



Education Department Resource

## Addressing the Matthew Shepard Tragedy in the Classroom

### Suggestions for Classroom Discussion

In the wake of the Matthew Shepard tragedy, we ask that you speak with the members of your chapter, and ask them to take some time to address the issues which it raises; particularly toward how tolerating homophobia is de-humanizing, and may allow incidents like this to occur.

At GLSEN, we see it as our position to not allow homophobia to go unanswered in the schools. And we believe that it is through subtle-or-not-so-subtle repetition of homophobic conditioning- whether through teacher comments, intended humorously or otherwise, and through a lack of response to comments, behavior, and smaller expressions of hate, that anti-gay and lesbian attitudes are not only inadvertently sanctioned, but actually legitimized and reinforced. The silence on the issue is in fact deafening. In response to what could only be considered a tragedy, therefore, we ask that you take a few moments to discuss these issues with your students, and to encourage your colleagues to do the same.

We've generated a few suggestions for classroom discussion; and are eager to see this email initiate a larger GLSENtalk dialogue on the subject.

1) Your students are likely to have strong feelings about this. Approach this is as you would any pertinent current events issue and allow your students to share what they know, and discuss their feelings.

2) Engage your students in a discussion of motivation: what in our society perpetuates the attitudes that make this violence okay? Do they believe that the young men who committed this crime could have viewed Matthew Shepard as a fellow human being? How or how not? Do they think it made a difference that they knew that he was gay?

This may lead to some students suggesting that - in order for Matthew to protect himself- he should not have let people know about his sexual identity. You may use this as an opportunity to discuss whether that's fair: should we ask people to hide large parts of themselves, their lives. Likewise, you might encourage your students to think or talk about times they've had secrets, or aspects of themselves that made them feel different, and how it felt to keep those parts of themselves hidden.

You could lead your group to discuss "blaming the victim". This is a phenomenon and a catch phrase they might not be familiar with. Ask them to

consider such incidents, and whether it's right to punish someone twice. You might ask your students if it's easier to think that the gay guy might be in the wrong in this case, and why is it easier to feel that way? You could also simply ask them: Did Matthew Shepard do anything wrong? Was he a bad guy? Did he hurt anybody?

While discussing perpetrators and motive, ask your students if they've ever hurt anybody, or insulted anybody for being different. Ask them if they've ever used homophobic language (give examples, including fag, queer, or dyke.) Students may say that they are just kidding around. Ask them if they believe that everyone knows that. Share with them some of the statistics about violence, or harassment in the schools. Again: ask your students how these young murderers could have believed it was okay to hurt someone. Where and how would they have learned that this was okay? How could they have learned otherwise?

3) On bystanders: if your students have followed the news stories they know about the two young women - girlfriends of the perpetrators - who stood by until after the fact. They are accomplices. Ask your students if they have ever stood by and watched someone be harassed or insulted or hurt. How did that feel? Why didn't they get involved? By not getting

involved, do they think that they signaled to the perpetrators, the victim, and other bystanders, that they thought that this was okay? How do they think it would feel to be the victim in that circumstance? How would they want others to act, if they were the victims?

4) Community: what kind of message does your community send out about gay and lesbian people? How could that message be changed?

Simple curricular suggestions: for Social Studies, it should be easy and logical to engage your class in a discussion of current events, and to ask students what anti-gay bias they've witnessed at their schools. Likewise, Health, Psychology, and Biology courses should see a natural progression of the curriculum, which would include a discussion of the psychological factors involved in this crime. English classes may want to read an article, and write their answers to questions down, and discuss their writing; and perhaps practice their essay writing and letter-writing skills by writing letters-to-the-editor.

Conclusion: Teachers must not be silent at this critical time. This is a major news story and students need a chance to explore their feelings and come to terms with a horrific event. We urge you to provide that opportunity.