

January 17, 2005

Chairperson and Members of the Senate ^{Education}~~Judiciary~~ Committee,

My name is Joe Loos, I am the father of a transgendered child, a member of "PFLAG" (Parents, Friends & Family of Lesbians and Gays) Missoula Chapter, and a member of the National Association of Social Workers, Montana Chapter.

I speak in support of Senate Bill 198 in behalf all classes named in this legislation, but most particularly in behalf of the 4 to 10% of our youth who are gay or lesbian.

Studies in other parts of the country have shown that "Youths perceived to be non-heterosexual face harassment and physical violence in school environments (Uribe & Harbeck, 1992)."

We also know that in some studies "Forty-five percent of gay males and twenty percent of lesbians experience verbal or physical assault in high schools. Twenty-eight percent of these youth dropout of school because of harassment secondary to their sexual orientation (Remafedi, 1987)."

"One result of society's attitudes toward sexual minority youths is enhanced risk for low self-esteem, self-injurious behaviors, suicide, and substance abuse (Gibson, 1989; Savin-Williams, 1990)."

Though I do not have data for Montana, I do know as a parent, and from talking with Montana youth, educators, and other parents that this legislation is needed in Montana.

Without clear policies in our schools that prohibit harassment, intimidation and bullying, the boundaries remain inconsistent and easily ignored. This legislation would require school boards to develop such policies.

Without training to those clear policies, educators and administrators too often fail to notice and to act to protect those vulnerable to harassment, intimidation, and assault. This legislation would require such training, and prepare educators to be proactive in heading off harassment and intimidation behaviors.

As members of the 59th legislature you have the opportunity to model positive proactive leadership by supporting this legislation. When our youth experience unclear messages and even negative messages about people who are perceived to be "different" they can easily be misled into believing that verbal and physical abuse is "okay," or at least not worth the time and attention of the responsible adults around them. Way back in November of 1999 in the *American School Board Journal*, School Districts across this state had the opportunity to read about the need for safe school policies and programs if they were to avoid the expensive lawsuits experienced in other parts of the country (Jones, 1999). Yet, many school boards have continued to avoid the issue. Your leadership by way of this legislation would be a clear and positive message to school districts across Montana, that it is time to take a clear stand for safe schools.

Thank you,
Joe Loos, LCSW
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References:

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Uribe, V. & Harbeck, K. (1992). *Addressing the Needs of Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Youth: The Origins of PROJECT 10 and School-based Intervention.* In K. Harbeck (ed.), *Coming Out of the Classroom Closet: Gay and Lesbian Students, Teachers and Curriculum,* Binghamton, New York. Harrington Park Press.