



## Supporting Your LGBTQ Youth: A Guide for Foster Parents



There are approximately 175,000 youth ages 10–18 in foster care in the United States.<sup>1</sup> Of these youth, an estimated 5–10 percent—and likely more—are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning (LGBTQ).<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The total number of youth in care comes from *The AFCARS Report* (<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport19.pdf>). It is based on the number of youth ages 10–18 in care on September 30, 2011.

<sup>2</sup> The estimate comes from the assumption that 5–10 percent of the general population is LGBT. John C. Gonsiorek & James D. Weinrich, "The Definition and Scope of Sexual Orientation," in *Homosexuality: Research Implications for Public Policy* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications, 1991); Courtney, Dworsky, Lee, and Raap, (2009) found a much higher percentage of youth in foster care who identified as something other than fully heterosexual (see <http://www.chapinhall.org/research/report/midwest-evaluation-adult-functioning-former-foster-youth>).

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Like all young people, LGBTQ youth in foster care need the support of a nurturing family to help them negotiate adolescence and grow into healthy adults. However, LGBTQ youth in foster care face additional challenges. These include the losses that brought them into care in the first place, as well as traumas they may have suffered while in foster care. They also include stressors unique to LGBTQ youth, including homophobia or transphobia<sup>3</sup> and the need to evaluate (often with little or no support) the safety of their communities, schools, social networks, and homes in order to decide whether to disclose their LGBTQ identity, when, and to whom.

Despite these challenges, LGBTQ youth—like all youth in the child welfare system—can heal and thrive when families commit to accepting, loving, and supporting them as they grow into their potential as adults. This factsheet was written to help families like yours understand what they need to know to provide a safe, supportive, and welcoming home for an LGBTQ youth in foster care.

In this factsheet, you will learn about LGBTQ youth in the child welfare system, the unique risks they face, and the important role that foster parents can play in reducing those risks. You will discover specific actions that you can take to create a welcoming home for all youth in your care and to promote your youth's health and well-being in the community. At the end of this factsheet are links to many resources for more information and support.

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<sup>3</sup> *Transphobia* refers to fear of people who are transgender.

## About LGBTQ Youth

The acronym *LGBTQ* is a general term used to describe people who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning their gender identity or sexual orientation.

### Definitions

*Lesbian, gay, and bisexual* describe a person's *sexual orientation*—emotional, romantic, or sexual feelings toward other people. *Lesbian* refers specifically to women who love women, while *gay* can refer to any person who is attracted to people of the same sex. (The term *homosexual* is considered outdated and offensive by many gay people.) Bisexual people are attracted to men or women regardless of their anatomy. People do not need to have any particular sexual experience (or any sexual experience at all) to identify as bisexual, gay, or lesbian, because sexual orientation and sexual behavior are not the same thing.

*Transgender* refers to a person's *gender identity*—an internal understanding of one's own gender. A transgender person's gender identity does not match the sex (a biological characteristic) assigned to him or her at birth. Many, but not all, transgender people choose to alter their bodies hormonally and/or surgically to match their gender identity. Some people's experience, perception, or expression of their gender evolves and changes over time. Gender identity and sexual orientation are separate aspects of a person's identity: A transgender person may be bisexual, gay, or straight (or may identify in some other way).

Some youth (and adults) identify as *questioning* when they start to recognize that they may be part of the LGBT community. This does not mean that sexual orientation or gender identity is a choice. These youth may need time to process what being LGBT means for them; to reconcile any anti-LGBT stereotypes they have internalized; and to decide if, when, and how they should identify themselves as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender to others.

Some people's *gender expression* (meaning, the ways in which they express their gender identity to others) does not conform to society's expectations for their sex. This might include choices in clothing, mannerisms, names, hairstyles, friends, and hobbies. It is important to understand that society's gender expectations are cultural, not biological, and they change over time (for example, women used to be expected to wear only dresses; now teens of both genders wear jeans, sweatshirts, and tennis shoes). In any case, not all *gender-variant* (or *gender nonconforming*) youth will continue to express themselves this way into adulthood, and many will never identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender.

In other words, it is best not to make assumptions. Respecting your youth's self-identification is very important. As youth grow to trust their foster families, many will eventually share their feelings about gender identity or sexuality more openly.

"Gaining that trust takes time, patience, and consistency. That's what [my foster mother] gave me."  
— *LGBTQ youth in foster care*

## Addressing Common Misconceptions

There is a lot of misinformation about sexual orientation and gender identity. Here are some things that are important for you to know about LGBTQ youth in your home:

**LGBTQ youth are a lot like other youth.** In fact, the similarities that LGBTQ youth in foster care share with other youth in care far outweigh their differences. Most, if not all, youth in foster care have been affected by trauma and loss; they require acceptance and understanding. Making sure your home is welcoming to all differences, including race, ethnicity, disability, religion, gender, and sexual orientation, will help ensure that all youth in your home feel safe and that the youth in your care grow into adults who embrace diversity in all of its forms.

**This is not "just a phase."** LGBTQ people are coming out (acknowledging their sexual orientation/gender identity to themselves and others) at younger and younger ages. Studies by the Family Acceptance Project have found that most people report being attracted to another person around age 10 and identifying as lesbian, gay, or bisexual (on average) at age 13. Gender identity may begin to form as early as ages 2 to 4.<sup>4</sup> Someone who has reached the point of telling a foster parent that he or she is LGBTQ has likely given a great deal of thought to his or her own identity and the decision to share it.

**No one caused your youth's LGBTQ identity.** Sexual orientation and gender

<sup>4</sup> Ryan, C. (2009). *Helping families support their lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) children*. Washington, DC: National Center for Cultural Competence, Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development.

identity are the result of complex genetic, biological, and environmental factors. Your youth's LGBTQ identity is not the result of anything you (or a birth parent, or any other person) did. LGBTQ people come from families of all religious, political, ethnic, and economic backgrounds. Experiencing childhood trauma or reading about, hearing about, or being friends with other LGBTQ people did not "make" the youth become LGBTQ.

**LGBTQ youth are no more likely than other youth to be mentally ill or dangerous.** These unfortunate myths and stereotypes have no basis in truth. Gay or transgender people are not more likely than heterosexuals or gender-conforming people to molest or otherwise pose a threat to children. And although it is true that LGBTQ people experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, and related behaviors (including alcohol and drug abuse) than the general population, studies show that this is a result of the stress of being LGBTQ in an often-hostile environment, rather than a factor of a person's LGBTQ identity itself.<sup>5</sup> Professional mental health organizations agree that homosexuality is not a mental disorder and is a natural part of the human condition.

**Your youth's LGBTQ identity cannot be changed.** Medical and psychological experts agree that attempting to change someone's sexual orientation or gender identity does not work and often causes harm.

<sup>5</sup> Schlatter, E., & Steinback, R. (2010). 10 anti-gay myths debunked. *Intelligence Report*, no. 140. Retrieved from <http://www.splcenter.org/get-informed/intelligence-report/browse-all-issues/2010/winter>

**Many religious groups embrace LGBTQ people.** Some people fear that they will have to choose between their faith and supporting their youth's LGBTQ identity—but this is not always the case. Many religious communities welcome LGBTQ youth, adults, and their families. It may be important to know that there are other options if your family does not feel welcomed or comfortable at your place of worship.

## LGBTQ Youth and the Child Welfare System

LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the child welfare system: While approximately 5 to 10 percent of the general population is estimated to be gay, a study conducted in three Midwestern States found that a greater percentage of those aging out of the child welfare system reported a sexual orientation other than heterosexual (24 percent of females and 10 percent of males). These numbers are likely to be underreported because youth who come out often risk harassment and abuse.

Some LGBTQ youth enter the child welfare system for the same reasons that other children and youth enter care: Their birth families are unable to provide a safe, stable, and nurturing home for them due to a parent's incarceration, drug or alcohol abuse, mental illness, or other reasons unrelated to the youth's LGBTQ identity. Others, however, are rejected (and in some cases, neglected or abused) by their families of origin when their families learn that they identify as LGBTQ. Some youth experience

repeated losses—originally adopted as babies or toddlers, they are returned to the system by their adoptive families when they come out.

Youth who are rejected by their families may experience greater risks than other youth in care. Studies show that these youth have lower self-esteem and a much greater chance of health and mental health problems as adults. Compared to other LGBTQ youth, those who are highly rejected by their families because of their sexual orientation or gender identity are:

- More than three times as likely to use illegal drugs or be at high risk for contracting HIV and other STDs
- Nearly six times as likely to experience high levels of depression
- More than eight times as likely to attempt suicide<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, a high percentage of LGBTQ youth in foster care experience further verbal harassment or even physical violence after they are placed in out-of-home care. As a result, many of these youth experience multiple disrupted placements, compounding the trauma associated with leaving their families of origin. In one study, as many as 56 percent of LGBTQ youth in care spent some time homeless because they felt safer on the streets than in their

group or foster home.<sup>7</sup> This maltreatment is partially responsible for the fact that LGBTQ youth make up as many as 40 percent of homeless teens.<sup>8</sup> Homelessness, in turn, increases the youth's risk of substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, victimization, and contact with the criminal justice system.

The good news is that these risks can be mitigated by foster and adoptive families who are willing to nurture and protect the health, safety, and well-being of these young people. It is essential for child welfare agencies to identify and ensure access to family foster homes that can provide stable, supportive, and welcoming families for LGBTQ adolescents, where youth can develop the strength and self-confidence they need to become successful adults.

## Creating a Welcoming Home for Youth

All youth in care need nurturing homes that provide them with a safe place to process their feelings of grief and loss, freedom to express who they are, and structure to support them in becoming responsible, healthy adults. Creating a welcoming foster home for LGBTQ youth is not much

<sup>7</sup> Mallon, G. P. (1998). *We don't exactly get the welcome wagon: The experience of gay and lesbian adolescents in North America's child welfare system*. New York: Columbia University Press. Cited in Wilber, S., Ryan, C., & Marksamer, J. (2006). *CWLA Best Practice Guidelines: Serving LGBTQ Youth in Out of Home Care*. Washington, DC: Child Welfare League of America. <http://www.nclrights.org/site/DocServer/bestpracticeslgbtyouth.pdf?docID=1322>

<sup>8</sup> Administration on Children, Youth and Families. (2011). *Information memorandum: Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning youth in foster care*. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

<sup>6</sup> Ryan, C. (2009). *Helping families support their lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) children*. Washington, DC: National Center for Cultural Competence, Georgetown University Center for Child and Human Development.

different from creating a safe and supportive home for any youth.

“The most important thing is to allow any youth to feel safe enough to blossom into whoever they are meant to be.”

— *Foster parent*

In fact, youth in care may have difficulty trusting adults (many with good reason), so you may not know a youth’s gender identity or sexual orientation until he or she has spent some time in your home and has grown to trust you. Avoid making assumptions about gender identity or sexual orientation. Any steps you take to make your home welcoming to LGBTQ youth will benefit all children and youth in your care—both by giving LGBTQ youth the freedom to express themselves and by helping heterosexual and gender-conforming youth learn to respect and embrace diversity.

Behaviors that openly reject a youth’s LGBTQ identity must be avoided and not tolerated. This includes slurs or jokes about gender or sexuality and forcing youth to attend activities (including religious activities) that are openly hostile or unsupportive of LGBTQ people. Well-meaning attempts to protect youth from potential harassment, such as “steering” them toward hobbies more typical for their sex (football for boys, for example) or isolating them for the sake of safety, also are experienced as rejection by LGBTQ youth and can have devastating consequences for their self-esteem and well-being.

Consider the following suggestions to make your home a welcoming one,

### **whether or not a youth in your care openly identifies as LGBTQ:**

- Make it clear that slurs or jokes based on gender, gender identity, or sexual orientation are not tolerated in your house. Express your disapproval of these types of jokes or slurs when you encounter them in the community or media.
- Display “hate-free zone” signs or other symbols indicating an LGBTQ-friendly environment (pink triangle, rainbow flag).
- Use gender-neutral language when asking about relationships. For example, instead of, “Do you have a girlfriend?” ask, “Is there anyone special in your life?”
- Celebrate diversity in all forms. Provide access to a variety of books, movies, and materials—including those that positively represent same-sex relationships. Point out LGBTQ celebrities, role models who stand up for the LGBTQ community, and people who demonstrate bravery in the face of social stigma.
- Let youth in your care know that you are willing to listen and talk about anything.
- Support your youth’s self-expression through choices of clothing, jewelry, hairstyle, friends, and room decoration.
- Insist that other family members include and respect all youth in your home.
- Allow youth to participate in activities that interest them, regardless of whether these activities are stereotypically male or female.
- Educate yourself about LGBTQ history, issues, and resources.

“At [my foster mother’s] house, I was able to feel safe and focus on being who I was.”

— *LGBTQ youth in foster care*

**If a youth in your care discloses his or her LGBTQ identity, you can show your support in the following ways:**

- When a youth discloses his or her LGBTQ identity to you, respond in an affirming, supportive way.
- Understand that the way people identify their sexual orientation or gender identity may change over time.
- Use the name and pronoun (he/she) your youth prefers. (If unclear, ask how he or she prefers to be addressed.)
- Respect your youth’s privacy. Allow him or her to decide when to come out and to whom.
- Avoid double standards: Allow your LGBTQ youth to discuss feelings of attraction and engage in age-appropriate romantic relationships, just as you would a heterosexual youth.
- Welcome your youth’s LGBTQ friends or partner at family get-togethers.
- Connect your youth with LGBTQ organizations, resources, and events. Consider seeking an LGBTQ adult role model for your youth, if possible.
- Reach out for education, resources, and support if you feel the need to deepen your understanding of LGBTQ youth experiences.

- Stand up for your youth when he or she is mistreated.

LGBTQ youth in foster care need permanent homes; they do not need additional disrupted placements. If you are being asked to consider providing foster care to an LGBTQ youth and you feel—for any reason—that you are not able to provide a safe and supportive environment, be honest with your child welfare worker for the sake of both the youth and your family. If you are able to provide an affirming environment, remember that you can talk with your child welfare worker about any questions you may have or support you may need.

## Supporting Your Youth in the Community

The support your LGBTQ youth receives in your home is important. However, you also must be prepared to advocate for your youth when needed to ensure that she or he receives appropriate child welfare, health care, mental health, and education services to promote healthy development and self-esteem.

## Working With the Child Welfare System

The overwhelming majority of child welfare workers, like foster parents, have the best interest of the children and youth they serve at heart. However, workers are human, and they have their own feelings and biases. While there is no need to assume problems

will arise, it is important to be aware of your youth's rights.<sup>9</sup> For example:

- **Your youth has the right to confidentiality.** Agencies should not disclose information regarding his or her sexual orientation or gender identity without good reason (e.g., development of a service plan) and the youth's permission.
- **Your youth has the right to an appropriate service plan.** This should include the same permanency planning services provided to heterosexual or gender-conforming youth: The youth's sexual orientation or gender identity alone should not be a reason for a worker to forego attempts to reunite the youth with his or her birth family or seek a permanent adoptive placement. It also includes helping the youth access LGBTQ community programs, if desired.
- **Your youth should be supported in expressing his or her gender identity.** The child welfare agency should respect your youth's preferred pronoun and name.
- **Your youth has the right to request that a new caseworker be assigned,** if the current worker is not addressing his or her needs appropriately.

## Health Care and Mental Health Providers

Your youth, like all youth in foster care, has the right to health care and mental health services that address his or her individual needs. In the case of a lesbian, gay, bisexual,

<sup>9</sup> For more information, see Wilber, Ryan, & Marksamer, 2006, in note on page 5.

or transgender youth, finding a competent, supportive provider may require some additional research. Consider the following:

- **Check with your youth to see whether he or she feels comfortable at agency-recommended service providers.** Although your agency may have preferred providers, you can inquire about other options that work better for your youth. Begin with those who accept Medicaid; however, if the provider your youth needs does not accept Medicaid, the child welfare agency may be able to authorize additional funding for necessary services.
- **Sexual health should be part of every youth's wellness exam.** Competent health-care providers will be able to offer frank, nonjudgmental, and comprehensive education about sexual health that is relevant to LGBTQ youth.
- **Transgender youth need health-care providers who are appropriately trained to address their health concerns.** This includes the ability to discuss, provide, and obtain authorization for medically necessary transition-related treatment, if desired.
- **Be aware of the possibility that your youth might benefit from mental health counseling** about issues that may or may not be related to sexual orientation or gender identity. In addition to typical adolescent concerns, many LGBTQ youth struggle with depression or anxiety as a result of experiencing stigma, discrimination, or harassment. If that is the case, seek a provider who is experienced and



competent in helping LGBTQ youth cope with trauma.

- **Under no circumstances should your LGBTQ youth be forced or encouraged to undergo “conversion therapy.”** Practices intended to change a person’s sexual orientation or gender identity have been condemned by every major medical and mental health association.

## Your Youth at School

Unfortunately, bullying and harassment at school are everyday experiences for many LGBTQ youth. In many schools, negative remarks about sexual orientation or gender identity are common from other students, and even faculty or staff. A 2011 survey of more than 8,500 students between the ages of 13 and 20 found that nearly two-thirds of students felt unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, and 44 percent felt unsafe because of their gender expression.<sup>10</sup> School harassment can have devastating consequences for youth’s education and general well-being. Absenteeism and dropout rates are higher and grade point averages lower among LGBTQ youth experiencing harassment at school.<sup>11</sup>

If your youth is being bullied or harassed, you may need to work with his or her caseworker, school administrators, school board, and/or PTSA to address the problem.

<sup>10</sup> The Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network [GLSEN]. (2012). *The 2011 national school climate survey: Executive summary*. New York: Author.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Also see, for example, Lambda Legal. (n.d.) *Facts: Gay and lesbian youth in schools*. New York: Author; and Mental Health America (2012). *Bullying and Gay Youth* [webpage]. <http://www.nmha.org/index.cfm?objectid=CA866DCF-1372-4D20-C8EB26EEB30B9982>

The following practices have proven effective for preventing anti-gay harassment and improving school climate for LGBTQ youth:

- **Gay-straight alliances (GSAs).** Students at schools with GSAs hear fewer homophobic remarks, experience less harassment, feel safer at school, and are more likely to receive help when reporting bullying to school personnel.<sup>12</sup>
- **Anti-bullying policies that specifically reference sexual orientation and gender identity.** Students in States with comprehensive safe school laws report fewer suicide attempts.<sup>13</sup>
- **LGBTQ-friendly teachers, curriculum, and resources.** Students in schools with an inclusive curriculum were about twice as likely to report that classmates were somewhat or very accepting of LGBTQ people.<sup>14</sup>

## Conclusion

The evidence shows that LGBTQ youth are overrepresented in the foster care system and that these youth face serious risks and challenges beyond those experienced by other youth. Rejection by their families and other caregivers exacerbates these risks. If LGBTQ youth are to reach their full

<sup>12</sup> GLSEN, 2012.

<sup>13</sup> Espelage, D. L. (2011). *Bullying & the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning (LGBTQ) community*. Proceedings of the White House Conference on Bullying Prevention. Retrieved from: [http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/lgbt/white\\_house\\_conference\\_materials.pdf](http://www.stopbullying.gov/at-risk/groups/lgbt/white_house_conference_materials.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> GLSEN, 2012.

potential and become healthy, happy adults, they—like all youth in care—need families who can provide permanent, supportive homes during their critical adolescent years. With a little additional education and training, your family can successfully provide a welcoming home to LGBTQ youth in need.

## Resources

### For Families

- **Helping Families Support Their Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) Children.** Research showing that families have a major impact on their LGBT children's health, mental health, and well-being. [http://www11.georgetown.edu/research/guchd/nccc/documents/LGBT\\_Brief.pdf](http://www11.georgetown.edu/research/guchd/nccc/documents/LGBT_Brief.pdf)
- **Family Acceptance Project.** A research-based, culturally grounded approach to help ethnically, socially, and religiously diverse families increase support for their LGBT children. <http://familyproject.sfsu.edu>
- **PFLAG.** A national nonprofit organization that supports families through more than 350 chapters in major urban centers, small cities, and rural areas in all 50 States. Selected resources include:
  - **Coming Out Help for Families, Friends, and Allies** <http://community.pflag.org/page.aspx?pid=539>
  - **Our Trans Children.** Answers to frequently asked questions and support for family members just learning of their loved one's gender differences. [http://www.pflag.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Publications/OTC\\_5thedition.pdf](http://www.pflag.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/OTC_5thedition.pdf)
  - **Be Not Afraid: Help Is on the Way!** A faith-based resource from PFLAG's Straight for Equality program. <http://community.pflag.org/sfe-test/document.doc?id=649>
- **Advocates for Youth: GLBTQ Issues Info for Parents.** Tips for parents of LGBTQ youth, including resources on talking about sexuality. <http://www.advocatesforyouth.org/glbqtq-issues-info-for-parents>
- **LGBTQ Youth Resources for Families.** Resource list from the Maternal & Child Health Library at Georgetown University. [http://www.mchlibrary.info/families/frb\\_LGBTQ.html](http://www.mchlibrary.info/families/frb_LGBTQ.html)
- **Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.** Education, information, resources, and health services for LGBTQ youth and adults. <http://www.cdc.gov/lgbthealth/>
- **American Psychological Association.** Answers to questions about...
  - **Transgender People, Gender Identity, and Gender Expression.** <http://www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/transgender.aspx>
  - **Sexual Orientation and Homosexuality.** <http://www.apa.org/topics/sexuality/orientation.aspx>

- **LGBTQ Youth in the Foster Care System and Legal Rights of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Youth in the Child Welfare System.** Factsheets from the National Center for Lesbian Rights.  
[http://www.nclrights.org/site/DocServer/LGBTQ\\_Youth\\_In\\_Foster\\_Care\\_System.pdf?docID=1341](http://www.nclrights.org/site/DocServer/LGBTQ_Youth_In_Foster_Care_System.pdf?docID=1341) and  
[http://www.nclrights.org/site/DocServer/LGBTQ\\_Youth\\_In\\_Child\\_Welfare\\_System.pdf?docID=1581](http://www.nclrights.org/site/DocServer/LGBTQ_Youth_In_Child_Welfare_System.pdf?docID=1581)
- **Getting Down to Basics.** Toolkit from Lambda Legal with resources for those supporting LGBTQ youth in foster care.  
<http://www.lambdalegal.org/publications/getting-down-to-basics>

## For LGBTQ Youth

- **Be Yourself: Questions & Answers for Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Youth.** Clear, straightforward answers for LGBTQ youth.  
[http://www.pflag.org/fileadmin/user\\_upload/Publications/Be\\_Yourself.pdf](http://www.pflag.org/fileadmin/user_upload/Publications/Be_Yourself.pdf)
- **Represent and YCteen Stories.** Personal stories from youth in foster care.  
<http://www.representmag.org/topics/gay+slash+lesbian.html>
- **The Trevor Project.** Crisis intervention and suicide prevention services for LGBTQ youth.  
<http://www.thetrevorproject.org>

- **It Gets Better Project.** Videos created to show LGBTQ youth that they are not alone and that they have the potential for happy, positive futures, if they can just get through their teen years.  
<http://www.itgetsbetter.org>
- **Get Busy. Get Equal.** ACLU resources for LGBT youth about their rights at school and how to advocate for themselves effectively.  
<http://www.aclu.org/lgbt-rights>
- **Know Your Rights: Youth.** Legal resources regarding out-of-home care and school issues for LGBTQ youth (from Lambda Legal).  
<http://www.lambdalegal.org/issues/teens>
- **Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network.** The leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students.  
<http://www.glsen.org/cgi-bin/iowa/all/student/index.html>

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