



# PRIDENTITY IN ACTION

**A WHOLE OF SCHOOL  
APPROACH TO SUPPORTING  
SEXUAL & GENDER DIVERSITY**



**BRIMBANK  
YOUTH  
SERVICES**

A SERVICE PROVIDED BY  
BRIMBANK CITY COUNCIL



## **Brimbank Youth Services**

Brimbank Youth Services (BYS) is a council led, generalist youth service covering 25 suburbs in the Western Suburbs of Melbourne, with 20.2% per cent of residents aged 12-25 years. Our vision is, "A community that encourages and provides opportunities for young people to feel valued, respected and included". We work towards achieving this by developing and delivering a range of services aimed to enhance the health and wellbeing outcomes of young people aged 12-25 years who live work or study in Brimbank.

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Members of the Q - West Network

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# INTRODUCTION

**Brimbank Youth Services is incredibly proud to have been the lead agency in the development and delivery of Pridentity in Action, a whole of school approach to supporting sexual and gender diversity.**

**Pridentity in Action is a clear example of the ways in which local youth services can add value to work that is already occurring in building safe, inclusive communities.**



This work was instigated after youth services received a phone call from a parent of a nervous young person who wanted to know, *"if there was a local queer group my son could join?"*. As Brimbank Youth Services was a relatively new service at the time the option of starting a group program & same sex attracted gender diverse young people and their allies was being explored. After encouraging the young person to consider being part of the phone

conversation by being placed on speaker, we discussed meeting informally to look at what would make a good group. He then mentioned having another friend at his school who he thought would be interested in meeting with the staff member at his school. The worker arranged this and it was at this meeting that the two young people indicated that they did not necessarily want to *"join a group"* rather they, *"want to find ways to stop homophobia in their school"*.



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This conversation was a call for action for Brimbank Youth Services, knowing from research the serious impacts that homophobia and transphobia can have on the health and wellbeing of students. The service then established a partnership with the school and sought to explore models of best practice in creating a school culture that support sexual diversity. From here the Pridentity in Action model was developed and implementation began across two schools within the City of Brimbank with assistance from Safe Schools Coalition Victoria. Over an 18 month period the initiative of two young people resulted in the project through multiple interventions reaching over 500 students across both schools.

The purpose of this report is to share the processes and learnings that were gained and developed through Pridentity in Action with other schools and youth services who are also interested in working together to create communities that celebrate sexual diversity.

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## AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF PRIDENTITY IN ACTION

The overall aim of Pridentity in Action was to increase knowledge and understanding of the impacts of homophobia on health and wellbeing and strategies to address this form of discrimination resulting in safer more inclusive school communities.

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### To achieve this aim the objectives of the Pridentity in Action Project were:-

- To increase staff knowledge of the needs of SSAGD students and referral pathways through professional development and information exchange
- To increase student knowledge through the delivery of curriculum materials that promote sexual diversity and inclusion
- To develop school and agency policies that respond to homophobia
- To increase support options for the health and wellbeing of young people who identify as SSAGQ through the provision of individual support, youth led student projects and advocacy & awareness raising activities
- To develop partnerships between Keilor Downs Secondary College, St Albans Secondary College, Safe Schools Coalition Victoria and Brimbank Youth Services

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## SCHOOLS AS A HEALTH PROMOTION SETTING

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**Strong evidence at both a local and national level reinforced the need for Brimbank Youth Services to work in partnership with schools to create opportunities that address the serious impacts that homophobia and transphobia can have on the health and wellbeing of same sex attracted young people.**

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The detrimental impacts of homophobia and transphobia can create serious consequences on the physical and emotional health and wellbeing of students including early school leaving, drug and alcohol abuse, and depression. The rates of early, suicidal ideation and suicide is also higher for SSAGQ young people with the suicide risk increasing fourfold for same sex attracted young people.

The National Survey on the Sexual Health and Wellbeing of Young People highlights one in ten Australian young people identify as same sex attracted and of this group 75% have experienced some form of homophobic abuse. It is reported, Homophobic bullying rates have increased and schools are the most common place for this to occur (Hillier, 2010).

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Brimbank Youth Services completed a literature review, benchmarking exercise and focus group with young people which revealed at a local level, young people were finding that schools were significantly less safe for SSAIGD students than for others. In addition to this young people also informed us they had all experienced greater rates of homophobia in year 9 and were very clear they wanted to see Brimbank Youth Services take an active role in preventing homophobia in schools.

This call for action allowed Brimbank Youth Services to consider the ways in which as a service they could work in partnership with schools to achieve cultural change by adopting a broader multi-faceted program model based on the World Health Organisation, Health Promoting Schools Framework often referred to as Whole of School Approach. These schools were both Keilor Downs Secondary College and St Albans Secondary College.

As a mental health promotion initiative Pridentity in Action recognises that both schools and Youth Services are vital settings in enhancing the health and wellbeing of young people. In addition to supporting the needs of young people directly the project also enhances the capabilities of the youth and education sector in taking action towards a community free of homophobia and transphobia.



## WHOLE OF SCHOOL APPROACH FRAMEWORK

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**The Whole of School Approach framework created multiple enabling opportunities to work alongside both Keilor Downs Secondary College and St Albans Secondary College to create more supportive, inclusive and safer school environments.**

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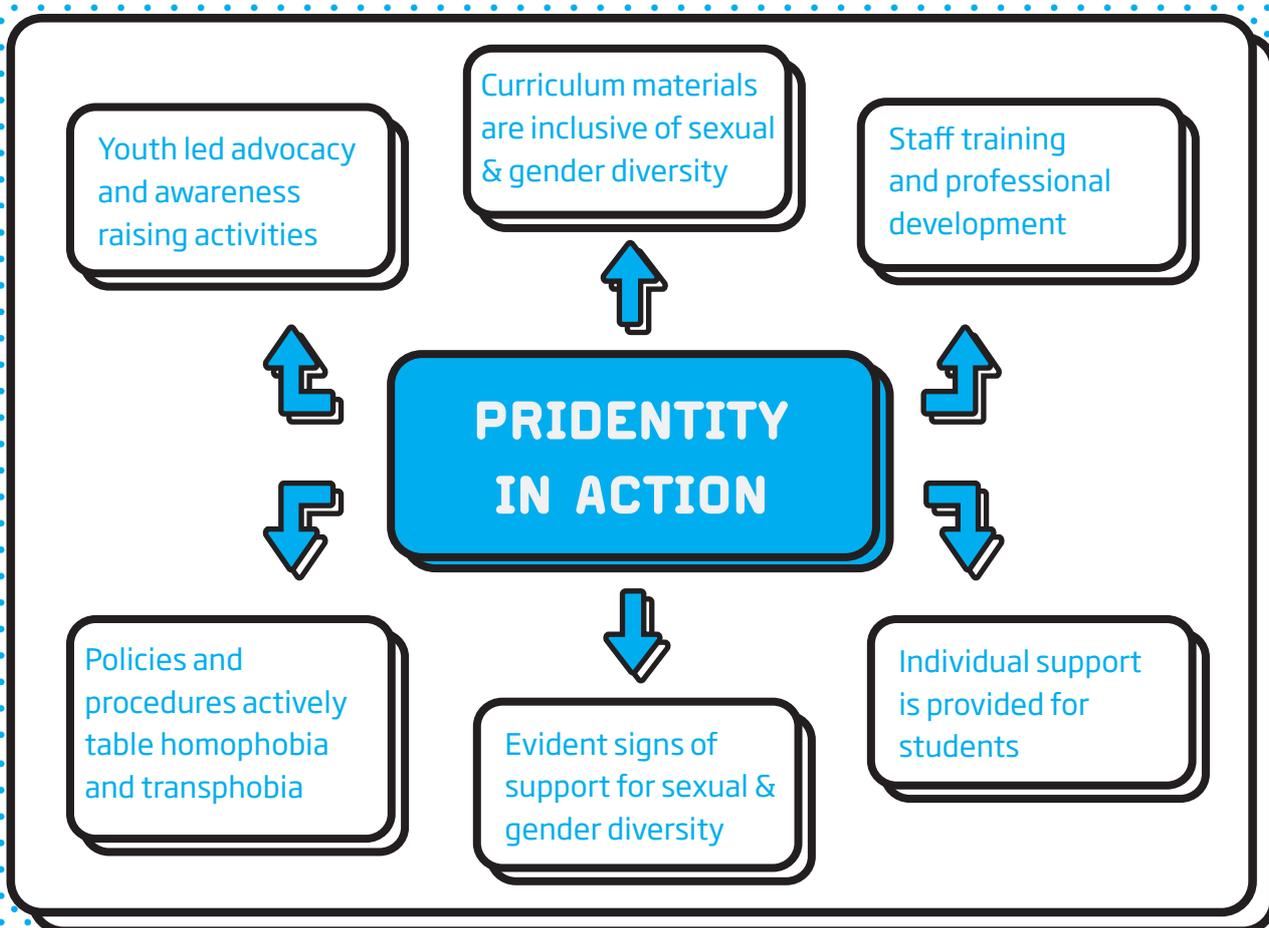
First and foremost it recognised the role that student lead action plays in creating change, and to sustain this change it must be supported by multiple reinforcing factors including curriculum, policy, visible signs of support, staff professional development and specialist support.

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Underpinning this model was a belief that although each of these strategies on their own could have a positive impact on individual students, it would be by pooling resources and delivering multiple approaches over a year long period that more promising results in a shift in school culture could be achieved.

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## STRATEGY ONE – VISIBLE SIGNS OF SUPPORT

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A practical and proactive step that can be taken by schools and local youth services is to show visible signs of support for sexual diversity. Pridentity in Action ensured that clear signs of support for sexual diversity were evident throughout both schools, this included taking the following steps :-

- Supporting schools to seek Safe Schools Coalition membership
- Displaying Safe Schools Coalition membership in the administration foyer
- Ordering resources including posters, postcards, badges and stickers from Safe Schools Coalition, The Action Centre, Minus 18 and headspace
- Working with a group of students to display posters, postcards, badges and stickers in prominent and protected areas
- Distributing help seeking info about local youth services programs and support
- Creating a directory of specific services for Student Wellbeing Team to assist referral pathways
- Purchasing specific sexual and gender diverse library resources
- Working alongside library staff and students to display library resources
- Creating opportunities for the Rainbow Flag to be raised on school grounds
- Including information about Pridentity in Action in the school newsletter
- Creating opportunities for students to present at school assemblies
- Creating links between the GSA groups within schools and the Student Leadership Committee to support the Pridentity in Action by working together to reduce discrimination
- Demonstrating leadership support for the project from Principal and Assistant Principals

**“Once our school put the new rule that you can’t say gay anymore, the posters reminded other students to acknowledge this and hold back” - Student**

**“I like that there is a collection of books in the library with rainbow stickers on the spine – this began as display and now is in the general collection and we can borrow them anytime” - Student**

**“It was so good that we got to speak at assemblies saying how homophobia will not be tolerated, I felt that other students listened as the message came from students not just teachers” - Student**

# STRATEGY TWO – STAFF PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT



Safe Schools Coalition Victoria were a critical partner in the Pridentity in Action Project, particularly in taking the lead role in the delivery of specialist professional learning. This drew upon current national and international research which aimed to provide staff with the insight, ideas and confidence to address homophobia and transphobia. In addition to this other steps that were taken to increase staff professional development included:-

- A Brimbank Youth Services and lead staff member from each school presenting information at a staff meeting about Pridentity in Action at both the commencement and conclusion of the project
- Considering how Safe Schools Coalition training can occur on an annual basis as a 'refresher'
- Developing an MOU between the school/s and youth services to ensure clear communication channels and expectations between project parties
- Inviting a small number of student members of the Gay Straight Alliance groups to participate in staff professional development and if they are comfortable speak about their experience of sexual diversity within the school
- Including all staff involved in the development of the project evaluation
- Encouraging schools to share information with other schools about the program model and its success

The staff professional development component of the project was evaluated by Safe Schools Coalition Victoria at the conclusion of the training. Post survey results revealed that amongst staff there was increased knowledge of the impacts of homophobia and strategies to address this in the classroom. Students who participated in the training indicated it made them feel like school staff were supportive of the changes they wanted to see and were open to suggestions as to how to make school a safer, more inclusive space.



**“I feel better equipped now that I have practical advice and skills to make a change in the classroom to be more inclusive of same-sex attracted students”**

**“I really valued taking time out to be able to have the opportunity to talk about this openly with my colleagues.”**

## STRATEGY THREE – DEVELOPMENT OF POLICY

One of the strongest protective factors for same sex attracted, gender diverse young people is policy based protection in schools (Safe Schools Coalition, 2014). The policy component of the project saw Brimbank Youth Services work alongside Safe Schools Coalition and the Secondary School Nurses based in each school, to ensure anti-bullying policies and procedures are in place that actively tackle homophobia and transphobia. To achieve this the following steps occurred:-

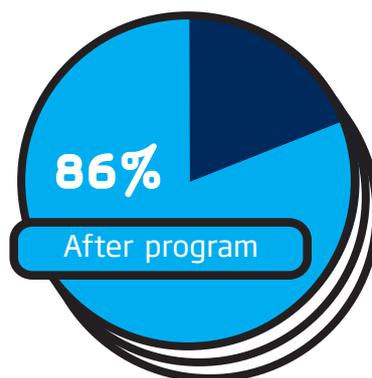
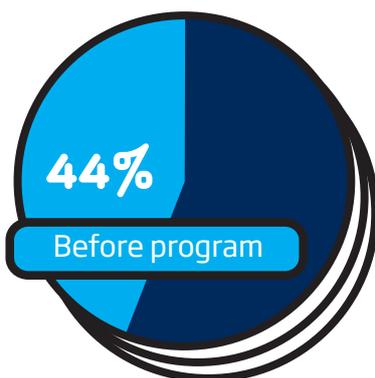
- Schools and Youth Services accessed secondary consultation from Safe Schools Coalition Victoria regarding development and implementation of the policies
- An initial policy scan was completed in both schools and youth services to determine if current policy specifically addressed bullying and harassment in relation to sexual & gender diversity
- Policy drafts were developed by Secondary School Nurses in close collaboration with the Student Wellbeing Team in each school
- Project partners and members of the Gay Straight Alliance groups were invited to review the policies and provide feedback
- Policy approval was sought through the schools governance structures (including school council)
- A communication strategy was developed to ensure broad understanding and awareness of the policies, this included presentations year level assemblies, class times, Pridentity workshops, IDAHOT (International Day against homophobia and transphobia) and newsletter updates

**“I feel like the policy really made a difference as it could be referred to as soon as an incident arose, for example a year 12 student made a homophobic comment at the end of year whole school assembly and it was very public. The policy was then used to develop a response which included the student meeting with myself and the School Principal to discuss the incident and its potential impacts and also to inform the students’ parents of the incident”**  
**- Secondary School Nurse**

## STRATEGY FOUR – SEXUAL & GENDER DIVERSITY IN THE CLASSROOM

A key component of the WHO Whole of School Approach Framework in relation to Pridentity in Action is that school curriculum was inclusive of sexual & gender diversity. Brimbank Youth Services worked to source materials that could be delivered to all year 9 students as part of a broader health and wellbeing curriculum. These resources were the 'Pridentity, Inclusive Education Kit' developed by Catherine Reidy at Women's Health in the North and, 'Beyond, that's so Gay' developed by Daniel Witthaus from NICHE

(National Institute for Challenging Homophobic Education). A 'train the trainer' model was implemented in both schools that saw Brimbank Youth Services staff and members of the Student Wellbeing Team facilitate a modified program to all year 9 Students over a series of workshops, with 25 students in each group. Additional school staff participated in the workshops and further training with the vision that they would continue to facilitate the workshops on an annual basis.



-  Accurate understanding of homophobia
-  Inaccurate understanding of homophobia

A comparison between the pre and post student surveys demonstrate a strong result. Prior to the sexual diversity program 44% of year 9 students stated an accurate explanation of homophobia. After program participation, this number increased to 86% of students accurately describing homophobia.

**“I now feel more confident in saying just stop what you are doing because we are all the same” - Year 9 Student**

**“I just don’t believe that people should be homophobic in any circumstance. It is very offensive and needs to be stopped” - Year 9 Student**

## STRATEGY FIVE – ADDITIONAL 1:1 SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS

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In the development of the Pridentity in Action model it was recognised that strategies needed to be established between both schools and Brimbank Youth Services to ensure students had flexible pathways for support from both generalist and specialist services including Student Wellbeing Teams, Brimbank Youth Services Youth Support Team, Minus 18, headspace Sunshine and The Action Centre. This was achieved by:-

- Ensuring increased promotion of generalist and specialist support services to students through the Gay Straight Alliance Groups and Pridentity Workshops
- Establishing protocols with Brimbank Youth Services that saw students requiring additional support prioritised through intake processes
- Having a member of the Youth Support Team at Brimbank Youth Services based at one of the schools a half day per week delivering individual 1:1 support for students
- Ensuring schools were aware they could access secondary consultation from the Brimbank youth Services, Youth Support Team when required

## STRATEGY SIX – OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH LEAD SOCIAL CHANGE

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The most successful component of the Pridentity in Action project in both schools was the establishment of Gay Straight Alliance Groups, "Project Human" at St Albans Secondary College and "Everybody Loves Rainbows" at Keilor Downs Secondary College. The idea to start both groups were initiated by students who had heard about groups in other schools and saw the benefit that this would have on their own school experience and school culture.

The groups were supported through a youth participation framework by Student Wellbeing and Brimbank Youth Services staff. The Stand Out resource published by Minus 18 was drawn upon as a guide to starting the group, establishing best practice approaches in doing this. A Brimbank Youth Service Staff member initiated meetings with students to vision as to what their hopes were for the group - from here an action plan was developed and students launched into action!

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**The groups provided multiple opportunities for advocacy and awareness raising of the issues and impacts of homophobia and transphobia, including:-**

"We created an alliance with the Student Representative Council, so they could help us campaign"

"We got to attend and present at the Safe Schools Symposium, that was a pretty big deal"

"We sold purple ribbons on Wear it Purple Day"

“We got to go to the Same Sex Formal together and that was just the BEST”

“We got to speak up with confidence when people were disputing same sex marriage”

“On IDAHOT Day, we decorated the school, had a band, raised a rainbow flag”

“We spoke at the Council IDAHOT event, showing that Council was really interested in what we were doing”

“We hosted a BBQ for the year 9’s after they completed their sexual diversity program”

“We spoke at assemblies saying how homophobia will not be tolerated”

“We did a bake sale/ribbon sale event that promoted the group and raised awareness in tackling homophobia and bullying”

“We looked over the policy and the teachers really cared about what we thought of it”

“We could talk directly to the Principle and Vice Principle”

“The pledge! We got more than 100 signatures from students committing to not staying silent around homophobia and to be part of the solution”

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The Gay Straight Alliance Groups were evaluated at the conclusion of the project but have continued in both schools. Through focus groups it was evident that students who were involved in either, "Project Human" or "Everybody Loves Rainbows" reported that overall this was an extremely positive experience and felt there was a cultural shift at their school.

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**At Keilor Downs Secondary College there was a total of 18 students actively involved in the GSA and at St Albans Secondary College a total of 10. Students at both schools reported feelings of having greater support in their school than ever before.**

"It's good to know there are people who feel the same way as we are all passionate about change"

"I now know that Safe Schools Coalition and Brimbank Youth Services are there to help us, and support us with events"

"It's not as hard to accept yourself when there's a bunch of people that already accept you"

"Yeah, we had great support from the teachers who were involved in the group, they were on board and actually seemed to appreciate that fact that we have a group here to challenge homophobia"

"In having us actively initiate events in the school, it not only raised awareness but brought acceptance"

Some of the students through the evaluation indicated feeling that the initial purpose and expectations of the group hadn't yet been met, but recognised that they were in the 'establishing phase' and progressing toward where they wanted to be.

"Well Rome was not built in a night, you know?"

"They might not ever be totally met as, there will always be homophobia, but I feel like if we just had impact on one person we are reaching our goal"

"If I say 'my girlfriend' no one gasps, no one really reacts I guess"

Others felt that they saw glimmers of change

"I asked everyone in this room if they feel safer at school now, and they said yes, so there you go ... We made change happen"

"It's created awareness to make people realise what they are actually saying"

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Through the evaluation students indicated some concerns they had regarding the group, these concerns included how they could ensure the ongoing sustainability of the group as the groups were populated by Year 12 students, that more teacher involvement was required and the group would be stronger if more allies attended.

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## CONCLUSION

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The Pridentity in Action project aimed to support cultural change in school communities by increasing a range of protective factors that have significant health and wellbeing for young people in school settings. A result of this project, the following occurred:-

- Increased student participation in social action initiatives
- Enhanced leadership skills amongst students in the Gay Straight Alliance Groups
- Strengthened peer support networks
- Increased help seeking strategies
- Decrease in bullying incidents/ discrimination related to sexual diversity
- Greater awareness of impacts of homophobia amongst student cohort
- Opportunities to celebrate diversity
- Improved response frameworks as a result of policy
- Consistent messages that homophobia and transphobia will not be tolerated in school settings
- Increased sense of safety within the school community
- Stronger partnerships between schools and services in relation to student wellbeing

**“I think if  
Pridentity in Action  
was here when  
I was in year 8,  
it would have  
changed a lot  
of things for me,  
but it was better  
late than never”**

