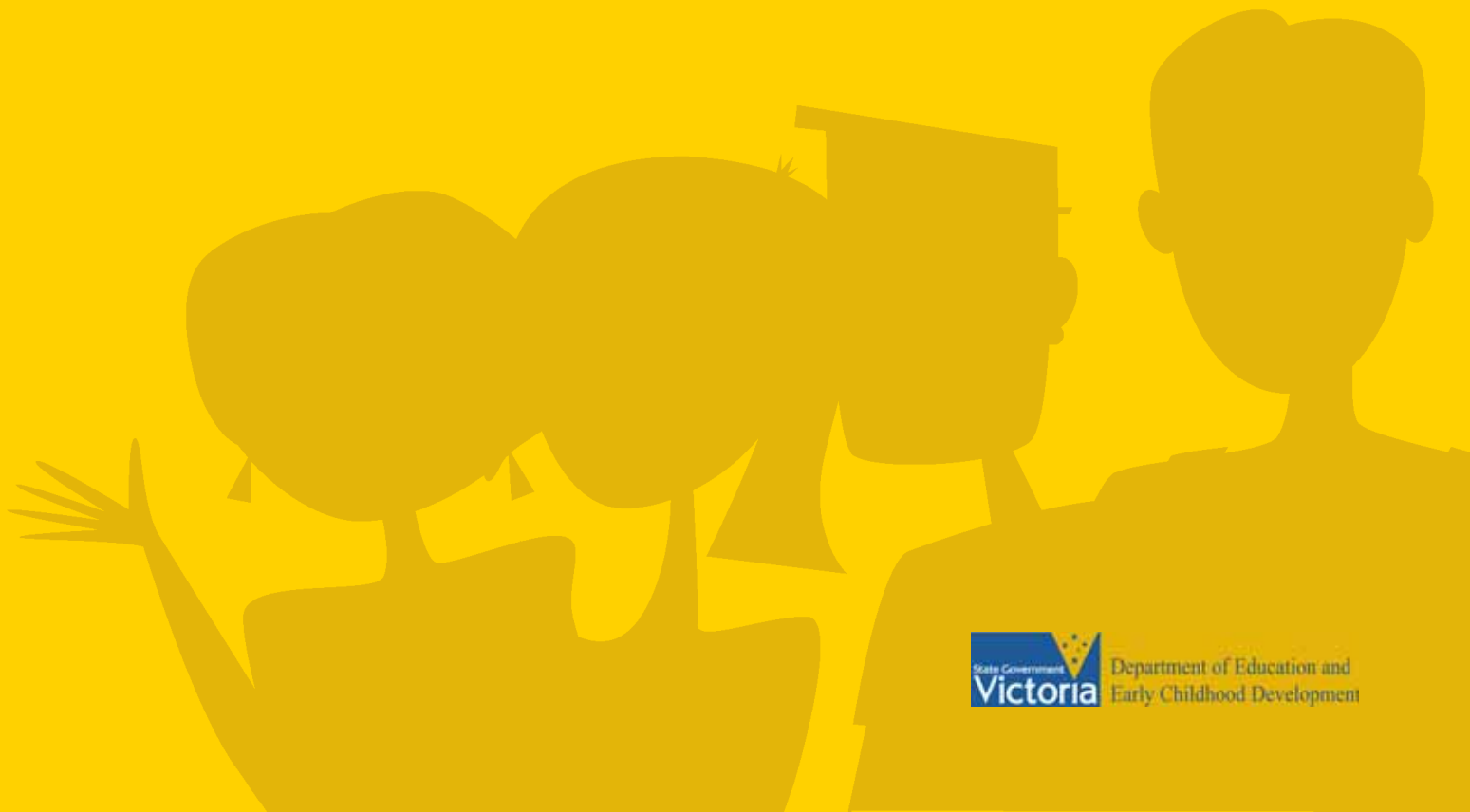
Supporting Sexual Diversity in Schools



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Website links

Legislation

- *Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 1995*
- *The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006* **<http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/Home.asp>**.

Research

- *Writing Themselves in Again – The 2nd Report on the Sexuality, Health and Wellbeing of Same-sex Attracted Young People* **<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/wtia.html>**.

Student learning

- Catching On-*line* – inclusive sexuality education website, incorporating *SSAFE (Same-sex Attracted Friendly Environments) in Schools* materials and other school-based sexual diversity resources **<www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/teachingresources/health/sexuality/>**.
- Health education (2005, updated 2007), *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide* **<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/governance/referenceguide/curric/3_17.htm>**.
- The Victorian Essential Learning Standards **<http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/index.html>**.
- Whole school – Same-sex attraction and gender diversity, Curriculum Planning Guidelines **<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/curriculum/preptoyear10/guidelines/phase1/ws/samesex.htm>**.

Student wellbeing

- *Safe Schools Are Effective Schools* **<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/healthwellbeing/safety/bullying/default.htm>**.
- Student care and supervision (2005, updated 2006), *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide* **<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/governance/referenceguide/enviro/4_6.htm>**.
- Student health (2005, updated 2006), *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide* **<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/management/governance/referenceguide/enviro/4_5.htm>**.

What you need to know

Approximately 10 per cent of young people experience feelings of same-sex attraction while they are at school. Environments that are harassing and humiliating as a direct effect of homophobia can compromise their learning.

Why you need to know it

Victorian primary and secondary schools are well positioned to create safe and supportive learning environments for all same-sex attracted young people.

A supportive school culture

In Victoria, we pride ourselves on having safe and effective schools that cater for the diverse needs of our community. Everyone has a role in creating a safe school environment for all students.

Same-sex attracted young people are entitled to the same safe school environment as all other groups within the school. Homophobia in Victorian schools has a negative impact throughout the school community, including teachers, parents and other family members.

The word 'gay' and equivalents, when used as a term of derision and harassment, should be understood by the total school community as offensive, hurtful and unacceptable. Same-sex attracted young people can and should have the same hopes, joys and security as all others.

We must be proactive in ensuring that our schools are free of homophobia and are safe, affirming environments for all students, not just those who ask for support. Recognising this cohort of students is achieved by displaying information and phone numbers on school noticeboards and acknowledging school liaison with relevant support agencies.

Combating homophobia

Proven approaches to combat homophobia in Victorian schools include:

- modelling exemplary behaviour by the school leadership team and the teaching and student support staff
- fostering a culture of openness and a celebration of diversity, and a mutual understanding of expected behaviours in the total school community
- immediately addressing issues caused by peer pressure, social stigmatisation or bullying
- following existing school governance procedures
- applying existing Department of Education and Early Childhood Development policies and support materials on bullying, discrimination and inclusive sexuality education
- recognising same-sex attracted young people as an everyday part of the school's social mix
- respecting students who choose to remain unidentified, by making information and contacts related to support services readily available.

Research into homophobia

Research tells us that 60 per cent of same-sex attracted young people experience verbal or physical abuse, and that the greatest amount of this abuse (74 per cent) occurs within schools.

Research also shows that the suicide risk for same-sex attracted young people is at its highest in the months before they disclose their sexual orientation.

However, the same research that describes high levels of homophobic violence in schools also indicates that the schools addressing these issues are making a difference. Young people feel safer in these schools, can easily find someone to talk to about their feelings and are offered referrals for support if they wish.

Writing Themselves in Again – The 2nd Report on the Sexuality, Health and Wellbeing of Same-sex Attracted Young People is available at:
<http://www.latrobe.edu.au/arcshs/wtia.html>.

Legislation

Victorian schools should feel confident a clear legal framework that mandates appropriate and fair treatment for all school staff and students supports them.

Under the *Victorian Equal Opportunity Act 1995* it is unlawful to discriminate in education on the grounds of:

- a student's actual or assumed sexual orientation
- a student's gender identity
- the sexual orientation or gender identity of a student's parents, friends or family members.

Schools have an obligation to ensure they create supportive and relevant educational experiences for their students. The inclusion of all students must be reflected in a school's policies, codes of conduct, curriculum, learning and teaching, student services, organisation and ethos.

To be compliant with the *Victorian Equal Opportunity Act*, schools must ensure students and staff do not experience homophobia or discrimination. Strategies and preventative measures undertaken should be continuous and proactive, and should reflect educative processes within the school.

Inaction may also amount to an implicit authorisation or encouragement of discrimination or sexual harassment. This means that a school staff member who 'turns a blind eye' to discrimination, homophobic abuse or sexual harassment by students or staff may be held liable on the basis of authorising or assisting discrimination.

Further information about the *Victorian Equal Opportunity Act* and the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission is available at:
<http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/Home.asp>.

Human rights

In addition to the *Victorian Equal Opportunity Act*, the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities* came into full effect in January 2008.

The Charter protects twenty civil and political rights relating to key themes of freedom, respect, equality and dignity, and includes rights to non-discrimination, privacy and reputation, freedom of expression, and security of person (safety), as well as freedom from cruel, inhuman and degrading treatment.

Schools have an obligation to respect, protect, and promote human rights, and to act compatibly with all of the rights in the Charter, and must also properly consider rights when making decisions and taking actions.

Further information about the *Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act* and the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission is available at: **<http://www.humanrightscommission.vic.gov.au/Home.asp>**.

School policy and practice

An inclusive approach to school policy is standard across all Victorian Government schools. A commitment to support same-sex attracted young people is integral to this inclusiveness and should be reflected in a school's policies and practices. This includes codes of conduct, curriculum, anti-bullying and sexual harassment policies, student wellbeing procedures, teaching and learning practices, organisation and ethos.

Inclusive learning and teaching

The Victorian Essential Learning Standards (2005) provides a platform for an inclusive curriculum with many opportunities to address bullying, homophobia and the positive inclusion of same-sex attracted young people and same-sex attracted family members.

Sexuality education, compulsory in the Health and Physical Education domain, is only effective for all students when it acknowledges and caters for student diversity. Learning in the Health and Physical Education domain provides specific references to same-sex attraction, homophobia and discrimination. The Interpersonal Development domain addresses building positive relationships and bullying issues. Students learn to acknowledge and respect diversity, explore their beliefs and values, and consider how these influence behaviour within and beyond the school context.

Learning within other domains, such as English, the Humanities and Civics and Citizenship, provide many opportunities to include sexually diverse content and themes, for example, studying human rights, investigating events that have resulted in civil improvements for minority groups, and discussing texts that incorporate the theme of same-sex relationships. Students can also reflect on the diversity of families and young people within their own school community.

Further information can be obtained at:

1. Curriculum Planning Guidelines
   <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/curriculum/preptoyear10/guidelines/phase1/ws/samesex.htm>
2. Catching On-*line* – inclusive sexuality education website
   <www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/teachingresources/health/sexuality/>
3. Victorian Essential Learning Standards
   <http://vels.vcaa.vic.edu.au/index.html>.

Measuring success and reporting progress

School demographic data shows approximately 10 per cent of students are same-sex attracted, even if they are unidentified. Approaches relevant for this population can be included within a school's annual implementation plan and be recognised within the student wellbeing and engagement areas of the school's strategic plan.

This acknowledgement will assist schools in determining specific issues to address and outcomes to report on, and will lead to a range of student learning and student wellbeing measures that can be evaluated annually. Student surveys, reviews of curriculum for appropriate content, and analysis of bullying and student welfare reports are just three ways to explore how effective approaches are in the school.

Schools could then reflect on the achievement of their approaches in the annual report to the school community.

Education for the total school community

Teachers and families may need more information to understand and feel confident in ensuring an inclusive, respectful learning environment, tackling homophobia, and the importance of addressing these issues in the school context.

Professional learning opportunities for staff, parents and school council members can be crucial in providing a platform for a change in school culture and developing positive approaches. Making a range of written and electronic resources available will also assist in explaining the importance of challenging homophobia and supporting same-sex attracted young people.

Professional learning opportunities are available from registered external providers such as Family Planning Victoria and the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society.

Further information can be obtained from the sexuality education 'Professional learning' webpage available at:
<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/teachingresources/health/sexuality/proflearn.htm>.

A safe space

The goal of taking action is to make the total school community safe for those who are same-sex attracted and those affected by homophobia, such as family and friends. However, many individual students also benefit from an identified safe space and someone to talk to. Student wellbeing staff (for example, student welfare coordinators and school nurses) are well placed to develop an in-depth understanding of issues related to being same-sex attracted, and to display materials that signal an openness to discuss them.

Reassurances of confidentiality and respect for the student's privacy are critical, as is a good referral to an appropriate support agency outside the school.

confidence

Resources

Schools need to develop their own library of resources. *SSAFE (Same-sex Attracted Friendly Environments) in Schools* materials and other school-based sexual diversity resources are available from the sexuality education 'Learning and teaching' webpage available at: **<http://www.education.vic.gov.au/studentlearning/teachingresources/health/sexuality/learnteach.htm>**.

References

Legislation

- *Equal Opportunity Act 1995* (Victoria).
- *The Victorian Charter of Human Rights and Responsibilities Act 2006.*

Department policy

- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2005, 2007), *Victorian Government Schools Reference Guide*.
- Department of Education and Early Childhood Development (2006), *Safe Schools Are Effective Schools – A resource for developing safe and supportive school environments*.

Research

- Hillier, L, Harrison, L, Dempsey, D, Matthews, L, Beale, L, Rosenthal, D & Walsh, J 1998, *Writing Themselves In: A National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Wellbeing of Same-sex Attracted Young People*, Melbourne: National Centre in HIV Social Research: Program in Youth/General Population, Centre for the Study of Sexually Transmissible Diseases, La Trobe University.
- Hillier, L, Turner, A & Mitchell, A 2005, *Writing Themselves In Again: The 2nd National Report on the Sexuality, Health and Wellbeing of Same-sex Attracted Young People in Australia*, Melbourne: Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University.
- Nicholas, J & Howard, J 2001, 'Same-sex attracted suicide: Why are we still talking about it?', paper presented at Suicide Prevention, Australia, Sydney, April.

The booklet has been developed in consultation with the Ministerial Advisory Committee on Gay and Lesbian Health, Department of Human Services; the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society, La Trobe University; and the Victorian Equal Opportunity and Human Rights Commission.