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Equality Florida, Step Up for Students team up to provide LGBTQ awareness training

By Drew Wilson

LGBTQ rights organization Equality Florida has joined forces with Step Up For Students to provide LGBTQ awareness training at private schools.

Equality Florida currently offers the training at public schools and would bring the same curricula to private schools that accept Florida Tax Credit Scholarship and Family Empowerment Scholarship students.

Step Up For Students, the organization that administers most of those scholarships, has raised \$1 million privately to seed the endeavor.

That money is aimed at providing four years of ongoing training services for private school administrators and teachers, provided by Equality Florida's Safe Schools team and coordinated by Step Up's staff.

"This is an exciting opportunity for us," Equality Florida CEO Nadine Smith said. "Any time we can step inside any school to offer help to students, we want to be there. The bottom line is that every student should feel safe, no matter whether the school is public or private."

Step Up President Doug Tuthill added, "We're honored to partner with Equality Florida to ensure every child regardless of their identity has access to safe learning environments."

Equality Florida's five-year-old Safe and Healthy Schools program is used in public school districts around the state. It aims to create a culture of inclusion while countering the bullying, harassment, social isolation and bigotry that dramatically increase risk factors for LGBTQ students.

The partnership between Equality Florida and Step Up has been in the works for more than two years, and the two organizations signed a memorandum of understanding in February.

The first step was cultural training for Step Up staff, which took place in the St. Petersburg and Jacksonville offices in March, prior to the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. The second step was to introduce Safe and Healthy Schools to private school organizations. The third step, which began this month, was to begin inviting private schools to participate voluntarily and free of cost.

Some schools are already on board, including Piney Grove Academy in Ft. Lauderdale, Murl-Windsor Academy in Hollywood, Foundation Academy in Jacksonville, Deeper Root Academy in Orlando, and Sunrise Academy in Orange City.

Sunrise Academy was the first scholarship private school to receive Equality Florida's training in September.

"Sunrise Academy is excited to join the partnership and be the first private school to participate in Equality Florida's Safe School program," Principal Shellnisha Franklin said.

"We as educators must strive to create a safe space where all students feel valued and empowered to be their authentic self."

The stakes are high.

LGBTQ students attempt suicide at four times the rate of non-LGBTQ students. A recent survey found 18% of Florida high school students either identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or unsure. Another 1.5% reported they are transgender.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Youth Risk Behavior Survey, LGBTQ students are also more likely to experience bullying and violence, resulting in higher absenteeism and poorer school performance.

Smith, whose father is a church deacon and whose organization has worked with church congregations, says she especially welcomes the opportunity to work in faith-based schools. Two-thirds of the schools that participate in the state-sponsored Florida Tax Credit Scholarship and Family Empowerment Scholarship programs, which serve economically disadvantaged students, are faith-based.

Smith says the focus is on students and not religion.

"What we really believe is that you meet people where they are, where their belief systems are," Smith says. "We're not telling someone that they have to change their faith beliefs, but what we are saying is there are ways that you interact with young people that can either make them safe and create a healthy learning environment or ways you can make them unsafe and push them away and push them down a path that can lead to depression, suicide, homelessness — a lot of negative outcomes."

Equality Florida supports legislation that would ban LGBTQ discrimination in the workplace, housing and in private schools with students on state-sponsored scholarships. But Smith says the partnership complements those efforts, allowing her trainers to help teachers and students in any private school that will open its doors to them.

"What we discover in talking to schools and parents and teachers who cross the spectrum in terms of belief — political beliefs, religious beliefs, cultural beliefs — is that they want to create the safest space for every student, they want to see them have the most support in becoming who they are," Smith said. "And we can be a great partner in making that happen."

The Equality Florida trainers will adapt training to the constraints of COVID-19. They helped Step Up to create an online LGBTQ resource page for schools, families, and students that will be continually updated with the most up-to-date research and best practices.