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Peer and Client Environments: Ways to Increase Organizational Support for Sexual Minority Adolescents[1]

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Introduction

Organizations are constantly pressured to adapt their structures, processes, and behaviors to be consistent with the institutional environment in order to guarantee their legitimacy and therefore their chances for survival (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977). In reference to support for sexual minority adolescents, the first programmatic decision that needs to be made is whether the organization and its stakeholders are prepared to openly offer support to sexual minority, or LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender), youth (Regan & Fogarty, 2006). In order to determine whether your organization is ready to provide this type of support, it is crucial to talk to employees, board members, parents, and the adolescents in your organization about their attitudes and perceptions about supporting this population. The purpose of this publication is to provide administration and staff with specific ways to understand the culture of their organization in reference to support for sexual minority adolescents.

Peer Environments

Peer environments affect our work-related decisions. This is true with respect to support for LGBT adolescents because organizations make decisions based on their perceptions of how peers and board members feel about this type of support (Regan & Fogarty, 2006). Organizational leaders interested in supporting LGBT youth should talk to their employees and board members about supporting this population to discover their attitudes and potential prejudices. This information will also be useful in determining whether or not the organizational environment would be receptive to this type of support.

Furthermore, research shows that local organizations are affected by their national organizations' policies regarding discrimination and treatment of LGBT adolescents (Rienzo, Button, & Wald, 1996; Russo, 2006). If policies at the national level are not inclusive of sexual minority adolescents, local youth-serving organizations can create their own inclusive policies. This strategy has successfully been employed by many local chapters of

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organizations with discriminatory policies at the national level. Local schools have successfully passed safety clauses to include sexual orientation in states where there is no comprehensive policy. For example, in Alachua County, Florida, the Safe Schools Coalition advocated for the safety of LGBT adolescents in schools by insisting that sexual orientation be added to the safety clause for all adolescents. This inclusion was successfully added to the clause and received little or no resistance from the community or school board.

Client Environments

Youth-serving organizations need to know the clients they are serving. Organizations cannot know whether they are providing effective programming without actually talking to the adolescents, families, and communities participating in those programs. When it comes to support for LGBT adolescents, organizations often erroneously assume that they know what the adolescents in their organizations think about this issue. Instead, they should implement strategies to get the youth more involved in decision-making and leadership with respect to these issues. Research shows that this strategy is beneficial to at-risk or invisible youth such as LGBT adolescents, who are left behind or ignored by societal institutions (Diversi & Mecham, 2005; Zeldin, Larson, Camino, & O'Connor, 2005). Implementing this strategy means talking to adolescents about diversity issues, including age-appropriate LGBT material. This strategy should be productive, since the younger population tends to be more open, welcoming, and inclusive of the LGBT community as a whole.

Furthermore, parents contribute money to many of the youth-serving organizations their children are involved in. It is also important to gain their feedback in regard to supporting LGBT adolescents. Specifically, organizations may want to know how parents feel about diversity training on this topic and whether or not they would continue to financially support the organization if this step were taken.

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