

**Statement of Carolyn Laub
Executive Director
Gay-Straight Alliance Network**

**GAY-STRAIGHT ALLIANCE
NETWORK**



My name is Carolyn Laub and I am the Executive Director of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network (GSA Network). GSA Network empowers youth across the state to stand up to harassment and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity. We have more than 475 Gay-Straight Alliance clubs in California middle schools and high schools registered with our network, which includes more than 40% of the state's public high schools. 5 of the GSA clubs registered with us are in Kern County – all 5 are located at high schools in the Kern Union High School District and we are supporting students at East Bakersfield High School in their effort to establish the district's 6th GSA club.

California is making great strides towards increasing safety for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students as more and more high school students are able to start their own GSA clubs, hold forums and discussions about a variety of issues, and as it becomes more common to see articles in student newspapers promoting respect for students based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

But we all take a step backward when school officials choose to censor positive messages.

GSA Network and our local members are deeply concerned about the recent decision made by Mr. Gibson, the principal at East Bakersfield High, to refuse to allow the school's paper, *The Kernal*, to publish a series of articles about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues. The principal's decision to censor the publication of an article about the lives of East High LGBT students and their coming out stories is misguided and has a detrimental effect on the very students the principal purports to protect by barring the articles from running. As the principal, his charge and duty is to provide a safe campus for all students, including LGBT students, and protect them from harassment and discrimination, not to force them into silence. If the principal has direct evidence that there are safety concerns at school, then his first priority should not be to curtail free speech rights of students but to take appropriate steps to identify and discipline those students who are making threats and to make clear to the school community that harassment will not be tolerated.

Instead, the principal at East High is sending a clear message to the students identified in the censored *Kernal* articles: go back into the closet if you want to be safe at school.

Today, you've heard from the East High students who dared to start an open and honest dialogue about sexual orientation. We commend the brave students who spoke openly about their lives as well as the student journalists who carefully and respectfully documented their stories. GSA Network welcomes such articles in school newspapers

because they foster a healthy dialogue and create momentum for more safety and acceptance; they don't lead to more violence.

When GSA clubs are formed in conservative communities -- such as the other 5 GSA clubs in Bakersfield schools -- they may be considered "controversial" at first but they help to shed light on a unacceptable climate of intolerance and hostility that exists in our schools. Similarly, articles about LGBT students spark a dialogue about safety and respect for a group of students who face pervasive harassment and discrimination at school.

GSA Network and our members know that censorship is never the right strategy to fight discrimination. It has not worked in the past and it will not work here. The principal at East High should encourage the publication of these positive and respectful articles. If he is genuinely worried about the school's climate and the safety of the students identified in the article, he can take proactive steps including publicizing the school's non-discrimination policy and providing mandatory staff training and student education on preventing harassment of LGBT students.

Based on our experience working with other school districts across California, we know there are many effective strategies available to the East Bakersfield High principal that will successfully fight intolerance, homophobia, discrimination, harassment, and violence in schools. Censorship is not one of those strategies.

We hope that this lawsuit will result in the *Kernal* being able to publish the articles on LGBT issues before the end of the school year. Additionally, GSA Network hopes to work with Kern High School District, like we are with Los Angeles Unified and Visalia Unified, to find a resolution that will ensure that *all* students at East Bakersfield are safe and that *all* students have a voice at school.