



Human Rights
Law Centre



rainbow
families
VICTORIA

What was it like to experience discrimination for being who you are in a religious school?

Last week, the Equality Campaign, the Human Rights Law Centre and Rainbow Families Victoria asked LGBTIQ people to share their experiences of discrimination in schools – as students or teachers – where they were targeted because of who they are or who they love.

In 48 hours, we received more than 800 responses from people across Australia sharing stories of being bullied, threatened or expelled because of their sexuality or gender identity. Here is a small collection of some of the stories shared with us by students and teachers about their experiences.

We call on you to make sure that outdated, discriminatory laws which allow religious schools to discriminate against students and staff are removed from Australian law once and for all.

Experiences of students

“I am currently a student in an extremely religious school, and I am gay. Every day I have to deal with homophobic comments made casually, being told I will go to hell, and that I am not human. Everyday LGBT students and teachers are treated lesser than their peers. I have witnessed gay students being attacked, I have watched people vandalise gay students’ lockers, I have seen someone smash a gay teacher’s car windows. We do not need to face more discrimination than we already do.”

“I attended Catholic school for 13 years. I did not identify as a lesbian until I was late into my twenties, but I knew quite a few girls who identified in high school, and they had a very difficult time. One I know sought help from a teacher, who broke confidence and spoke to the principal, and my friend was under threat of being expelled if she did even the smallest thing wrong (“just give me one reason”) due to her sexuality.”

“I have spent the past six years at an Anglican girls’ school in the eastern suburbs of Sydney. LGBTQIA+ topics are banned and there has been stoic backlash from the executive team when these issues are discussed or students choose to be open about their identity. My transgender brother had to leave the school for fear of coming out to the religious institution. I am bisexual and I have been personally told by teachers/staff that my existence is a sin simply because of the people I love. I have been unable to exist authentically at the place where I spend almost every day ... this legislation will literally make places like this HELL for LGBTQIA+ students. I can only thank my lucky stars that I complete my HSC this year and can be out of that place for good. But I fear for younger/future LGBTQIA+ students that attend the school.”

“I was bullied, physically and verbally abused, and then unwillingly outed to the rest of my peer group as a lesbian student at a Catholic school. I was also threatened with corrective rape by teenage boys ... The fact my school taught that LGBT+ people were abominable sinners created an environment where I felt unsafe and perilously aware I could be expelled at any time for any perceived homosexual behaviour.”

“I worked at a Catholic school and have had a student write and submit a suicide note as a cry for help, expressing the pressure of the Catholic values and fear if she was to come out.”

“Basically it was six weeks before my HSC and [the school] set a meeting with me and my mother to talk ... about the "issue" of my sexuality. After this meeting the conclusion was that they would take it to the school board to see what will be done, whether or not I would be expelled ... A week later I had another meeting saying I could stay in school on these conditions: (1) I could not mention/talk about my sexuality at school. (2) I would be excluded from some school functions. (3) I had to see a councillor weekly until I left school. I didn't agree with this but with only six weeks left I had to suck it up and deal with it. It left me feeling very angry and stressed.”

“I was actively involved in creative arts, business and hospitality, music ensembles, representative council, student prefect council, student support mediators, as well as [assisting] with student admin duties as an officer for the student services office ... the high school made the HSC process harder, by repeatedly throwing me regularly into the counsellor's office because I was apparently "sick" because I was gay. I remember regularly coming home from school and locking myself in my room and crying for hours.”

Experiences of teachers

“I am a lesbian and was informed by the religious pastors in my workplace that my sexuality was wrong and I would be punished if I continued. I was 18 years old. I learnt nothing but that I was no good and worthless but I was still a lesbian. I was born this way.”

“At the ripe young age of 22, I was sacked from an Anglican boarding school, because another member of staff read my mail from a girlfriend, and told the headmistress. She promptly sacked me saying I was 'an economic liability' in a posh private school. I was sent up to Westminster to a psychiatrist, who examined me for 2 hours, and came to the conclusion, I was much more sane than the people who had referred me'. I was totally devastated, and cruelly isolated by the staff, after doing a great job with the students.”

“I teach at a conservative Catholic Primary school. I am constantly afraid that someone will find out and that I will lose my job. I am the main income earner and my employment is incredibly important. I worry that I will lose my job. I worry that my employer won't give me a good reference if she finds out. This could affect my future employment opportunities. I feel like a criminal and I have done nothing wrong.”

“As a gay teacher myself, I have faced years of being terrified in schools and replaced the name of my partner with a female name.”