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Host, Paul Gagnon and Correspondent, Karen "Mal" Malmé

## Op-Ed:

# Safe Schools Coalition Defends Governor Dean

Dear Editor:

In response to your editorial "Too Little Too Late" (OITM, April 1998), in which you criticized Governor Dean for lack of action on homophobia in the schools, we offer the following comments.

We represent the Vermont Safe Schools Coalition. Formed in 1995, the coalition's first effort was the "Building Bridges to Equity Conference" on GLBTQ youth issues in 1996. The Coalition is comprised of representatives from the VT Department of Health, VT Department of Education, Outright Vermont, and concerned educators and students.

Currently, the Coalition is engaged in work to educate and sensitize elected officials, school administrators, and others about the levels of homophobic harassment still present in Vermont schools. Despite state legislation passed in 1994 prohibiting discrimination and harassment in schools on the basis of sexual orientation (S313), many schools have not yet developed, adequately communicated, or enforced the policies which were mandated to be in place by August, 1995.

The goal of the Coalition is to make schools safe for all students. One way to do this is to create a program in Vermont similar to the Safe Schools Program in Massachusetts. The Massachusetts program mandated gay/straight alliances in schools; provided for education of faculty, staff, and students; and created a staff position at the Department of Education to provide technical assistance, communication and other resources. We have shared information about this model with both Governor Dean and Vermont State Commissioner of Education Marc Hull, and continue to be in contact with them about it. The model is helpful to us but cannot be implemented in the same way as in Massachusetts because Vermont's schools are controlled locally and not by the Governor.

On November 19, 1997, 17 GLBTQ youth from around the state sat down with Governor Dean for pizza and a conversation about their lives. This meeting received its impetus from inter-

views and conversations Paul Olsen had conducted for OITM with the governor over the past several years. In those conversations, Governor Dean expressed interest in meeting with a group of GLBTQ youth. The November 19th meeting, the first in a plan to make the voices of GLBTQ youth heard, resulted from those conversations, and the efforts of the Safe Schools Coalition, the Queer Youth Providers Network (a state-wide network of community based GLBTQ youth serving groups), Outright Vermont, and Keith Goslant of VCLGR.

Governor Dean gave generously of his time and attention, in fact, he stayed a half an hour longer than originally planned. During the meeting he committed to writing a letter about the need to enforce the anti-harassment/anti-discrimination policy. He also expressed his support for the formation of Gay/Straight Alliances in high schools across the state, and for the need to provide training on homophobia, heterosexism, and the needs of GLBTQ youth for school faculty, staff, and administrators.

On March 11, 1998, a similar meeting was held with Commissioner Marc Hull. Those who attended the meeting came away feeling that Hull listened with both his heart and his mind. He shared with us that in five years of School Superintendent's meetings, the issues of GLBTQ youth, or the fact of their existence in schools, never came up. He promised that this would not be the case in the future, and committed to raising awareness among school administrators. In April, he proved his commitment by allocating 40% of one Department of Education position to the needs of GLBTQ youth and the faculty/staff who work with them.

The next step, meeting with members of the House and Senate Judiciary, Education, and Health and Welfare Committees, took place at Visibility Day on April 15th. Again, young GLBTQ people and those who work with them had an opportunity to tell their stories directly. In addition, the group was introduced to the

House by Representative Bill Lippert, and met with Governor Dean in his ceremonial office. At this meeting, the Governor made his strongest statements of support to date, including his willingness to "play cop" with schools not in compliance with anti harassment legislation, and to speak about these issues at schools himself. He has been as good as his word — yesterday he spoke at U32 High School in Montpelier, and he has confirmed an engagement at Cabot School on May 20. Also during the April 15th meeting, Dean himself brought up complaints that his letter to school principals was not strong enough. He offered to make stronger and more public statements, including sending another letter if necessary.

In all these meetings we had two goals. One was to educate and sensitize people to the issues and the need. The other was to begin a dialogue about how we can work together to make Vermont's schools safe. We did not present the Governor, the Commissioner, or the legislature with a laundry list of things to do "for" us. Instead we asked them to work "with" us. Both Governor Dean and Commissioner Hull have joined in the work enthusiastically, each has taken initiative to address these issues in ways appropriate to their roles, and our dialogue continues.

Sincerely,

Palmer Legare, founder of Cabot School Gay/Straight Alliance on behalf of Safe Schools Coalition members:

Tom Aloisi, Vermont Department of Health, AIDS Program

Tom Dalton, Vermont Department of Health, AIDS Program

Shaun Donahue, Vermont Department of Education, HIV/AIDS-Health Education Consultant; Safe Schools Coordinator

Tami Eldridge, Outright Vermont, Executive Director

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