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NYCLU Freedom in Expression Contest

The United States of America is a nation founded on a myriad of intellectual and humanist ideals such as free thought, freedom of religion, fair justice, democratic government and free expression, just to name a few. Throughout American history, most people in our nation have upheld the ideals that our Founding Fathers wanted American society to uphold, but there remains a sizeable amount of people that refuse to accept these ideas, largely because they are mired in their own ignorance.

In contemporary America, there is fairly low tolerance for discrimination against minority/ethnic groups, religious groups and discrimination based on gender. Nevertheless, one form of discrimination is only fought in a handful of places – discrimination based on sexual orientation. The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered and Questioning community, or LGBTQ community, often finds itself the victim of discrimination and sadly, violence. This is especially true in America's schools. The most recent example of this violence was the murder of Lawrence King, a gay fifteen-year-old from California, who was murdered by another student, Brandon McInerney, in a classroom at the middle school. People nation-wide most likely believe the source of the hate McInerney possessed came from his parents. While this may or may not be true, one thing is certain – schools across the country are not doing nearly enough to combat discrimination and intolerance against LGBTQ youth. A California Assemblyman also believes this is the case. Assemblyman Mike Eng introduced a new diversity education bill (the California Diversity Bill) that would require mandatory classes on diversity and tolerance in schools throughout California. Although I applaud Assemblyman Eng's efforts, it is saddening that the sort of violence Lawrence King experienced; and at

school, a place where he should have been safe, was the impetus needed for such a bill to be introduced. This horrific incident clearly exemplifies the vulnerability of LGBTQ students and the lack of protection these students receive from schools.

The transgressions committed by schools pertaining to protecting the rights of all students, especially LGBTQ students are appalling. In my own school, for example, the word ‘gay’ is often used in an insulting and degrading manner and the highly vulgar term ‘faggot’ is also used by students and with complete disregard for the offensiveness of the word – and it is a rarity to hear teachers punishing, or even warning students for using the word. The practice of ignoring these sorts of things is not only a bad, but harmful practice. It is the duty of the school and those who work within its walls to make all students feel welcome, and I am highly certain that LGBTQ students do not feel as welcome as they should in my school. It is most shocking that a school in a city as liberal as New York City could have such high intolerance. It perturbs me to think of the type of intolerance LGBTQ students elsewhere in the country would be forced to experience – in the rural, lesser-educated areas of this nation. It is why I believe that all states should adopt laws similar to the California Diversity Bill, regardless of whether or not certain persons may disagree with the LGBTQ lifestyle. Disagreement is not a justification for ignorance, violence, and marginalizing this sector of society.

“Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere...” – Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. an advocate for civil rights for all people, not just people of color, was the man who uttered these very true words. The fate of humankind is not laid out in separate lines or rows – it is intertwined. “...Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” This is what most people fail to realize. It is also something schools should realize. The abuse that LGBTQ students suffer in our nation’s schools does not merely affect LGBTQ students only. It has a ripple effect, and other groups will soon find themselves the victims of senseless violence and intolerance. This is why America’s schools, in the name of justice, freedom and equality – all the ideals our nation was founded upon, should do a lot more to protect the rights of LGBTQ students.