GLOBE (sponsored by PFLAG Everett-
 Snohomish County)
 GLSEN - Washington State
 Greater Seattle Business Association
 Idaho Safe Schools Coalition
 Inlaws & Outlaws Hearts and Minds Campaign
 King County (WA) Sexual Assault Resource
 Center
 Kitsap Safe Schools Network
 Lake Washington Education Association
 Lambert House
 Leander Middle School (Leander, Texas)
 Lifelong AIDS Alliance
 Morningside Academy
 North Carolina Healthy Schools Initiative
 Oregon Safe Schools and Community Coalition
 OSPI (The Office of the Superintendent of Public
 Instruction, Washington State)
 PFLAG National – Parents, Families & Friends of
 Lesbians and Gays – and 4 local chapters:
 Bellevue, Olympia, Seattle and Skagit Valley
 Planned Parenthood of Greater Washington and
 Northern Idaho
 Planned Parenthood of the Great Northwest
 Pride Foundation
 Programs for Peaceful Living
 Public Health - Seattle & King County
 Ravenna United Methodist Church
 Respect for All Project, GroundSpark
 Safe Schools of Wyoming
 Science & Management of Addictions (SAMA)
 Foundation
 Seattle Counseling Service for Sexual Minorities
 Seattle Office for Civil Rights
 Seattle Public Schools
 Teaching Tolerance, Southern Poverty Law
 Center
 Teen Talking Circles
 Three Wings
 Turning Institute
 University of Puget Sound - Multicultural Student
 Services
 Washington Association of School Social
 Workers
 Washington Education Association
 Washington State University's Gender
 Identity/Expression & Sexual Orientation
 Resource Center
 Western Washington Fellowship of Reconciliation
 Youth Guardian Services
 Youth Suicide Prevention Program



Safe Schools Coalition

Crises: 1-877-SAFE-SAFE

Messages: 206-451-SAFE (7233)

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www.safeschoolscoalition.org

Good morning. My name is Kari Lerum; I am a faculty member at the University of Washington, Bothell, and I am honored today to represent the Safe Schools Coalition. The Safe Schools Coalition is an international public-private partnership headquartered in Washington State that helps schools become safe for everyone regardless of their differences, including sexual orientation and gender expression.

This is a sad day, but also an important day, for Washington State. It is a sad day because bullying cases like Russell Dickerson's are heartbreaking, and absolutely preventable. But this is also an important day because the case of Russell Dickerson will help us all – school administrators, teachers, parents, and policy makers – to move in the right direction. This case will help us make sure that all students are welcome, and none are subjected to cruelty, in Washington State Public schools.

The Safe Schools Coalition did not initiate this lawsuit, although we have helped families to find attorneys when they have asked. Our preference is to focus on prevention: helping teachers and administrators to ensure that harassment simply does not occur in their schools. We also focus on early intervention. In other words, when harassment does occur, our job is to respond swiftly with effective non-legal interventions.

This is important work. We know from *The Washington State Healthy Youth Survey* that more than a quarter of 8th graders in Washington State report having been bullied at least once in the past month.¹ 15% of those 8th grade students report that they have been harassed or intimidated because of their race (or what they perceived it to be). 14% of those students report being harassed for their sexual orientation (or what someone perceived it to be). And one out of 5 (20%) of students report being harassed for

their gender (including “sexual jokes, gestures, or comments” that make them “feel uncomfortable”). It gets a little better with age, dropping from more than 25% to 16% percent of overall harassment between 8th grade and senior year. Some of this reduction is undoubtedly due to kids maturing. But some is also due to the fact that bullied students sometimes just give up and drop out. Fortunately, Russell had the personal strength and the family support not to give up and drop out.

In Grays Harbor County, where Russell attended school, racial bullying is slightly less common than for the state as a whole, This may be due to the fact that there are fewer students of color in Grays Harbor County. At the same time, in Grays Harbor County we also see slightly higher rates of bullying based on sexual orientation and gender. We also know that bias-based harassment occurs across all counties of Washington State, including Rural, Urban, and Suburban schools. Rates in King County are nearly identical to statewide figures.

What the Safe Schools Coalition wants to emphasize today is that all of these statistics -- across all of counties in Washington State -- can change for the better. Bullying is actually preventable. There are proactive anti-bullying policies that school administrators and teachers can and must implement. Three separate studies published in 2003, 2004 and 2006 all found that students in schools with anti-bullying policies, programs and practices feel safer and are at much less risk than students in schools without such policies.²³⁴⁵ Specifically, students are safer and healthier when their schools use the following four strategies:

1. The school has a well-publicized and enforced policy that explicitly prohibits bullying and discrimination on the basis of race, religion, gender expression and sexual orientation.
2. The school trains and encourages teachers to intervene when harassment happens.
3. The school has support groups for kids, such as gay-straight alliances, and
4. The school makes available information about lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people at school and in the curricula.

In closing: If you are a student – or a family member or friend of a student –who is experiencing bias-based harassment and intimidation at school, please contact the Safe Schools Coalition for help. Call 1-877-SAFE-SAFE. If you are a school employee or school board member, we invite you to contact the Safe Schools Coalition for guidance and support in making your school cruelty-free. Our web site is www.safeschoolscoalition.org . If this law suit accomplishes anything, let it be to both alleviate the damage inflicted upon Russell Dickenson, and to make Washington State schools safer for kids right now. Thank you Russell and thanks to the ACLU for holding all Washington schools accountable in our common quest to create learning environments that are welcoming and free of harassment.

¹ 2006 Washington State Healthy Youth Survey

² Russell, S. (2010). Supportive Social Services for LGBT Youth: Lessons from the Safe Schools Movement. *The Prevention Researcher*, 17(4), 14-16.

³ Goodenow, C., Szalacha, L., & Westheimer, K. (2006). School support Groups, Other School Factors, and the Safety of Sexual Minority Adolescents. *Psychology in the Schools*, 43(5), 573-589.

⁴ O’Shaughnessy, M. et al. (2004). *Safe Place to Learn: Consequences of Harassment Based on Actual or Perceived Sexual Orientation and Gender Non-Conformity and Steps for Making Schools Safer*. San Francisco, CA: California Safe Schools Coalition.

⁵ Szalacha, L.A. (2003). Safer Sexual Diversity Climates: Lessons learned from an evaluation of Massachusetts safe schools program for gay and lesbian students. *American Journal of Education*, 110(1), 58-88.