

DONN SHORT

AM I SAFE HERE?

LGBTQ TEENS AND BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

 **point**
PRESS | a UBC Press imprint
Vancouver . Toronto
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Praise for *Am I Safe Here?*

“Short’s compelling book contributes to the increasing awareness that the notion of a ‘safe school’ needs to move beyond policies, programs, security measures, and responses to individual incidents. Short weaves direct, powerful quotes from the students throughout his book, thereby empowering them to share their experiences, expertise, and insights. The students’ comments combined with his sound recommendations provide direction for meaningful, sustainable change. It is the responsibility of all educators to hear their voices, ultimately assuring LGBTQ students: ‘Yes. You are safe here.’”

– MARY HALL, PHD, DIRECTOR OF SAFE SCHOOLS MANITOBA

“*Am I Safe Here?* is an essential resource for administrators and teachers at both elementary and secondary schools. The systemic approach that calls for cultural change in developing an LGBTQ-positive school setting in all grades and in all spaces surpasses the limiting incident-based reactionary approach. School administrators and teachers now have a meaningful tool to address heterosexism and cisgenderism and to create LGBTQ-inclusive schools for students, teachers, and staff.”

– NICK MULÉ, PHD, FOUNDER, QUEER ONTARIO

“An important read for folks interested in ending homophobic/transphobic bullying and including LGBTQ students in full citizenship in our school settings.”

– SUSAN RUZIC, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL JUSTICE, PROFESSIONAL AND SOCIAL ISSUES DEPARTMENT, BC TEACHERS’ FEDERATION

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“If you’re looking for another book full of academic theory and sad statistics about the experiences of LGBTQ youth in schools, this isn’t the book for you. Short brilliantly positions LGBTQ youth as the experts on their own experiences. He demonstrates how these students have become the educators on LGBTQ issues in their schools, which begs the question: Where are the teachers and what are they doing? LGBTQ youth shouldn’t be the only ones advocating for change. In fact, they have the most to risk.

“Short provocatively blends together the first-hand experiences of LGBTQ youth to focus on a model to create equity-seeking schools that are supported by comprehensive LGBTQ policies, inclusive curriculum, visible and “out” LGBTQ teachers, gay-straight alliances, ongoing professional development, and proactive school administrators as key ingredients in challenging and changing a toxic heteronormative school culture. Make no mistake: there is a revolution happening in our schools. Classrooms are the battleground. And our LGBTQ students are the ones leading the way.”

– KRISTOPHER WELLS, ASSISTANT PROFESSOR AND FACULTY DIRECTOR,
INSTITUTE FOR SEXUAL MINORITY STUDIES AND SERVICES, FACULTY OF
EDUCATION, UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Short, Donn, author

Am I safe here? : LGBTQ teens and bullying in schools / Donn Short.

Includes bibliographical references.

Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-0-7748-9020-5 (hardcover).—ISBN 978-0-7748-9021-2 (softcover).—

ISBN 978-0-7748-9022-9 (PDF).—ISBN 978-0-7748-9023-6 (EPUB).—

ISBN 978-0-7748-9024-3 (Kindle)

1. Lesbian students – Canada. 2. Gay students – Canada. 3. Bisexual students – Canada. 4. Transgender youth – Canada. 5. Sexual minorities – Canada. 6. Teenagers – Canada. 7. Bullying in schools – Canada. I. Title.

LC2576.C3S56 2017

371.826'60971

C2017-903621-1

C2017-903622-X

Canada

UBC Press, which owns the On Point Press imprint, gratefully acknowledges the financial support for our publishing program of the Government of Canada (through the Canada Book Fund), the Canada Council for the Arts, and the British Columbia Arts Council.

Set in Calibri, Helvetica Condensed, and Sabon
by Artegraphica Design Co. Ltd.

On Point Press, an imprint of UBC Press

The University of British Columbia

2029 West Mall

Vancouver, BC V6T 1Z2

www.ubcpres.ca

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It's just, when you're walking down the hall, you hear, "Oh, that's so gay, dude" or "He's such a fag." My friend Robert is the only one in the school who's really out, and so if he walks by, you might hear some people say, "Oh yeah, that guy's such a fag." No one ever says anything to his face. No one says anything about him being gay to his face. You know what you can get away with and what you can't. I mean, not officially, not what the school says, but you can. It's more complex than that. Yeah. It's a greater complexity, you know? You gotta change everything.

– KATIE, GRADE 12 STUDENT, TORONTO

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Preface

“Pick a point and enter,” she said.

Good advice, I thought. The speaker at the front of the room was giving advice on how to start a project that needed starting. So I picked a point. I had been thinking for some time about LGBTQ students in schools: How could I help? What needed to be done? What was there to do that wasn’t already being done?

At the same time, many schools, teachers, and parents in Ontario were engaging in some very heavy conversations about “making schools safe” in the province. I had just arrived in Toronto from Vancouver and had not really paid much attention to Ontario’s *Safe Schools Act*, which seemed to be the focus of a lot of the conversations.

The Safe Schools Act, passed in 2000, was really a bill amending Ontario’s Education Act, but it was always referred to as a discrete piece of legislation. The first thing I looked for was a definition of *safety* in the act. The first thing I noticed was that there wasn’t one. So that was my point of entry.

What did *safety* mean? Who got to define *safety*? How had the legislature and the public talked about safety before the bill’s passage? And although school safety is an issue for all students, I was interested specifically in LGBTQ students. What did *safety* mean to LGBTQ students? How did they define *safety*, and how did that compare with what their schools were doing?

Reading through newspaper and media accounts, I saw that the Safe Schools Act was in many ways a product of the zero-tolerance discussions

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surrounding extreme school violence of the 1990s. The influence of the school shootings in Columbine, Colorado, and at W.R. Myers High School in Taber, Alberta, was evident.

In Ontario, the first serious steps toward implementing a zero-tolerance approach to school safety began in the early 1990s, with public demands for increased “discipline” in schools as a result of a series of violent incidents in a number of Toronto high schools, particularly some incidents with knives at schools in Scarborough.

Not surprisingly, in response to media and parental demands for solutions to school violence, politicians, school administrators, and others viewed safety in terms of zero-tolerance policies, expulsion, suspension, security guards, surveillance cameras, and punishment after the fact.

At the same time as this “hunker down” approach was taking root, however, there had also been an almost thirty-year journey in Toronto schools toward equity. Although the “fortress” mentality seems to me to leave the particular safety of LGBTQ students out of the safety equation, the efforts to bring “equity” to Toronto schools have put LGBTQ concerns front and centre.

Many administrators, teachers, and others contributed to this decades-long effort. Toronto District School Board equity officer Tim McCaskell was one of the leading figures. I knew I had to talk with him. He was very helpful, the best possible real-world entry point. He introduced me to a number of teachers who were stressing equity in their classrooms in order to help LGBTQ students feel welcome, included, and safe.

The first teacher I spoke to suggested another teacher. And she another. And so on and so on. I relied on this network of teachers committed to equity. From the start, I became aware of how much great work was being done in Toronto schools – by administrators, teachers, and students themselves.

I spent many weeks observing, listening to, and talking with the people I met – mainly students. This book represents the results of that time. I couldn’t believe how much work was being done to make schools equitable and safe. I never ceased to be amazed at the depth of knowledge the students possessed and at the very smart and informed opinions and ideas I was hearing. That was a relief. I had worried that maybe no one would have anything to say.

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They had some ideas that most would think of as dangerous to the status quo of schools. But that was their point. *Transform the schools*, they told me. *Rethink everything*. Well, as Oscar Wilde said, an idea that is not dangerous is not worthy of being called an idea.

Each day was exhilarating. Even the time I was called a fag by a student, one of the school's self-appointed guardians on the lookout for my type, had its positive aspect bound up in the sting. I was coming to understand the matter-of-factness of what was going on and beginning to appreciate that there was something that could be done about it.

I started out with my attention on bullying but came away at the end understanding that the students themselves saw the threat to their safety as much broader than that. They talked about heterosexism, heteronormativity, invisibility, and inclusiveness. How did they know all that?

At its core, this book is about seven different schools in the Toronto area and the people I met there. But you will also hear from teachers, administrators, and people in other locations such as Vancouver, Edmonton, and Thunder Bay.

The names of the schools have been changed, as have the names of the individuals I met, except where people have asked to use their real names or where their identities are a matter of public record.

I don't think it's necessary to worry too much about keeping track of who's who or what school people are from. To my great surprise, the students, and their allies, articulated a common message regardless of location. I think what is important is that we are hearing from students, teachers, and administrators on the frontlines and hearing the power of that unified voice. Hopefully, the distinctiveness and the verve and vigor of their voices will strike you as much as it did me and their individuality will accompany you throughout the book.

I provide a list of participants and their schools at the front of this book. But first, here is a very brief overview of the schools I visited, which are as diverse as the students themselves.

Burton School is a small school of approximately 150 students, Grades 11 and 12 only. Equity animates Burton School's climate.

Equity and social justice are the governing principles of Elizabeth Coyt Alternative School, a small school of under 500 students that teaches Grades 9 to 12.

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Approximately 1,000 students attend nearby Sylvia Avenue Collegiate and Vocational School, which teaches Grades 9 to 12 and has a much more ethnically diverse student population than either Burton or Coyt.

Trimble Collegiate Institute is a hardscrabble high school of over 1,200 ethnically diverse students. However, I will always remember Trimble – and it may be your take-away as well – for its “student-identity walls.” You will see what I mean.

Brookwood Collegiate and Vocational School is the largest school I visited. Much more rough-and-tumble than Trimble, its student body numbers almost 2,000, many of whom were described to me as “gangsters” and “rejects” – terms I heard at other schools as well. Even so, pockets of equity flourish in the vast wasteland here that ignores equity.

Grosvenor Secondary School was the only private school I visited. Its 400 students were dealing with its first gay-straight alliance when I met with students there, an issue that had caused some controversy in the student newspaper.

And finally, as Toronto’s only high school program for LGBTQ students, Triangle was a revelation. By 2016, about 600 students had passed through its doors at Oasis Alternative Secondary School. Some of the most remarkable students in this book attend Triangle.

For teachers, guidance counsellors, social workers, principals, vice-principals, trustees, and others who read this book, I ask you as you meet the students and teachers and guidance counsellors from these wide-ranging schools to consider what goes on in *your* classroom, in *your* school? How do *you* conceptualize safety? Let this be your entry point.

I ask you, also, to consider that acceptance of homophobia is itself an act of homophobia. Complicity is tantamount to discrimination, and inaction in the face of hostility contributes to schools being unsafe for LGBTQ students. This is the final implicit message the people in this book are imparting to us.

No matter how long it may take, schools have to be transformed. Some change can be achieved immediately. Some change may take years. That is no reason not to start now. Don’t believe me; believe them.

Acknowledgments

It is my great pleasure to thank the students and teachers who gave so generously of their time. This book would not have been possible without their commitment, courage, and candour. My thanks to Bruce Ryder, Didi Khayatt, Don Cochrane, Gerald Walton, Azmi Jubran, Gabe Picard, Ellen Chambers-Picard, the late Peter Corren, Murray Corren, Jeffrey White, Tim McCaskell, Stephen Myher, Adam Gingera, Steve Falkingham, and Randy Schmidt and all of the terrific people at UBC Press.

Finally, I acknowledge with gratitude the financial support provided by the Law Foundation of British Columbia and the Legal Research Institute at the University of Manitoba.

Participants

For some of the interviewees in this book, real names are used with their permission. Their work promoting equity and social justice in schools is a matter of public record. They are Murray Corren, Peter Corren, Azmi Jubran, Tim McCaskell, Gabe Picard, and Jeffrey White. I am grateful to each of them.

Except in the discussion of matters of public record, the names of the schools are fictitious, and the names of the students, teachers, and other allies are pseudonyms. There would be no book without any of these generous people.

The following list will help readers to keep track of the students and educators at each school. Of course, I met with and spoke with many more students and teachers than those who appear in this book. If I have not included them, it is mainly because their perspectives, stories, and ideas duplicated those who do appear. However, my thanks go to all who permitted me to spend time with them.

Burton School

Delores Kent – teacher
Lazy Daisy – Grade 12 student
Benjamin – Grade 12 student
Alexander – Grade 12 student
Brent – Grade 12 student

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Sylvia Avenue Collegiate and Vocational School

Sharon Dominick – teacher

Melanie Bhatia – teacher

Barry – Grade 11 student

Louise – Grade 11 student

Douglas Allington – student who wrote a letter of thanks to
Sharon Dominick

Trimble Collegiate Institute

Lorna Gillespie – teacher who encouraged students to write
on the walls

Len – Grade 12 student

Katie – Grade 12 student

Elizabeth Coyt Alternative School

Carla – Grade 12 student, girlfriend of Emma

Emma – Grade 12 student, girlfriend of Carla

Cal – Grade 12 student, best friend of Emma and Carla

Brookwood Collegiate and Vocational School

Diana Goundrey – guidance counsellor

Joey – Grade 11 student who wrote poem

Sian – Grade 11 female student

Jerry – student who had graduated from Brookwood
two years before I met him

Dalton – Grade 12 student involved in LGBTQ politics
in Toronto

Kyle – Grade 12 student

Grosvenor Secondary School

Terrence – Grade 12 student

Sam – Grade 12 student

Mr. Taylor – teacher

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Triangle Program at Oasis Alternative Secondary School

Ryan – Grade 9 student
James – Grade 10 student
Noel – Grade 12 student
Trista – Grade 11 transgender student
Silver – Grade 11 queer student
Jeffrey White – head of the Triangle Program

Others

Michael – Grade 12 student I met at an anti-bullying conference
Bruce – teacher I met at a conference in Toronto
Anders – high school principal, Vancouver
Alice – Grade 11 student, Vancouver

Introduction

At the beginning of the school year, we'd always run through the school rules or whatever they were ...
But I would think to myself: I'm gay. Am I safe here?

– *Gabe Picard, Grade 12 student, Thunder Bay*

LGBTQ students are regularly excluded from full citizenship in their schools. Their outlaw status and “queer” citizenship put them at constant risk of exclusion, harassment, and bullying, thus forcing them to ask, as Gabe Picard does, “Am I safe here?”

Too often educators search for solutions to bullying at the level of the individual. This approach limits their ideas of bullying and victimization to the study of only a few implicated students rather than looking at the culture of the school.

Fortunately, research on bullying is now moving away from this narrow focus in order to consider how the culture of schools gives rise to bullying. Because school culture assumes that everybody is heterosexual, it validates heterosexuality. This bias conveys benefits and privileges to some students at the expense of those who do not fall into that category. And it is the students who transmit the values of the normative social order, often through bullying. Only by embracing this view of bullying as part of the larger school culture can solutions to bullying be realized.

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This book is written for classroom teachers, administrators, school staff, trustees, staff developers, and pre-service teachers who want to promote student safety and school improvement by creating a safe and inclusive school for LGBTQ students. It asks that we stand back from the two or three students who might be involved in isolated instances of bullying, or even repeated bullying, and move instead toward a view that takes the cultural context of bullying into account.

Something Else Is Needed

Many of the students you will hear from in this book view negative attitudes and bias – in classrooms, extracurricular activities, cafeteria discussions, and hallway gossip – as more immediately threatening to their personal identities and safety than any fear of physical or verbal harassment or violence. In other words, there is a system of inequality, exclusion, and oppression that is organized around sexuality.¹ Everyone agrees that schools must ensure physical safety and have policies that respond to bullying as it occurs. But in the words of a principal I spoke with, “Something else is needed.” This book tries to address that “something else.”

Almost all of the students who speak with me talk about the pressures they face in simply walking the hallways. Len, a seventeen-year-old gay student in Grade 12, succinctly sums up that anxiety:

In my early years, I avoided hallways because they were really ruled by this dominating self-validating culture in this school. The dominant culture was not violent, I wouldn't say, not violent or overly aggressive, or homophobic, but it was definitely very heterosexist. And [with] the cool kids hanging out and walking through that hallway, [it] was always a little bit uncomfortable for me.

For some students, however, the hallways are a clear threat to their physical safety. Gabe Picard describes what it is like simply going from one classroom to another:

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All the hallways were terrifying to me. Always. I would always make sure that I was walking down the middle of the hallway. It's harder to actually body check me into the locker that way because when you're beside a locker, you're there, and it's convenient, so boom, they would just throw their weight into you.

Ryan, a fifteen-year-old student in the Triangle Program for LGBTQ students, left his previous school because of public persecution (somehow unseen by teachers?) that often occurred in the hallways:

It was really hard not only to be out, but you kind of got harassed in the hallways. Like, you'd have people yelling at you, and you just wanted to be left alone. I left because I really couldn't take it there anymore.

When I ask him whether he ever heard the word *fag* at his previous school, he says, "Oh yeah, in the halls, up and down." Did he have some way of dealing with it? "Yeah. I just didn't go to school."

These students negotiate the unsafe spaces of schools by making trade-offs, such as sticking to the middle of hallways, and by making impossible choices no student should have to make, such as just staying home. But they offer solutions, too. The students I meet, including Gabe Picard and Lazy Daisy, both in Grade 12, are part of a new student-led activism among LGBTQ youth who see the importance of a profound, embracing connectedness between LGBTQ students and their schools.

This book discusses some ways this connectedness can be accomplished. Several provinces, including Ontario, Manitoba, and Alberta, have introduced legislation that gives students the legal right to form gay-straight alliances.² This is a step in the right direction, but only a step. What we need to achieve in order to create a safe and welcoming space for LGBTQ students is recognition of queer realities and lives. Change in that direction has been under way in isolated places for years and is now becoming more commonplace and more sophisticated. For example, some students have already begun to argue that the term *gay-straight alliance* is bred from the very binary they wish to avoid. However,

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because legislation is framed in terms of gay-straight alliances, that is the term used in this book.



Even though more and more schools have anti-bullying or safe school policies, bullying is still familiar behaviour in schools. This is often because school policies and approaches are framed to respond only to physical, verbal, or even cyberbullying – and only after it has occurred. Responsive policies do little to change the culture that gives rise to bullying. I hope that as you read this book, you will come to see that physical bullying is only part of the problem faced by LGBTQ students. For us to fully appreciate why LGBTQ students feel unsafe in school, the entire cultural experience of going to school must be framed within this lens. Otherwise, looking at bullying but ignoring what is happening (or not happening) in the curriculum, in the schoolyards, and in the hallways and cafeterias is like looking at schools through a straw.

Students as Experts

One of the aims of this book is to listen to the stories of LGBTQ youth and their allies – the teachers and guidance counsellors who support them – in order to better appreciate their day-to-day experiences. So this book begins by asking students a simple question: “What is school like for you?”

My hope is that by presenting a sense of the realities of LGBTQ students in schools, in their own voices, this book will create a picture of the social setting that gives rise to the bullying, harassment, and exclusion they experience.

In 2002, Gabe Picard, a gay Grade 12 student in Thunder Bay, brought a human rights complaint against the Lakehead District School Board, claiming discrimination based on sexual orientation. His complaint argued that because he was being bullied and because the school board had failed to provide a safe and inclusive school environment, he was being denied access to the education that was available to everybody else. Here was a student heroically taking on the cultural brickwork of schools,

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not just concerned about his own personal safety. Gabe tells me about his decision to file a complaint:

I got really, really fed up and I went into the principal's office, and I yelled at her and I told her, "Well, you're still letting this happen." And she's like, "Well, what do you want me to do about it, Gabe? We can't change the way it is." She told me that. Those were her exact words: "Gabe, we can't change the culture."

That's what set me off, and then I told her that, if she couldn't change the culture, then she'd failed as an educator and that she was a failure as an educator.

And I said, "What's the point in you becoming an educator, then, if you can't change the culture? That's the whole thing?"

That's what I told her. I told her, "*That's the whole thing*, that's what teaching is all about. Change." And then I told her that she failed as an educator if she believed she couldn't change it, and then I stormed out. So that's why I did it, filed the human rights complaint.

I ask you to consider Gabe Picard as you read every page of this book because I believe that LGBTQ students are the experts on their own experiences and lives and can best address the fundamental aims of this book.

This book is part of the shift in focus from seeing bullying primarily as a psychological problem to questioning the sociocultural processes of normalization and the structures of power that hold them in place. As the students in this book talk about their lives, they question the formal and informal laws and codes that govern high schools and regulate student behaviours.

The need to transform the culture of schools emerged as a consistent theme in my conversations with students and teachers. Several years after Gabe Picard brought his action, Katie, a Grade 12 student, tells me that "transforming the culture is what it's all about. *It's the fucking map, the compass, and the moon, all in one.* It's everything queers need to find our way out of oppression and the only thing that will do it?"

Some schools are doing terrific work to include LGBTQ students, but they are oases among the vast wasteland of schools that continue to

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forget, oppress, and exclude these students. In some schools, the students themselves are leading the way. But in every school, this work needs to be the work of every teacher, every administrator, every staff member, every trustee, and every citizen.

By the time you reach the end of this book, you may find the term *bullying* to be mostly inadequate to describe the social predicament of LGBTQ students. Because, for many, it is much more than that. What LGBTQ students live in fear of encountering and do encounter is the day-to-day exclusion and oppression that goes on in every school. In 2013, I attended a cultural festival in Vancouver while interviewing teachers for this book. I spoke with Anders, the principal of a local high school, who addressed the difference between bullying and the larger cultural position of LGBTQ students very effectively:

I think *bullying* is a less challenging word for teachers and administrators than having to confront something larger like heterosexism and homophobia ... You only have to worry about a few people rather than using a wider lens to assess a bigger picture of what's going on. Bullying – it's simpler and makes for a simpler target ... Something else is needed, but where do you start?

Based on the interviews and observations in this book, it seems that what is needed for LGBTQ students is to be connected with and included in their school culture. This book envisions a future where the unequal treatment of LGBTQ students cannot even be imagined.

One School, Many Laws

Mindful of Gabe's and Katie's words about transforming the culture, I have spoken with students, teachers, and others about the spaces, rules, and norms in the lives of LGBTQ students, which together comprise the space that the students in this book would describe as "my school." But every school is made up of smaller, varied spaces: classrooms, hallways, playgrounds, the cafeteria, locker rooms, and so on. Norms and rules, both formal and informal, govern those spaces, dictate behaviours, and

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assign positions. As state agents, teachers and administrators have a duty to ensure the safety and equality of LGBTQ students in all schools, as well as their freedom from discrimination in all aspects of school life and culture, including the school curriculum. But how to do that?

Cultural norms interact with formal law and official policies in schools and can carry as much authority as law. For many students, these norms, law-like in their own right, may have an even more powerful influence on student behaviours and attitudes. The formal policy of the state may say one thing, but what do students' peers say? Their family? Their religious beliefs? Their ingrained sense of gender? Can we assume that even well-written laws and policies dealing with harassment, bullying, or inclusiveness will have their intended effects? What is the influence of cultural expectations on the effectiveness of law and policies? On student behaviours and attitudes? On the climate of schools? In what ways do students monitor each other and model themselves on the values within our normative social order?

This book emphasizes LGBTQ students' everyday experiences to show the effects of these official and unofficial standards. I take this approach because it's needed to understand why formal law often struggles to deal with the harassment and bullying of these students.



I hope that the voices presented here comprise new knowledge about what must be changed to create safe, equitable, and inclusive schools for LGBTQ students. Throughout, students speak in support of nothing less than changing their entire cultural experience of going to school. The students and teachers who tell their stories here make a number of suggestions for improving school culture and creating an equitable, inclusive environment. Their suggestions are summarized at the end of each chapter.

If you are a teacher, an administrator, or a staff member, ask yourself how much of what you hear from the students in this book applies to your own school. Listen, and we can learn what must be done.