

## FOREWORD

### *It's About Time*

*Is safety the only thing to which LGBTQ students are entitled at school? . . . Safety is an essential baseline for schools' ability to meet the needs of LGBTQ students effectively . . . but it is not a sufficient goal in itself [Sadowski's emphasis].*

WHEN I READ THESE WORDS in the manuscript for Michael Sadowski's amazing new book *Safe Is Not Enough: Better Schools for LGBTQ Students*, I practically leapt out of my seat. "Finally!" I thought, "Somebody has said it."

For you to understand my alacrity, I need to take you back in time, specifically to 1992.

In 1992 I was a high school history teacher in Concord, Massachusetts, where we had started the nation's first gay-straight alliance in 1988, leading me to found GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) in 1990. This work had brought me to the attention of our new governor, William Weld, a forward-thinking Republican who was concerned about the high rates of suicide among youth who were lesbian or gay. (We had yet to add "bisexual," "transgender," "questioning," or "queer" to our lexicon.) He created a Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth and appointed me to it. I was asked to cochair the education committee, and we made schools our first order of business.

Throughout 1992 we held hearings around the state and heard heart-rending tales of the harassment and abuse LGBTQ youth faced at the hands of their peers and (sadly, too often) their families. We learned of

the horrible toll exacted by growing up in a society that is fundamentally hostile to your very existence (a toll many of us remembered all too well from our own childhoods). We gathered the then-very-sparse academic data on the experiences of LGBTQ youth and talked to the then-very-few experts on the subject. We set about writing a report with detailed recommendations for what could be done to make schools better places for LGBTQ students.

As we formulated the report and our recommendations, two critical debates that would have long-lasting repercussions for what would become known as the “safe schools” movement dominated our proceedings.

The first was what to call our report. Perhaps befitting her professional background as a therapist, my cochair, Dr. Doris Held, argued for the title “Breaking the Silence.” I disagreed. I knew that many folks did not want to break the silence (including soon-to-be-President Clinton, who would promulgate the infamous “don’t ask, don’t tell” policy for LGBTQ members of the military the next year). I felt that such a frame would appeal only to those who already agreed with us that such a silence was unhealthy (which, for the record, it is—Doris was right about that) and that we needed a more universal theme around which people of all different viewpoints could rally. I argued that theme should be “safe schools”: everyone could agree that kids had a right to be safe at school and, furthermore, the many tales about the consequences of the lack of safety in our schools made the need for action abundantly apparent. Our chair, David LaFontaine, and the bulk of the commissioners agreed with me while also seeing the logic and wisdom of Dr. Held’s argument, so we settled on a compromise: *Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth: Breaking the Silence in Schools and in Families*.

The next debate was what to include in the report. Certain recommendations we made—like the need for a statewide law protecting LGBTQ youth from discrimination—were quickly affirmed. But we got stuck on the issue of curriculum. Working with a task force of educators, I had formulated detailed recommendations for curricular inclusion across all subject matters and ages. The overwhelming majority of the commission rejected these, saying they were simply politically impossible to advance

in the wake of the controversy in New York City about its “Children of the Rainbow” curriculum (which had resulted in the chancellor losing his job). We ended up settling on a rather mild plea for curricular inclusion (with no specifics as to what that meant), and sent the report to the governor in February 1993.

To Weld’s credit, he immediately welcomed the report and vowed to implement its recommendations, save one: curriculum. He distanced himself from this aspect of the report (so much so that the headline on the front page of the next day’s *Boston Herald* read “Weld: There Will Be No Gay School Lessons”), and it basically got dropped as the state went on to formulate its first-in-the-nation “Safe Schools for Gay and Lesbian Students” program.

For more than two decades this has nagged at me. While my fellow commissioners were probably right that there were very real limits as to what we could expect schools to do in the early nineties (when same-sex sexual relations were still illegal in many states, mind you) and did the politically smart thing in overruling me, I have always regretted that we settled for less than what we knew was required. As Michael writes in his introduction, “Is safety the only thing to which LGBTQ students are entitled at school?” In 1993, I guess it was, but that never sat well with me.

If anyone is to blame for the dominance of the safe schools frame—with all its limitations—for the next two decades, it has to be me. I took the Massachusetts model nationwide when GLSEN became a national organization in 1994 and for nearly two decades beat the “safety” drum hard, first as executive director of GLSEN until 2008 and then as President Obama’s Assistant Deputy Secretary for Safe and Drug-Free Schools from 2009 to 2011. The conflagrations that even this seemingly mild and noncontroversial frame inspired (including an effort by over sixty House Republicans to have me removed from office in December 2009) showed that it was and remains politically volatile to ask schools to address LGBTQ concerns. But the safety argument always involved a bit of tongue biting on my part. I knew that for LGBTQ students to truly thrive, not just survive, safety, as Michael writes, “*is not a sufficient goal in itself.*” It just never felt politically possible to say it.

Well, now someone has, and thank God for that.

Michael Sadowski's book is a much-needed and long-overdue "upgrade" of the safe schools movement, moving us beyond what is politically possible to what is educationally required for LGBTQ students to thrive. Michael makes a compelling case, with specific and highly practical examples, for schools to go beyond mere safety to full inclusion for LGBTQ students. His analysis is sophisticated, taking into account not only sexual orientation and gender identity but also factors such as students' age, race, class, religion, and region (to name a few). Michael offers every reader—regardless of whom they teach, or where they teach—useful takeaways for creating meaningful change in their schools. In short, he has given us a roadmap for the next phase of this movement.

I for one will forever be in his debt for correcting the well-intentioned mistakes we made two decades ago. This is the most important book written on LGBTQ issues in education in my lifetime, and I am honored to introduce it to you. Enjoy!

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