

SUPPORTING LGBT YOUTH

Executive Summary



movement advancement project ▶

December, 2006

Movement Advancement Project

Launched in 2006, the LGBT Movement Advancement Project (MAP) is an independent, intellectual resource for LGBT organization executives and donors, funded by a small number of committed, long term donors to the movement. MAP's mission is to speed achievement of full social and political equality for LGBT people by providing donors and organizations with strategic information, insights and analyses that help them increase and align resources for highest impact. In short, MAP's purpose is to stimulate additional contributions to the LGBT movement, as well as additional productivity from those contributions. See www.lgbtmap.org for more information on MAP.

Strategic Issues Briefs

This report is one of a series of MAP strategic issue briefs. These briefs examine key issues facing the LGBT movement and aim to help funders and organizations put the issues in their current and long-term perspective, understand strategies for solving the problem, prioritize giving and action plans, and, ultimately, make the most effective use of limited resources. In addition, by outlining the broad scope of work underway to solve a specific issue, MAP hopes to spark both funders and organizations to think expansively and to collaborate with other funders and organizations working to solve the same problem.

The opinions expressed in this report reflect the best judgment of MAP and are based on extensive research and examination of the issue, including data gathering and analysis, review of current literature and media, numerous in-depth expert interviews, attendance at key conferences, etc.

MAP strategic issue briefs are based on a point in time and while MAP will periodically update the briefs, current events advance rapidly and, therefore, this report may not reflect the most recent changes in the landscape.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Today's LGBT youth are growing up in an environment that is radically different from that faced by LGBT youth 20 or even ten years ago. On the positive side, American youth as a whole increasingly accept their LGBT peers; LGBT youth are coming out in unprecedented numbers; and some supportive infrastructure, such as Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs, is becoming commonplace in schools. On the other hand, however, as LGBT issues become more highly visible and politicized, LGBT youth face enormous hostility and opposition from conservative factions of society. LGBT youth suffer from a gaping lack of protections from school bullying; a social services and government infrastructure ill-equipped to work with them; and highly stressed families that often disown or perpetrate violence towards them.

This report provides an overview of the social and political events impacting LGBT youth, the organizations and strategies working to support them, and potential funding opportunities to strengthen current LGBT and allied youth work.

Recent Events Increase the Urgency to Support LGBT Youth

LGBT Youth Are Coming Out Much Earlier

Compared to 30 years ago, youth are coming out as gay at much younger ages. In the 1970s, the average young person first became aware of same-sex attraction between ages 13 and 16. By 2005, that average had fallen to age ten. Similarly, in the 1970s the average person first self-identified as gay between ages 19 and 23, falling to age 13 by 2005. Thus in the 1970s, most LGBT people did not self-identify until after high school, when they had reached some level of emotional maturity and were living outside their parents' home. In contrast, youth today increasingly come out in high school or even middle school, while emotionally immature and financially reliant on their families.

Schools and Social Services Are Ill-Equipped to Support Emerging LGBT Youth

The phenomenon of youth coming out at earlier ages has caught the education and social services systems flat-footed. Suddenly, these systems are battlegrounds over LGBT rights with students, parents, clergy, activists, and litigators entering the fray. Beyond youth-serving institutions, the adults who surround LGBT youth – including their parents, coaches, youth pastors, principals, teachers, guidance counselors, social workers, juvenile justice officers, and many more – are often wholly unprepared for understanding, working with, and accepting LGBT youth as they come out of the closet.

In addition to coming out into a much more tumultuous political and social environment, LGBT youth are also coming out at a time when they are much more emotionally, mentally, and financially vulnerable. All teenagers – regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity – endure countless new social pressures, along with rapid physical and emotional changes, at this time of life. These challenges can be exacerbated by realizing that one's sexual orientation is different from that of one's peers. And although more LGBT youth are coming out at younger ages, they are still a small minority, often facing profound levels of isolation. Youth in schools or communities hostile to LGBT people might choose to remain closeted, living each day with the fear of discovery.

LGBT youth that choose to come out of the closet often face stigma, violence, and harassment. Daily harassment and constant threats to safety take a significant toll on LGBT students, who are much more likely than other students to engage in self-harmful activities such as using drugs, making suicide plans or attempting suicide, and getting pregnant or causing a pregnancy.

Many LGBT youth face rejection not just from their peers, but also from their families. An astounding 30 percent of all LGBT youth report suffering physical violence from their families, and 26 percent are forced to leave home because of their sexual orientation or gender identity. Consequently, another response to the stress of being out (or even just being perceived to be gay) at such a young age is to run away from home. Recent data suggest that 42 percent of all LGBT youth who run away do so because of their LGBT identity, and that an astonishing 50 percent of all homeless youth are LGBT. Many end up living on the streets, where they often turn to sex work or theft to survive. Criminal activity leads to juvenile correctional facilities, where LGBT youth face new forms of harassment and abuse.

The alternative to homelessness is the foster care system or youth group homes, which are again generally ill-equipped or unwilling to integrate LGBT youth. For example, foster home intake workers may place LGBT youth with hostile foster families. In fact, nearly 80 percent of all LGBT youth in foster care experience some form of abuse, with 70 percent reporting violent abuse. Some foster care systems or families subject LGBT youth to anti-gay social service providers (such as a conservative Christian service provider) or even reparative or conversion therapy. Abusive or threatening foster care or group home experiences can also push LGBT youth to the streets, criminal behavior, and eventual placement in juvenile correction facilities.

Schools are Becoming Polarized Battlegrounds with the Religious Right

The Religious Right has sounded the alarm over American youth's increasingly positive attitudes toward gay people and issues, as well as the LGBT movement's modest gains toward making schools hospitable to gay students. The Religious Right is deploying a range of tactics to counter any pro-LGBT youth work in schools, including first and foremost promoting the "truth" about homosexuality, which usually focuses on erroneous claims that homosexuality is a choice and that it can be overcome through reparative therapy, as evidenced by the "Ex-gay" movement. They have supported this message with media campaigns to defend (from their perspective) child health and safety, as well as religious freedom and the rights of "oppressed" Ex-gays.

The Religious Right's Ex-gay efforts have also responded to the earlier coming-out age of youth, increasingly targeting families and youth and calling attention to "pre-homosexual" conditions in children, teaching parents how to "prevent" homosexuality among their children, and encouraging conversion therapy for youth who identify as LGBT. Contrary to all scientific evidence and the opinions of all mainstream psychological associations, Ex-gay groups claim that homosexuality can be "overcome" with counseling. Despite numerous scandals with Ex-gay leadership "falling back" into the "gay lifestyle," the Religious Right continues to put forward Ex-gay speakers and create new programs to "prove" that change is possible.

Understanding the Work Underway to Support LGBT Youth

MAP has grouped the many efforts to support LGBT youth into four streams of work: helping youth manage LGBT identity development; creating a supportive environment in schools and on campuses; fighting the burgeoning Ex-gay movement; and creating inclusive child welfare and juvenile justice systems.

The first category, helping youth manage LGBT identity development, focuses on getting positive, factual information about LGBT identity and issues to both LGBT youth and their families. LGBT youth need accurate information that lets them know they can have personally, professionally, and spiritually fulfilling lives as LGBT teens and adults. Families of LGBT youth need both accurate facts about sexual orientation and an understanding of how their words, actions, and behaviors affect their LGBT children's physical and mental health. If they are willing,

families of LGBT youth can learn how to protect and advocate for their LGBT children. Currently, almost all LGBT youth development services are local in scope and lack a national strategy.

On the national scene, forthcoming research from the César Chávez Institute's Family Acceptance Project has the potential to systematically link how LGBT youth are treated to their long-term risk levels. This in turn can provide valuable recommendations on how LGBT youth should be treated within their families, schools, the courts, and the foster care system because it will create a direct link between hostile behaviors towards LGBT youth and the harms they suffer as a result, and in contrast, what behaviors can most help LGBT youth. The research can provide the foundation for guiding parents and other adults in working through tough issues (for example, how a non-accepting family might better handle the coming out process in a way that keeps their child emotionally and physically safe), as well as to develop training and assessment materials for social service providers working with LGBT youth and families.

Second, work to create a supportive environment in schools and on campuses includes implementing policies and protections that help LGBT youth; mobilizing young people and the broader community to support LGBT youth in schools; and influencing school activities through training seminars for teachers and other staff members, using LGBT affirming curricula, and improving the overall school climate for LGBT youth.

Third, fighting the burgeoning Ex-gay movement is a relatively new but growing strategy. This strategy focuses primarily on dismantling myths about homosexuality propagated by the Ex-gay movement and exposing the severe harms that develop when trying to change something as innate as human sexuality.

The fourth strategy to help LGBT youth involves creating inclusive child welfare and juvenile justice systems, including implementing new social service delivery policies and practices, educating and training service providers about LGBT issues, and litigating to expand LGBT youth protections within these systems. The out-of-home LGBT youth field is very collaborative, involves many leading non-gay youth organizations, and could serve as a model for other issue areas related to LGBT youth.

Promising Avenues for Investment in Supporting LGBT Youth

The LGBT youth services field involves very complex mental and physical health concerns, controversial political issues and players, and complicated service delivery systems. Not surprisingly, there are many opportunities for funders to support LGBT youth.

First, within the youth identity development area, funds are needed to support better research on LGBT youth. Getting LGBT issues included in state Youth Risk Behavior Surveys is one approach, as only a handful of states currently include questions related to sexual orientation, which have proven very helpful in advocating for additional protections and services for LGBT youth in those states. Another possibility is funding the completion of the Family Acceptance Project, including messaging and dissemination of research, as well as training materials for parents and service providers. This would provide an important counter to the Religious Right as the main source of aid and advice for non-accepting parents.

Second, funding opportunities related to safe and supportive schools include strengthening state GSA networks (e.g., groups in 15 states have asked for help in adopting the California GSA Network model, which organizes and trains GSA members), creating new safe schools coalitions in key states, providing technical assistance in community organizing to parents and communities, and providing LGBT training to future teachers in targeted teaching colleges.

Third, a basic strategy for countering the ex-gay movement is needed, including research, media and communications training, specific messaging, and general talking points.

Finally, LGBT youth work around child welfare and juvenile justice systems could be strengthened and expanded through an infusion of more general operating support grants. As young people come out at younger ages, the demands for services will likely continue to increase. Investing in these systems now could benefit many LGBT youth in the future.

Conclusion

Supporting LGBT youth is a sound investment for funders committed to advancing LGBT equality. LGBT youth face many opportunities and challenges right now, whether coming out to their families or peers at an earlier age or dealing with attacks from the Religious Right. The systems and organizations that support LGBT youth and their families need to be strengthened to help these youth overcome today's challenges, take full advantage of current and future opportunities, and grow into healthy, happy, and responsible adults. The future of LGBT youth depends on it, as does the future of the LGBT movement.



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