

Consideration of Petition PE1573 (Statutory teaching of LGBTI+ issues)

Submission to Public Petitions Committee

Vale of Leven Academy

Overview

Vale of Leven Academy Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender and Intersex (LGBTI+) Committee is a pupil led group that works in partnership with Stonewall Scotland and the TIE Campaign (Time for Inclusive Education) in transforming the culture of the school to be inclusive, and focused on positive outcomes for all to achieve the school vision of 'Achieving Together'.

The Committee works with outside organisations to increase the visibility of LGBT Inclusive Education in schools in order to improve the experiences of all young people. This project has raised the profile of LGBT learners and the issues that they face, helped to champion equality and promote diversity, and made the learning environment more inclusive so that all young people, regardless of sexual orientation or identity, have a safe and supportive environment in which to achieve their full potential.

Planning

Vale of Leven Academy LGBTI+ Committee was established in 2013 by a group of senior pupils who wanted to improve provision for lgbti+ young people in the school. This was achieved through young people working with staff to identify the main issues which needed to be addressed, including the lack of awareness and understanding of differing sexual orientations and gender identity and expressions, the prevalence of the casual use of homophobic language as well as bullying, a lack of visibility and recognition of lgbti+ young people and a lack of staff expertise to provide support, guidance and signposting to relevant organisations.

The aims identified by the pupils were in direct response to the needs of the young people and are in line with GIRFEC, a Curriculum for Excellence and West Dunbartonshire Council priorities to 'promote health and well being and to develop our children and young people'.

The main objectives of the committee are to:

- to tackle homophobic language and bullying
- to make the school a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment for all pupils, parents and staff
- to promote diversity and celebrate difference
- by early intervention improve attendance, attainment, mental health and positive leaver destinations for all pupils within the school community.
- to challenge gender stereotypes so that all pupils can be their authentic selves, allowing them to invest their energies in study.
- to raise awareness of the issues that affect LGBT pupils within an educational setting
- to raise the profile of LGBT people in sport and to challenge homophobia, especially in football.

In addition to this the committee campaigns for Inclusive LGBT Education in all schools and helps other schools to establish a similar model for LGBT inclusion for the benefit of all learners, staff and parents.

Delivery

The LGBTI+ Committee has carried out a variety of work to achieve its aims, and through evaluating our practice and the impact it has and listening to the feedback of our school community, we have adapted and developed our approach over time.

In the school year 2013/14 we initially established a Rainbow room, which was a safe space for young people to go to report homophobic bullying and language, speak about coming out, or to find out more information or advice on LGBTI+ issues. This was set up in the Anti-Bullying Room, and staffed by senior pupils who were on the committee and had received peer mentoring training from a local LGBT youth group, YSort-It's Fusion. Our senior pupils made contacts with organisations like Stonewall Scotland and LGBT Youth Scotland to ask for support and resources to enhance this initiative. We met regularly, but informally, with key senior pupils to monitor the management of the Rainbow room, and to discuss plans for the future. As the year progressed it became clear to us that the Rainbow Room was having a positive impact for some of our young people; pupils who had never spoken to anyone about LGBTI+ issues before were coming forward to seek advice from the senior mentors, or to report homophobic language and bullying that they had witnessed or experienced. We were delighted that these young people were receiving support finally, but felt that it was on too small a scale, and that more needed to be done.

In the school year 2014/15 we took a more targeted and formal approach. At the very first in-service day, we established a sub-committee of the Health and Wellbeing School Improvement Plan Working Group, where we liaised with other staff about how to make the school a more inclusive place for all pupils by tackling LGBTI+ issues. One of our lead staff, Dawn Wilson, attended Stonewall's Train the Trainer course, providing us not only with Stonewall Champion School status, but with a structure with which to evaluate various elements of the school to ensure a consistent and embedded approach to LGBTI+ inclusion. For example, this led to a complete review and update of the school's anti-bullying policy, and the creation of an LGBTI+ book section in the library. Furthermore, it allowed us to deliver staff awareness raising to all school staff, many of whom contacted us to state how useful and informative it was. With the staff on board we were able to get Stonewall posters into every common area and classroom in the school, ensuring a consistent message to all pupils.

We held our first formal committee meeting in September 2014, where we discussed how to take our new action plan forward, and formed a number of focused working groups within the committee (eg Parental Liaison Team, Pupil Liaison Team, Promotional Team, Rainbow Room Management Team, Bullying Audit Team). Each of our working groups performed different duties, for example, the parental liaison team, accompanied by staff, attended every parent's evening, including the raising attainment evening, with free resources to give to pupils and parents. We received a positive response from parents, and it helped to boost our profile with the wider community. Our Bullying Audit Team designed an Anti-Bullying survey specifically for homophobic bullying and language which was issued to every pupil in the school and completed during PSHE. The team collated the responses and this allowed us to ascertain the extent of the issue within the school. Interestingly all of our statistics were in line with the Stonewall reports regarding the prevalence of homophobic language and bullying. The pupil liaison team established a social network through facebook which has received a lot of positive engagement within the school community and beyond.

We also marked certain events as a school, for example, during anti-bullying week we took part in the Stonewall '#NoBystanders' campaign, running assemblies for every year group, and asking the school community to sign our pledge board to not be a bystander to any form of bullying. We also celebrated LGBT History Month, where we delivered PSHE lessons to every year group and attended the Council's Rainbow flag raising at the head office, which led to the Director of Education, Terry Lanagan, visiting the school to give his full support of our work. On top of that, our pupils ran events for Transgender Day of Remembrance, International Day Against Homophobia, and Purple Friday - which resulted in a charitable donation to Stonewall. All of this helped to make our school a more welcoming place for all young pupils, LGBTI+ issues were given visibility and our young people became more educated and accepting. We are due to complete another anti-bullying audit soon, however many staff and pupils have commented on the shift in atmosphere and the decrease in prevalence of homophobic language.

This school year, we are reviewing our achievements so far and looking at how to build on these both in our school and in other schools. We have liaised with a number of other schools across Scotland to help them establish similar committees, and we have delivered training to probationer teachers in the authority to enable them to raise awareness and develop a skilled response to eradicating homophobic language in their school. Our own committee has been expanded to include pupils from S1-S6, and it is chaired by S6 pupils rather than staff, and the Rainbow Room has continued with a slightly different nature. This was a result of reflecting on our practice and realising there was a need for the rainbow room to be a positive and safe space for LGBTI+ young people and allies to have fun and support each other, the homophobic bullying aspect will be managed by the school's anti-bullying mentors who will be trained and confident in responding to bullying of all types. We are currently liaising with YsortIt to develop the Rainbow Room and establish greater links between our work in school, and their Fusion group. Through this link, we will help YSortIt to establish a Fusion group in our community, as the nearest one to us is Clydebank.

We have also met with Stonewall Scotland, and with the TIE Campaign, both of whom are working on building a case study of our school to distribute to other schools as a model of good practice. These partnerships are ongoing, and with the upcoming meeting with LGBT Youth Scotland regarding the Charter Mark for Schools, will provide us with support in continuing to improve our work this year, including further assemblies, working with role models, implementing a sports charter, further staff training, improving school transitions from primary to secondary and from secondary to further/higher education (links already made and currently being built on here with some feeder primaries, and with Glasgow University).

Innovation & Leading Practice

Research from Stonewall Scotland's School report shows that many young LGBT people are bullied and discriminated against because of their sexual orientation and/or gender expression.

- More than half (54 per cent) of lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils in Scotland don't feel 'part of their school community'.
- Half (49 per cent) of lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils in Scotland don't feel that they are achieving their best at school.
- Seven in ten (71 per cent) lesbian, gay and bisexual pupils in Scotland skip school at some point.
- One in four (26 per cent) lesbian, gay and bisexual young people in Scotland have tried to take their own life at some point.

- More than half (54 per cent) deliberately harm themselves, which can include cutting or burning themselves.

Vale of Leven Academy invests a great deal of time, effort and support in raising attainment, but this has historically taken place by addressing academic needs by providing additional study programmes and closely monitoring the progress of pupils. Our project aims to improve attainment by reducing barriers to accessing the curriculum and all the support structures that VoLA has in place. By raising awareness of LGBT issues and tackling homophobic language and bullying we are making LGBT pupils feel welcome, acknowledged and an important part of the school community. This objective has two main aims, to get non attenders back into the classroom, and by having a zero tolerance approach to homophobic bullying, keep them there so that they feel safe and can concentrate on their learning. By creating a culture of diversity and acceptance the entire school ethos is shifting to one where all pupils can feel valued and safe.

Impact

This group has been the driving force in making LGBT Inclusive education more visible in West Dunbartonshire schools, and other schools outwith the authority. The TIE Campaign, 4 high schools and 2 primary schools are currently working with VoLA LGBTI+ committee to establish similar models in order to promote LGBT inclusive practices within their place of learning. Currently the committee is involved in delivering training to other schools within the authority,

Stonewall Scotland are using the VoLA LGBTI+ Committee group as a model of good practice and plan to use our journey as a case study for future training events.

The impact of the work of the committee is already measurable. This year alone, 2 pupils have 'come out' as Trans and have been supported in their journey and met with acceptance. They are attending classes and engaging with staff that they had not previously. In addition, pupils are educating each other on the use of homophobic language and will challenge others when they hear it. There has been a cultural shift in the school and pupils are buying into the ethos of acceptance and diversity.

Dawn Wilson (Teacher)

Lauren Robson (Teacher)

Catriona Robertson (Head Teacher)