

LGBT Families and School Community Partnerships:

A Critical Role for School Counselors

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Abstract

School-family-community partnerships are associated with positive educational outcomes for students and families. However, there are limited interventions available to assist school counselors in building effective school-family-community relationships with lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender parents/guardians and their children. This article outlines strategies that school counselors can implement to enhance the partnerships between school communities and LGBT-headed families across the student, school, and community levels.

Keywords: school counselors, LGBT-headed families, school-family-community partnerships

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The diversification of family demographics including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) parents/guardians and their children calls upon educators to develop a welcoming and inclusive school climate (Byard, Kosciw, & Bartkiewicz, 2013). According to the Williams Institute (2013), six million American children and adults have an LGBT parent/guardian. Despite the positive momentum from recent legislation and public policy efforts aimed towards equality (i.e., *Obergefell v. Hodges*, 2015), not all LGBT families and their children are equally represented and welcomed in PK-12 schools (Fedewa & Clark, 2009; Glass, Willox, Barrow, & Jones, 2016). Kosciw and Diaz (2008) found that 17% of children from LGBT families experienced biased language, 23% of youth felt unsafe at school, and only 38% of school personnel frequently responded when witnessing negative remarks regarding LGBT families. These results represented an increasing need for school counselors to engage in advocacy efforts that improve the academic, social, emotional, and college and career development of children being raised by LGBT parents/guardians.

School counselors are uniquely positioned to utilize their expertise and training as advocates, consultants, and collaborators to develop conditions that foster acceptance and awareness of LGBT family structures (Bryan & Henry, 2012). For example, the ethical standards of the American School Counselor Association (ASCA, 2016a) call upon school counselors to “Respect students’ and families’ values, beliefs, sexual orientation, gender identification/expression, and cultural background . . .” (p. 1). The 2012 ASCA National Model encourages school counselors to engage and develop

partnerships with families, schools, and communities in efforts to close the achievement gaps for marginalized and vulnerable youth (Bryan & Henry, 2008). However, for school counselors to be effective advocates for LGBT families, knowledge about the unique challenges these families face (i.e., parenthood, adoption, social group discrimination) is necessary to engage in best practices that can strengthen resiliency. The purpose of this article is to discuss the role of school counselors in enhancing partnerships between school communities and LGBT families. The authors provide a step-by-step process of direct and indirect strategies for welcoming LGBT-headed families and their children across the student, school, and community levels.

LGBT Families/Guardians and Children in Schools

Research regarding the school-related experiences of LGBT families and their children is limited and outdated (Byard et al., 2013). In general, studies note that children of LGBT parents/guardians lack family representation in schools (Glass et al., 2016), report mistreatment, and experience discrimination and verbal harassment because they had an LGBT parent/guardian (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Additional research suggests that LGBT parents/guardians experience exclusion from their school communities (Goldberg & Smith, 2011; Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). For instance, Kosciw and Diaz (2008) found that when LGBT parents experience exclusion from the school community, parents report less engagement in parent-teacher activities, decreased levels of volunteerism at school, and cite limited connections with other parents in school community groups. In addition to being excluded from the school community, LGBT families report a lack of representation within the classroom learning environment. In a study that explored the experiences of gay or lesbian parents of

preschoolers, Glass and authors (2016) found that most participant families were not represented within the preschool curriculum. Such adverse experiences can impact the ability of LGBT-headed families to form collaborative partnerships with school and community stakeholders as well as pose challenges to the educational success of their children (Byard et al., 2013).

Literature review suggests that positive student outcomes are correlated with the involvement of families and strengthening parent/guardian engagement. Examples include: (a) increased student attendance (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002); (b) decreased negative student behavior (Epstein, 2005); (c) behavioral reinforcement for at-risk student populations (Bemak, 2000); (d) addressing school reform issues (Bryan & Henry, 2008); and (e) supporting resiliency of underrepresented student populations (Mitchell & Bryan, 2007). These examples highlight the importance of educational partnerships with families and the collaborative efforts that school counselors can pursue to strengthen the outcomes for LGBT families and their children.

School-Family-Community Partnerships

Research articles and studies document the imperative role of school counselors as systemic collaborators with educational stakeholders, both inside and outside of school (ASCA, 2012; Bryan & Henry, 2008, 2012; Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2010). According to the 2012 ASCA National Model, “Through school, family and community collaboration, school counselors can access a vast array of support for student achievement and development that cannot be achieved by an individual, or school, alone” (p. 6). Specifically, school counselors may partner and develop relationships with students, teachers, staff, and administrators in efforts to promote educational success

for all students (ASCA, 2012). Additionally, school counselors interact with families, community members, organizations, and with other stakeholders to improve access to resources. Epstein and Van Voorhis (2010) suggest that school counselors spend 20% of their time bolstering relationships and accessing partnership programs with teachers, parents, and other various community stakeholders.

School counseling professional literature calls for school counselor collaborations through a systemic cultural lens with diverse families and school communities, such as immigrant students (Suárez-Orozco, Onaga, & Lardemelle, 2010), Mexican families (Dotson-Blake, 2010), and African American families (Moore-Thomas & Day-Vines, 2010). Such relationships have increased attention to prevalent cultural barriers for diverse families while also providing innovative and strengths-based programming to enhance diverse school-family-community relationships for school counselors. A similar school-family-community framework also may have a beneficial impact on strengthening school climate reform for LGBT parents/guardians and their children.

Benefits to LGBT-Parented Families

Systemic school interventions directed at developing LGBT-welcoming climates may provide beneficial results for LGBT parents/guardians and their children (Byard et al., 2013). First, increasing the level of supportive school personnel may be an important protective factor for children from LGBT families who witness and experience anti-welcoming remarks. For example, researchers found that when youth from LGBT households can identify six or more supportive school staff members, their reported GPAs are higher when compared to participants with fewer supportive allies (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008). Second, systemic interventions aimed at increasing the training of school

personnel may improve the social-emotional wellness and overall safety for children from LGBT families. Specifically, Kosciw and Diaz (2008) found that when schools offered training to school personnel on LGBT-family topics, children of LGBT parents/guardians cited less bullying and discrimination as a result of their family structure. Lastly, strengthening school-LGBT-family partnerships may also increase the access and availability of inclusive resources, curriculum, and support groups/clubs that have been proven to increase the school outcomes of youth from LGBT families (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

Systemic Interventions to Support LGBT Family Partnerships

School counselors scaffold programs and services to educational stakeholders through direct services (i.e., social-emotional curricula, and individual and group counseling) and indirect methods (i.e., school-wide initiatives, family programs) on behalf of students with parents, educators, professional organizations, and community members (ASCA, 2012). When implementing LGBT-inclusive strategies, it is important that school counselors be mindful of the cultural norms within their school building, district, and community (Beck, Rausch, Wikoff, & Gallo, 2018). Thus, on-going reflective practice is recommended. To begin, school counselors can explore their cultural values and attitudes towards LGBT populations. It is important for school counselors to consider the worldviews of the stakeholders they are working with, whether students, administrators, and/or community members. School counselors can reflect upon how their own values interact and interface with the values of the stakeholders with whom they are working (Beck et al., 2018). Further, school counselors are encouraged to become familiar with and expand their knowledge of the LGBT community. School

counselors can read LGBT-related materials and attend diversity events to learn more about the culture of the LGBT community.

School Counselor-LGBT Systemic Interventions

School counselors can incorporate interventions into their school counseling programs to strengthen LGBT family and school community partnerships across the student, school, and community levels. In order to increase collaboration and parent outreach with LGBT families, family level suggestions will be intertwined throughout these systemic levels. School counselors are encouraged to consult and collaborate with colleagues, mentors, and other consultants for feedback as they move towards developing and implementing systemic LGBT-family strategies that reflect and match the needs of their school communities (Beck et al., 2018).

Understanding Family Structures

Before school counselors begin to implement LGBT-family interventions, it is important to acknowledge that the definition of a 'traditional' family has changed over the past several decades (Fedewa, Black, & Ahn, 2015). ASCA's updated position statement calls for school counselors to "promote sensitivity and acceptance of diversity among all students and staff to include LGBTQ students and diverse family systems" (ASCA, 2016b, p. 37). ASCA further directs school counselors to "advocate for the rights of families to access and participate in their student's education and school activities without discrimination" (ASCA, 2016b, p. 37). If a school counselor is to promote the acceptance of diversity and advocate for the inclusion of all families, they too must understand the unique aspects of an LGBT family.

Identifying and understanding the diverse structures of an LGBT family can be a unique challenge for professionals working in the schools (Ryan & Martin, 2000). The family constellations of children raised by LGBT parents/guardians could include the following: lesbian mothers who chose to have a child by donor insemination or in-vitro fertilization, gay dads that used a surrogate, a mother who is raising children from a previous marriage with her same-sex partner, or same-sex parents that serve as foster or adoptive parents to children previously in the child protective system. Although this is not an exhaustive list of the many family systems that exist, identifying a few diverse structures may help school counselors understand the unique characteristics LGBT families.

School counselors need to be aware that some families may keep details about their family structure confidential (Ryan & Martin, 2000). Even though there are currently more legal protections in place for LGBT parents/guardians, many still fear discrimination or exclusion based on their family status (Glass et al., 2016; Ryan & Martin, 2000). Some LGBT families may choose to present as a heterosexual family (i.e., the child's biological mother and father attend conferences and appear as a divorced family), whereas others may present as a single parent household because one parent/guardian avoids school activities altogether (Ryan & Martin, 2000). Assuming all families are heterosexual can cause harm and force LGBT-headed families and their children to remain hidden, which subjects them to further discrimination (Kozik-Rosabal, 2000). Therefore, school counselors can advocate for safe spaces and inclusion of all diverse families regardless of their level of *outness*.

Student Level

School counselors provide direct student services through core curricula, individual student planning activities, and individual and small group counseling (ASCA, 2012). Fostering inclusive family representation through books, posters, and conversations throughout the school may help to increase awareness surrounding the unique needs and demographics of LGBT families.

Core curricula. School counselors can design classroom or small group lessons that facilitate discussion and recognition of diverse family structures. Specifically, school counselors are encouraged to reference lesson plans such as the elementary resources from the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN, 2012) and Welcoming Schools (n.d.a). For example, GLSEN's (2012) *What Makes a Family* lesson helps K-2 students learn about diverse family structures. Additionally, school counselors can incorporate family inclusive books such as *The Family Book* by Todd Parr (2003), or *And Tango Makes Three* by Justin Richardson and Peter Parnell (2005). These classroom level resources can provide knowledge and awareness to students regarding how families can look different in the school setting, including LGBT-families, adoptive parents/guardians, or foster families.

Individual counseling. The ASCA National Model (2012) recommends that school counselors incorporate responsive services to assist youth in overcoming barriers that impact educational success. School counselors can provide individual counseling where youth from LGBT families can feel safe and supported. When working individually with students, school counselors can use bibliotherapy as a strategy to provide positive representation of LGBT characters and role models (Frank & Cannon,

2009). Specifically, school counselors can orient themselves to lists of recommended LGBT-family books that can be added to their school and counseling libraries as outlined by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). To facilitate discussion, school counselors might begin an individual session by reading a story about different kinds of families such as *All Families are Special* by Norma Simon (2003). School counselors can prompt children to draw a picture of their family and follow-up with questions including: (a) What title would you give your drawing? (b) Who is in your family? and (c) What makes your family special? School counselors can also strengthen family-school collaborations with LGBT families through sending books with diverse families and/or lists of suggested resources home with children. These activities aim to increase access and support for visible representation of diverse families, which research has shown to be a positive protective factor for LGBT families and their children (Kosciw & Diaz, 2008).

Group counseling. Group counseling can be another direct intervention for school counselors to strengthen their partnerships with children and parents from LGBT families. Connecting with students from other LGBT families may provide a safe space where youth can process their experiences, challenges, and resiliency with other children. Group topics may include: stress management, family diversity, peer support, and gender roles. Specifically, school counselors may consider adapting the lesson *Family Diversity Scavenger Hunt* (Welcoming Schools, n.d.b) as a resource for elementary students. This lesson asks youth to identify different family structures in various books and fosters discussion on the experiences of underrepresented family structures within the group. School counselors can also ask follow-up questions that

pertain to youth experiences in school. Examples may include: (a) How would you describe examples of supportive and negative school experiences you have had as a student from an LGBT family? (b) How do you decide when to talk about your family at school? and (c) If at all, how could your school better support students from LGBT families? Additionally, school counselors can visit the website *The Rainbow Letters Project* (see www.therainbowletters.com), a resource that gathers, connects, and publishes stories of individuals from all ages with an LGBT parent or family. Such strategies may be useful for students who have already identified feeling outcast or “othered” because of their family structure.

Also, school counselors are encouraged to provide connections among the parents of students within the small group experience. For example, at the end of the group, school counselors can design an activity where LGBT parents are invited to join their children in interactive group activities, share LGBT-family resources, and provide national initiatives such as Blogging for LGBTQ Families Day (Mombian, n.d.). By joining the parents and children together, school counselors can take the next step to create a more diverse, vibrant, and equitable family-school environment.

School Communities

When addressing concerns of equity and challenging a negative status quo, school counselors are well positioned to collaborate and bring together the multiple voices and perspectives of school stakeholders (ASCA, 2012). Therefore, school counselors can develop a committee of diverse team members that include school counselors, teachers, administrators, students, and LGBT parents/guardians. The purpose of this group could be to collaboratively discuss ways to welcome and meet the

unique needs of LGBT families and their children. Through the use of a strengths-based approach, school counselors can elicit feedback from LGBT parents/guardians such as: (a) the language they prefer when discussing their families; (b) strategies to help teachers understand what is different about their family structure, (c) current classroom practices or procedures that are in place and contribute to feelings of exclusion; and (d) brainstorm ways schools can incorporate more LGBT-welcoming activities that aim to engage more families within the educational community.

School counselors can utilize their training as data specialists and facilitate a needs assessment that aims to close the gap for LGBT students and parents (Beck, Rausch, Lane, & Wood, 2016). By collecting data (e.g., attendance, bullying) and discussing this with the previously mentioned committee, school counselors can then educate school stakeholders how to reach and connect with more LGBT parents/guardians within the school community. School counselors can also provide stakeholders with recommendations for how the school district can extend use of the school building to the LGBT community. Cultural events such as relevant announcements from the Supreme Court of the United States on marriage equality and LGBT Pride Month are a few examples for school counselors to consider.

Educating staff. It is important for school counselors to collaborate with classroom teachers on ways to strengthen youths' understanding of LGBT families throughout the school curriculum. According to Jeltova and Fish (2005) "Inclusive language, both verbal and printed, facilitates change in the school climate by providing individuals with accurate ways of articulating their thoughts, questions, and requests" (p. 27). Therefore, school counselors can provide professional development to teachers on

how to model appropriate language (e.g., two moms, two dads, one parent) when giving examples of family structures throughout the school curriculum and during parent teacher meetings and conferences. In addition, school counselors can have school faculty/staff practice ways to provide age-appropriate responses to students' questions about LGBT families. For example, school personnel may benefit from an interactive professional development activity from Welcoming Schools (n.d.c) entitled *Responding to Questions About LGBT Topics: An Interactive Skill-Building Exercise*. This activity can help normalize the experiences of children from LGBT families throughout the school building and further strengthen a more effective relationship with LGBT families. As a follow-up, school counselors can have attendees brainstorm inclusive strategies for how teachers can welcome and invite LGBT families into classroom celebrations such as Mother's Day and Father's Day.

District level. Collaboration with LGBT families also involves systemic interventions at the macro level with key stakeholders such as administrators and school board members. School counselors can educate and advocate that district officials and boards appreciate the educational value in making schools as inclusive as possible for LGBT families. Specifically, school counselors can help school stakeholders understand the importance of LGBT family representation on school registration forms and district newsletters (Jeltova & Fish, 2005). Modifying registration forms to say parent(s) and guardian(s) instead of mother and father may contribute to a welcoming environment for LGBT parents (Fox, 2007). School counselors can assist district stakeholders in identifying ways school social media resources such as Facebook, Twitter, and the school website can be welcoming for diverse family structures. School

counselors can advocate for the inclusion of LGBT specific language (i.e., sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression) within school policies and/or handbooks. Additionally, school counselors can invite LGBT families from the community, who are willing to be spokespeople for the population, and provide educational testimonials on the benefits of establishing LGBT-inclusive policies and procedures. School counselors can facilitate conversations on macro-level interventions and enhance partnerships with school board members on LGBT topics.

Community Outreach

School counselors can strengthen LGBT family-school partnerships and create equitable practices within the community setting. One strategy school counselors may consider is to help community leaders develop a diverse panel of stakeholders (Beck, Rausch, & Wood, 2014) who examine how family diversity is incorporated (or not) into community initiatives. Examples may include business policies, events, local celebrations, and parades. Further, it is suggested that school counselors invite LGBT families and school leaders to participate and help foster dialogue about ways to provide inclusive community resources. For example, this panel could develop a visual icon that local businesses and school buildings could display to promote a welcoming climate for diverse families.

It is important school counselors are mindful that resistance may arise to their advocacy efforts for LGBT families within some communities (Beck, 2017). Therefore, school counselors are encouraged to utilize their training in group dynamics and organizational change (Jeltova & Fish, 2005). Specifically, the use of immediacy, active listening, and solution-focused techniques may assist helpers in collaborating with

multiple stakeholders (Beck et al., 2014). If school counselors find that community leaders lack resources regarding how to create a welcoming community culture for LGBT families, helpers are recommended to reference the section *Family Education and Community Building* found on the Welcoming Schools website (Welcoming Schools, n.d.d).

School counselors can support the visibility of LGBT families through community gatherings. For example, school counselors can develop a community forum at their public library where community members and school stakeholders can view a screening of an LGBT-welcoming family film and engage in conversation surrounding how the larger school community can welcome diverse families. Specifically, communities can benefit from watching *That's A Family!* and engage in post-viewing discussion from the teaching guide and recommended activities that foster community discussion (Groundspark, n.d.). School counselors may also consider asking their local parent teacher organization to help advertise and sponsor this event as an additional strategy to strengthen the school-family-community partnership for LGBT families.

School counselors can organize a diverse book club and engage community members in thought-provoking dialogue on ways to increase partnerships with LGBT families. For example, vibrant groups could begin with reading *My Two Moms: Lessons of Love, Strength, and What Makes a Family* authored by Wahls and Littlefield (2012). In this way, developing a community of diverse readers may provide an ideal opportunity for community members to hear the narratives of local LGBT families and to collectively work towards a shared understanding of how to support their unique needs.

Systemic Advocacy

School counselors can facilitate change at the local, state and national levels by taking an active role in organizations like ASCA, the Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE), or the Association of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender Issues in Counseling (ALGBTIC). Working with other helping professionals can increase knowledge and awareness of ways to address the specific needs of LGBT families. This work might include advocating for a change in policies or protocols to ensure the school environment is safe and inclusive of LGBT families. Other actions may include presenting at professional conferences and sharing strategies with other educators to bring awareness to the small changes that can have a big impact in their schools and districts. In addition, school counselors can serve on local, state, or national task forces that help to inform elected officials about the unique needs of LGBT families. School counselors need to “find ways to have a voice as leaders in their schools and communities” (Dixon & Dew, 2012, p. 211) and strengthen the ways in which LGBT families are welcomed, included, and visible in school communities.

Summary

The need for schools to develop effective school-family-community partnerships with LGBT families is critical for student’s academic, career, personal, and social development. However, there are multifaceted barriers that exist and perpetuate a negative status quo for LGBT families across the student, school, and community levels. This article outlines essential recommendations for how school counselors can utilize direct and indirect strategies aimed to strengthen LGBT-family and school community partnership across the systemic levels in a school community. This

leadership role requires school counselors to not only be effective in building relationships, but also to have an LGBT-welcoming toolbox of strategies when advocating for and with LGBT families. With these recommendations in place, the authors hope that school counselors can serve as leaders and advocates for LGBT families and their children.

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Biographical Statements

Matthew J. Beck is an assistant professor in the counselor education department at Western Illinois University-Quad Cities. Matthew has worked in public education for 12 years as a teacher and professional school counselor at the elementary, middle, and high school settings. His research interests are informed by his school counselor practice, which encompass how school counselors, administrators and schools can provide an optimal school climate that fosters academic, career and social/emotional success of LGBTQ students. Specific areas of interest include: school counselor advocacy, LGBTQ youth education, and the partnerships among school counselors and administrators on LGBTQ issues.

Haley D. Wikoff is a doctoral candidate in the counselor education and supervision program at the University of Iowa. Prior to starting her doctoral studies, Haley was a school counselor for 14 years at both the elementary and middle school levels. Haley's research interests include: school counselor advocacy for LGBTQ youth, creating safe and inclusive school environments for LGBTQ youth and families, preparing school counselors to navigate personal values and cultural diversity, and ensuring school counselors engage in ethical practices.