



# Class Outing

LGBT educators enjoy more openness and acceptance than ever before. But their gains have been fragile and uneven. And many still feel it's safest to teach from the closet.

BY WARREN HYNES ILLUSTRATIONS BY SCOTT BAKAL

**A**s an activist, you know you're getting somewhere when Barack Obama wants to see you in his office.

In March 2011, Jaim Foster was sitting on a sofa in the White House, watching the president lean forward in his chair, listening intently. Foster was part of a small group the president and first lady Michelle Obama had invited. The Arlington, Va., teacher was there with a parent and three students to talk about bullying.

"I said that as a gay male, I had been bullied and gone through some traumatic times myself," says Foster, who is secretary of the National Education Association's Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender Caucus. "And that has led me to become an advocate."

And, anecdotally at least, more LGBT teachers are becoming leaders like Foster. But the comfort levels of these educators can vary sharply from region to region and even from school to school. In conversations with LGBT educators across the nation, it is clear that many still face bigotry and difficulty. But there are also many heartening stories of acceptance, respect and leadership.

"I think over the last 20 years, there's been so much more of an understanding that gay people are not these monsters," says C. Scott Miller, a second-grade teacher in Santa Ana, Calif. "People

will ask you what you did on the weekend, and did you see this movie or that movie. People are far more aware that these relationships are just as normal as anyone else's."

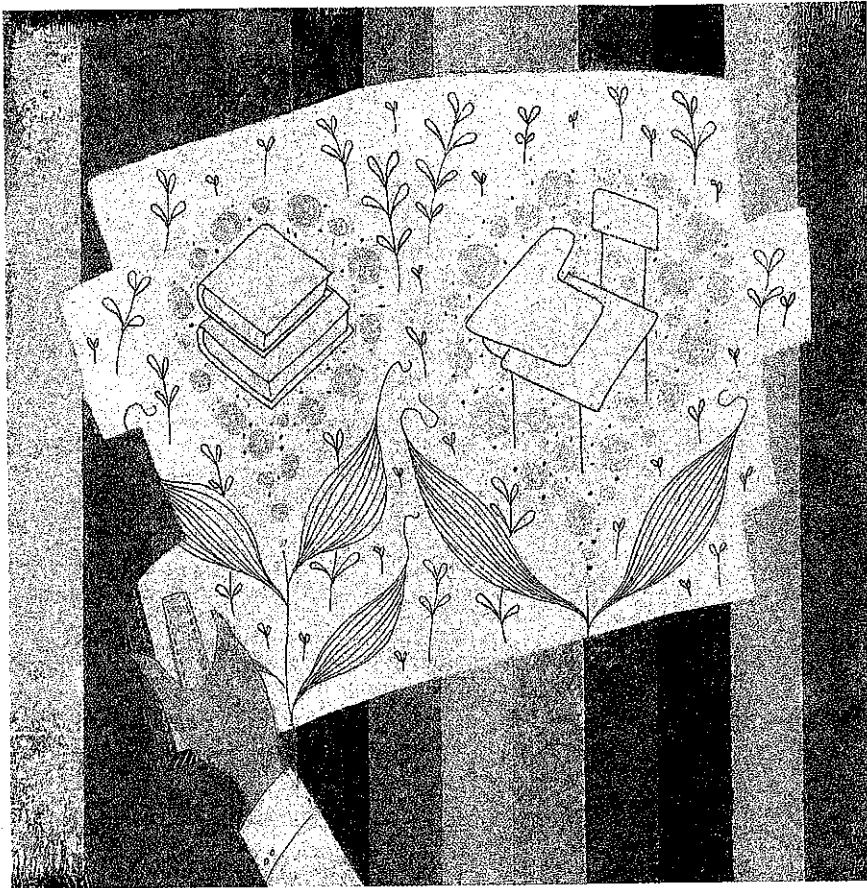
## Setting Aside Stereotypes

Those teachers who speak of greater acceptance within their schools emphasize a culture in which students and colleagues focus more on the individual than on any label or stereotype.

"A lot more families that I come in contact with know someone who's gay, whether it's a sibling or whatever," says Felix Gil, an elementary school principal in Summit, N.J. "It's not like you're the only gay person they know. They have a reference or a contact for that experience." Gil says this allows him and his school community to "focus on the work."

This cultural shift has also turned some LGBT educators into resources and sounding boards. Administrators, teachers and parents alike come to LGBT teachers with questions regarding the sexual orientation of students or family members. Miller, for instance, has a colleague whose daughter recently came out to her. "She said, 'Because I know you, it was easier for me to talk to my daughter,'" Miller recalls.

Of course, LGBT teachers also can provide increased awareness



and support for the primary focus of their work: the students. "I think it's important for all kids to have LGBT teachers," says Erika Sass, an elementary school technology and literacy teacher in Minneapolis. "For straight kids to see that Miss Erika is not creepy and scary and mean, maybe they won't think that being gay is weird. And it's especially important for queer kids to have a positive queer adult. When I was a youth, I was desperately looking for a queer adult who was healthy and living a normal life, to verify that I can live a normal life and be OK."

#### Coming Out?

Frank Burger, a high school biology teacher in Flint, Mich., has worked with LGBT students as co-adviser of his school's Gay-Straight Alliance. "If a gay student sees a gay teacher, they see someone who looks like them or acts like

them," Burger says. "And they feel safer and more supported in the classroom."

So does that mean every LGBT teacher should be out at this point? Despite Foster's invitation to the Oval



#### Pop Quiz

WHAT IS HETEROSEXISM?

- The assumption that everyone is attracted to the opposite sex.*
- The idea that male-female attraction is superior to same-sex attraction.*
- The belief that being heterosexual is better than being lesbian, gay or bisexual.*
- All of the above.*

Office, there is still no federal anti-discrimination law covering sexual orientation or gender identity. On the state and local levels, the kind of protection afforded to LGBT workers depends on where a person lives and how the laws are written. There are 19 states with no anti-discrimination laws protecting LGBT workers. Sixteen others offer partial protection, meaning that only public workers or sexual orientation are covered.

Bridget Valenzuela teaches science at Salt River High School on the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Reservation outside Phoenix. While Arizona law does prohibit discrimination based on sexual orientation in public employment, Valenzuela says it's much different teaching there than in areas such as San Francisco or Chicago.

"It's kind of like you're under cloak-and-dagger," says Valenzuela, who has been teaching for seven years. "It takes a lot longer for things to progress and make strides. It feels like things are moving at a snail's pace. When I first started teaching, I said, 'There's no way I'm ever going to be out.' Coming from a job where I was out, it was like being in the closet all over again."

Rep. Patricia Todd is a state legislator in Alabama, one of those states without any protection for LGBT workers. She introduced a bill in May 2011 designed to protect LGBT teachers from being fired because of sexual orientation or gender identity. No action was taken on the bill, but Todd, who has been out as a lesbian for three decades, says she plans to introduce the bill again this year and, if necessary, in 2013 as well. She describes the attitude toward LGBT teachers in her state as "hostile" and says she would not come out if she were a teacher.

"I have a friend who was fired from her school specifically because she came out," says Todd, a Democrat from Birmingham. "I just think this is absurd that we would fire a teacher not on merit, but based on stereotype and

misperception. We should encourage teachers to live their lives openly.”

Burger, who serves as male co-chair of the NEA’s GLBT Caucus, says he worries that as tenure laws are relaxed in some states, LGBT teachers could be targeted further. Burger wears an “Out and Proud” bracelet to his school in Flint, Mich., every day, and believes that every teacher has the right to live openly and honestly. But he is concerned for the LGBT teacher who is thinking about coming out now.

“I think you just need to be careful about how you do it,” Burger says. “You need to know the laws of your state. It’s not one of those things where you just go into a class and say, ‘I’m gay.’ You don’t do that. I’m not saying you’ve got to hide in the closet, but you do need to watch what you do.”

### Causing Controversy

Watching what you do is a common theme in conversations among LGBT teachers, even those whose states offer anti-discrimination protection. After all, it doesn’t take much to stir up controversy if certain elements come together. A few years ago, a parent complained about the photo on Burger’s desk of him and the man who is now his husband. The parent alleged that the photo was intended to elicit conversation with students and promote homosexuality.

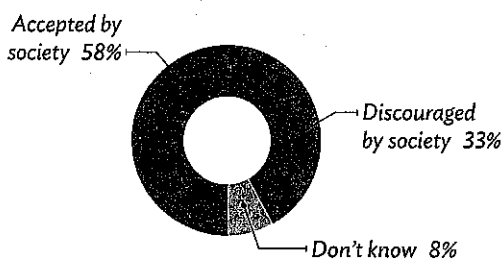
Complaints such as these can lead LGBT teachers to fret over their curricula as well. When Sass was teaching at a Los Angeles high school before moving to Minnesota, she found herself feeling anxious over a PowerPoint slide she had prepared about Bayard Rustin, the civil rights leader who also happened to be gay. “That’s one of the challenges of being an LGBT teacher—making sure you’re not being seen as pushing your personal agenda,” she says.

Emmy Howe co-directs the National Seeking Educational Equity and

Diversity (SEED) Project on Inclusive Curriculum, an international staff-development project designed to bring teachers together to discuss fairness and equity in school climates and curricula. In her years as an LGBT educator in her home state of Massachusetts and throughout the nation, Howe has noticed that opposition to LGBT teachers tends to increase just as gains in acceptance are experienced elsewhere. This happened in Massachusetts, she says, after same-sex marriage was legalized in 2003.

“Once a group gets a little power, people maybe become a little more afraid,”

### Homosexuality should be ...



— Pew Research Center Poll, 2011  
Does not add up to 100 percent due to rounding

Howe says. “The fact that marriage was legitimate made the people who were politically against having out teachers become more adamant and active.”

The impact of these political actions and reactions can send ripples throughout the country. A New Jersey high school world languages teacher, who has taught for more than 20 years, considered coming out for this story. But in the end, he felt that too much was at stake. “Politically, under this climate—it’s so toxic—I think everybody is operating from fear,” the teacher says.

Yet even without ever coming out, that same teacher has encountered students and parents in his district who view him as a valuable resource beyond his teaching expertise.

“I have noticed increasingly over my career that I attract students to me

who are grappling with LGBT issues and confide in me, even though I never have put myself forward as someone to confide in,” the teacher says. “I think that there are families over my career who have put their children in my program because they wanted them to have me—not because of the language I teach. They might have noticed in their children some confusion about identity and thought that this would be a safe place for them.”

### ‘A Long Way to Go’

Sass, whose home state of Minnesota has seen very public debates over sexual orientation in recent months, works in a charter school that offers her a lot of support. She is grateful for her situation yet saddened to know that some teachers feel the need to play it safe by not coming out. This, Sass says, is a societal challenge.

“What are we doing to (a) make sure that we’re hiring diverse teachers and (b) support diverse teachers to keep them retained?” she asks. A more visible LGBT community would make it easier to hire and support more diverse teachers, she says.

Even those LGBT educators who’ve had a seat with the president know it’s not easy for everyone. “If they don’t feel safe, they should not come out,” Foster says of his colleagues. “I do believe in the saying ‘Be the change that you want to see in the world.’ But it’s tough. It’s tough. We still have a long way to go.”

Gil applied for a principal position in his current district because he knew the administration there valued diversity. In thinking carefully about where he works, Gil has allowed himself to lead others while also being honest, open and comfortable with his identity. As the messy path toward progress continues, perhaps this is the final goal of the LGBT teacher.

“Ultimately, you will find a place that appreciates you,” Gil says. “And that will be the place where you can have the greatest impact. You may not be there now, but if you look for that place, you will find it.” ♦

# COUNTRY OUTPOSTS



Life can be tough for LGBT students in rural schools. But like kids in more urban areas, that can change with the right kind of support from teachers and parents.

BY SEAN McCOLLUM

**N**inth-grader Sadie Bauer was walking hand-in-hand with her girlfriend in a hallway of Kennewick High. It was a brave act of affection, considering bigoted attitudes toward same-sex relationships in this rural area of Washington State.

The words rang out, "You \*\*\*\*\* dyke!"

Sadie braced herself for more profanity and slurs, when out of the crowd came one of the school's math teachers. The teacher was probably a head shorter than the bully she confronted, recalls Sadie. But she still got in the name-caller's face until he backed off. Later, Sadie's tormentor came up and apologized.

For Sadie, now 19, the teacher's intervention was a memorable moment in an otherwise miserable high school career. "School was horrible," she remembers. "I was so stressed out. There were only two or three teachers I could talk to about being gay." She describes being so fearful of the school locker room that she lied to her doctor to get a note to escape the teasing and taunts. By sophomore year, Sadie says, she showed up at school only twice a week. In the end, dropping out was a mere technicality, though she proudly shares that she recently earned her GED.

Being an LGBT youth in America has never been a Gay Pride Parade, no matter the community setting. But most rural schools prove an especially unhappy and dispiriting place for kids whose sexuality or gender expression does not fit within community expectations. Those are the findings of researchers for the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), published in the *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* last August.

"We keep finding that youth in rural areas—whether gay or perceived as gay—are more likely to be victimized verbally and physically," says Dr. Joe Kosciw, lead researcher in the national study. In fact, the study found that these students are more at risk in rural districts than in urban districts with a history of bullying problems. "In addition, rural schools and communities often lack resources such as Gay-Straight Alliances or youth centers that can help offset the negative experiences of victimization."

Where might help for these students come from? The work of GLSEN and other national groups are increasingly

entering frays to offer support. But as LGBT teens are eager to share, the intervention of friendly math teachers is not to be underestimated. "You learn very quickly to identify safe teachers," says Korey Gaddis, also a former Kennewick High student. "You pick up on their vibe."

For a decade now, GLSEN's biannual *National School Climate Survey* has revealed and quantified the bias encountered by many LGBT students in middle and high schools across the United States. Lowlights from the most recent 2007 survey include 86 percent of LGBT students reporting verbal harassment; 61 percent saying that they feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation; 33 percent indicating that they have skipped a day of school in the last month due to feeling unsafe; and 22 percent reporting that they have been physically assaulted because of their sexual orientation. The idea that rural students are at greater risk for these abuses sounds alarm bells for LGBT youth advocates.

#### Out in the Country

As Dr. Kosciw and his fellow authors discuss in their article, "the overall climate of a school is ... influenced by and potentially reflects the attitudes, beliefs and overall climate of the larger community"—for better and worse. For rural areas, the "better" includes local recognition of schools as integral parts of the community, with area businesses and service organizations actively supporting school programs. Schools and students may benefit from strong values promoting the care and education of "their kids."

The "worse" is most evident when school and community leaders encounter values they consider alien. Many rural residents pride themselves on their conservative social and religious values, and distrust those whose identities and lifestyles fall outside those strictures. The relatively recent emergence of the national gay rights movement, and the fact that gay kids are growing up and coming out in their small towns, presents unnerving challenges to many rural residents and their ideas of how the world should work. These are among the views put forward by Mary L. Gray in her insightful book, *Out in the Country: Youth, Media, and Queer Visibility in Rural America*.

Mark Lee has spent the last three years trying to communicate

across this cultural divide in the Tri-City Area. In 2006, Lee moved from urban and progressive Portland, Oregon, to this farming region that includes the cities of Kennewick, Pasco and Richland. "The Tri-Cities are an incredibly conservative, white, religious community," Lee says. He quickly recognized the lack of an oasis for gay kids, and soon after his arrival established the Vista Youth Center, dedicated to the wellbeing of LGBT youth, ages 14-21. The center offers a support network and social outlet for dozens of teens and young adults, some who drive more than an hour each way for meetings.

Lee has witnessed the struggles of area LGBT students close up. "[LGBT] kids at Kennewick High learn quickly how to sneak in and out of school so as not to be screamed at," he says. "Youth have gotten beat up. They have to deal with frequent insults, sometimes from teachers as well as classmates. With all the bullying and harassment, I personally don't know how they make it through the school day."

At the same time, Lee describes the positive effect even a ray of support has on LGBT youth. "I've seen radical change in most young people who come to [Vista Youth Center]," he says. "I've seen them go from belligerent and depressed to being sweet, regular kids."

"It's an amazing place," adds Sadie about VYC, "a home away from home where I can be myself. If the youth center wasn't here, I don't know what I'd do. It's a lifesaver."

Lee recognizes that part of his mission is to reach out and educate community leaders about LGBT youth. He has brought in panels of educators to listen and respond to concerns and complaints from students. He plans to invite local ministers and church leaders to discuss the area's religious intolerance for homosexuality, which frequently fuels gay-bashing. "There's a lot of consciousness-raising that needs to happen," Lee says.

## Student Non-Discrimination Act

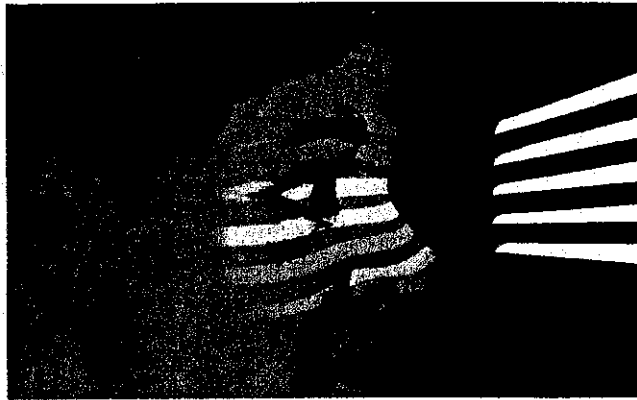
Federal non-discrimination laws specifically address discrimination based on characteristics that include race, color, sex, religion, disability and national origin. But they do not specify sexual orientation. This leaves LGBT students and their parents with few legal options when faced with the hostility and prejudice that are so common in public schools.

The Student Non-Discrimination Act (SNDA) would establish a comprehensive federal prohibition on discrimination in public schools based on actual or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity.

First introduced in January 2010, the bill is modeled after Title IX, which prohibits discrimination based on sex. If approved by Congress, the SNDA would help ensure that all students have access to public education in a safe environment that is free from discrimination and harassment.

## Not Rising to the Challenge

So why aren't more teachers and administrators in rural areas taking the lead in creating safer space for LGBT students in their schools? For some districts, it may be a lack of awareness,



says Heather Rodriguez, program director for Triple Point, a youth group for LGBT teens in Walla Walla, Washington. While virtually all U.S. schools now trumpet anti-bullying policies, most fail to include language specific to sexual orientation and gender expression. And some educators don't even acknowledge that anti-gay references qualify as harassment.

Other reasons for failing to protect LGBT kids can be tied even more directly to bigoted attitudes, Rodriguez notes. Some teachers are fearful of being ostracized by colleagues and harassed by parents. Many rural educators carry their own anti-gay attitudes into the school building. Korey Gaddis, now 21, recalls an assistant principal telling him to his face, "You shouldn't be gay."

Then there is the threat to job security. In some rural districts, even engaging the subject of homosexuality can threaten careers. "Administrators in our area fear parents lashing out, whether about sex education or creating a GSA [Gay-Straight Alliance]," Rodriguez says. "Teachers and school counselors fear for their jobs. Nobody wants to rock the boat."

These are not phantom fears, as events in the small town of Grandfield, Oklahoma, revealed last year. As part of her ethics class, high school teacher Debra Taylor received her principal's permission to feature *The Laramie Project*, the play and movie about the murder of gay college student Matthew Shepard. Her goal was to explore the roots of hate and intolerance. A few weeks later, the principal abruptly told Taylor to stop, which she did. But when she subsequently held a 20-minute class wrap-up on the material, the district superintendent suspended her for insubordination. Taylor resigned before she could be fired.

"I would be naïve to think what has happened to my students and me is an isolated incident," Taylor later wrote in her blog. "Unfortunately, those in charge of the school just don't get it. I know any gay student at Grandfield High School has

been taught a dubious lesson. They have learned they better keep quiet until they are old enough to leave town.”

#### “We Can Be Better”

Many small-town LGBT teens have learned that lesson well: Endure lives in the closet until adulthood gives you the means to move to more accepting communities. A quarter of gay teens who come out get thrown out of their homes or run away. Others kill themselves. Studies have consistently shown that LGBT youth are at elevated risk for dropping out of school, substance abuse, homelessness, depression and suicide. The lack of support in rural communities only heightens these risks.

The attempted suicide of a former student motivated veteran visual arts teacher Allison Kleinstuber to take a leadership role in helping LGBT kids and their allies at Golden West High School. The school is located in Visalia, a small city set in the center of California’s rural Central Valley.

“There are few resources for LGBT youth here, and we don’t have an environment that makes it easy to come out,” Kleinstuber says, noting that the area has a chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. “A lot of people here have a very literal way of looking at religious teachings.” While she embraces her faith-based belief that “Nothing else matters but love,” her friends and colleagues have made clear their condemnation of homosexuality as well as their disapproval of her decision to act as advisor for the school’s new GSA, launched last fall.

School administrators and GSA members are still working around their mutual distrust, Kleinstuber observes. And parents have protested when they discover that their children—whatever their sexual orientation—have attended club meetings. “But I think there’s a lot of staff, a lot of kids, who are glad [the GSA] is here,” she says.

A self-described “tough teacher,” Kleinstuber applies the same high standards to her school and district that she sets for students whose class work and behaviors do not meet her expectations. “We can be better,” she tells them. And she thinks teachers and administrators have an obligation to make schools safe places of learning for all kids, whatever their race, ethnicity, disability, sexual orientation or gender expression.

Heather Rodriguez hopes teachers and counselors would at least educate themselves about the means to help LGBT youth. “I want educators to know where their local resources are,” Rodriguez says. “Even if they’re not comfortable dealing with the issue of homosexuality themselves, they can at least know where these kids can go to get support.”

As part of in-school efforts, Mark Lee would also like to see more teachers in his area crack down on anti-gay speech in classrooms. He presses administrators to demonstrate leadership and courage to embrace student-empowered GSAs rather than stonewall their creation. He encourages teachers and counselors to post “Safe Zone” signs on classroom doors to send a clear signal to LGBT youth—and their tormentors—that gay students are not alone when running

the gauntlet of hallways, bathrooms and locker rooms.

“I really think those signs make a difference,” Lee says. “They signal these kids that there are places they can go where they know they’re not crazy.” ♦

#### TIPS FOR TEACHERS

### Ally Yourself with LGBT students

Whether or not you know their identity, you can be certain that you are teaching LGBT students. Visible support and small acts of kindness go a long way in helping these youth feel safer and find harmony at school. Not only does fulfilling the role of ally let them know they are not alone, it models for other students that gay and transgender classmates are their peers, worthy of respect and acceptance. More often than not, bullies operate with the tacit approval of the school community.

Here are six LGBT-friendly actions teachers and school staff can take to turn their classroom and hallways into Safe Zones.

**1. Post a “Safe Zone” sign** in your classroom and office. It signals to LGBT youth that you’ve got their backs.

**2. Confront homophobic remarks**, including slights and slurs that you overhear. Many students use terms like “fag,” “dyke” and “that’s so gay” without thinking. Let them know in no uncertain terms that such speech is unacceptable.

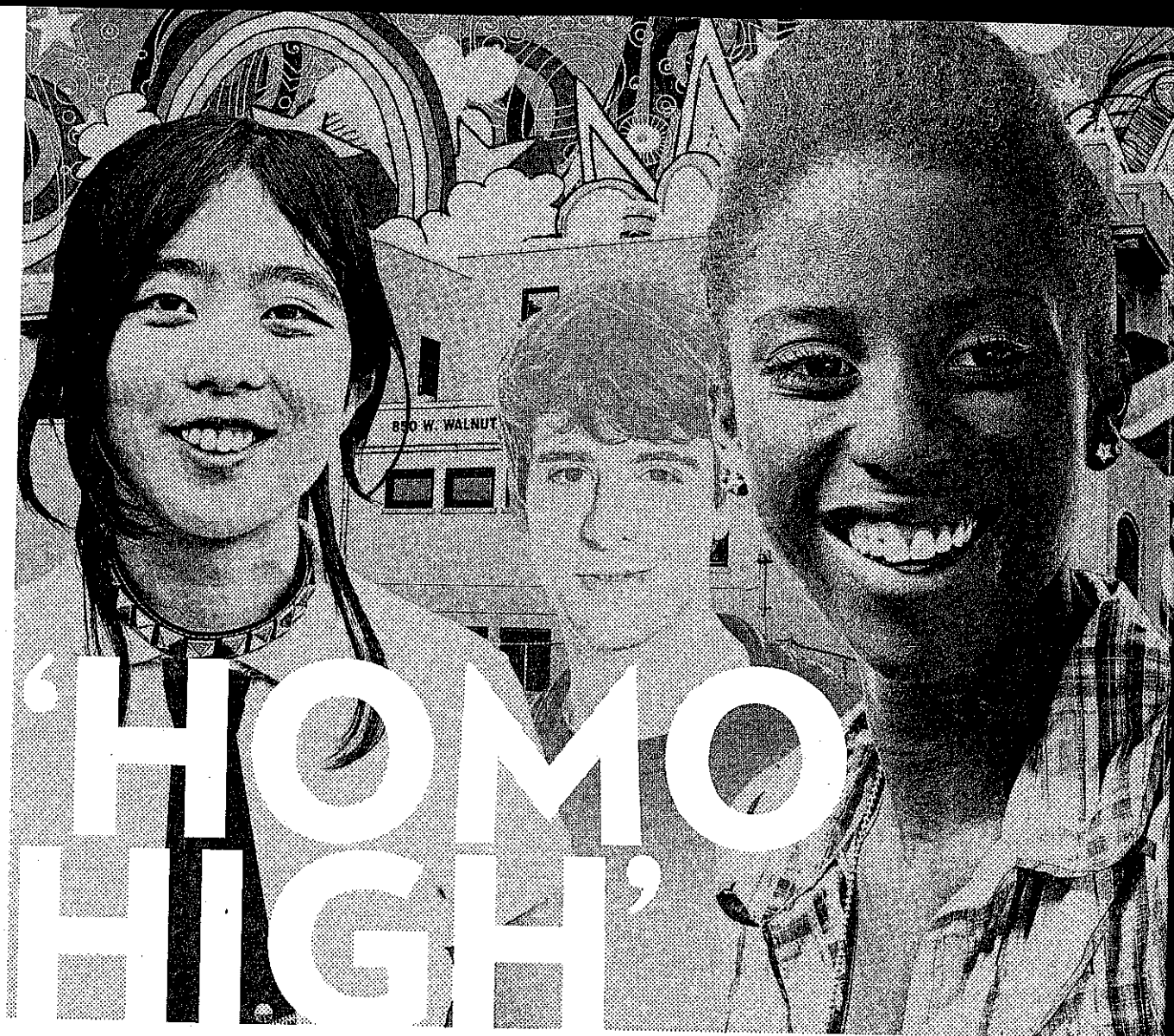
**3. Seek opportunities** to incorporate the contributions of LGBT people in science, history, athletics and the arts into your curriculum.

**4. Don’t assume any student is gay**—or not gay. If LGBT students do confide in you, thank them for their trust. Follow the student’s lead about what else you should do. Perhaps sharing this information is enough at this point. But if the student needs additional support, you can provide invaluable help by being versed in the LGBT-competent resources available in your school, district and community.

**5. Organize or encourage** district administrators to arrange an in-service with a qualified youth advocate about how to create a safer school for LGBT students.

**6. If your school has a Gay-Straight Alliance**, volunteer to act as its faculty advisor, or contribute in other ways.

For additional information and resources, see the Safe Schools Coalition website at [www.safeschoolscoalition.org/RG-SafeZones.html](http://www.safeschoolscoalition.org/RG-SafeZones.html). Also, check out Teaching Tolerance resources at [www.tolerance.org/supplement/10-tips-starting-gsa](http://www.tolerance.org/supplement/10-tips-starting-gsa).



# 'HOMO HIGH'

Some people argue “gay-friendly” schools offer needless segregation. Others say they’re the only chance some kids have to make it.

BY CARRIE KILMAN  
ILLUSTRATION BY SEAN McCABE

Soon after the Center on Halsted opened in 2007, Rick Garcia, whose office overlooks Halsted Street, began to notice something troubling.

The Center, near downtown Chicago, is perhaps the Midwest’s largest lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community center. “All of sudden,” says Garcia, political director for the LGBT advocacy group Equality Illinois, “the street was inundated with kids — kids who’d been abandoned by their families, who had nowhere else to go. All I could think was, ‘Why aren’t these babies in school?’”

Chicago’s public school system had a problem. LGBT students were three times more likely than straight peers to miss school because of threats to their safety, according to a 2003 districtwide survey; and students who faced regular harassment were more likely to drop out. For these kids, schools were failing.

In fall 2008, Chicago officials took a drastic step. They proposed a “gay-friendly” high school where students of all sexual orientations could learn in bully-free classrooms where a safe and welcoming environment was the norm.





Some gay-rights advocates — including Garcia — publicly questioned whether the district's plan to protect LGBT students only worked, in reality, to segregate them.

"If we create 'Homo High,' we don't have to prohibit this behavior in other schools," Garcia said recently, recounting his opposition. "The reality is, we have to live as neighbors. We have to learn to tolerate one another, if not accept one another. All our kids should be safe in all our schools; segregation is not the answer."

Officials eventually withdrew the proposal. If it had passed, the new campus would have opened this September, becoming one of only a handful of LGBT-friendly public high schools in the United States.

Anti-gay backlash played a large role in the opposition to Chicago's proposed Pride Campus. Two other LGBT-friendly schools — New York City's Harvey Milk High School and The Alliance School in Milwaukee — have also sparked ire from social conservatives.

But these schools can also be troublesome for those

who want LGBT kids to learn and live free from harm. For some gay-rights advocates, LGBT-oriented schools smack of "separate but equal."

Others believe LGBT-friendly schools offer a refuge and a blueprint — a chance to reach kids whose lives, sometimes literally, are at risk.

"Across the country, folks who support gay rights are starting to think about these issues," says David Stovall, an associate professor of educational policy studies and African American studies at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

"In popular culture we've seen a shift toward more widespread acceptance of LGBTQ spaces," Stovall says. "Now we're at the point where people are asking, should the focus be on taking care of our own concerns, or should we be pushing for a more integrated model?"

#### The Alliance School

Ninety miles north of Chicago, in a commercial section of central Milwaukee, The Alliance School sits at the back of a parking lot, an older, boxy-looking building the color of gray chalk.

Alliance opened its high school five years ago as part of the small-schools movement. In September, it moved into a bigger building and added a middle school after frequent requests from parents and other educators to expand. The school operates on the Summerhill model — democratic governance, student-led curricula, peer mediation, high academic expectations, no official principal and teachers called by their first names.

Though it's commonly called Milwaukee's "gay school," Tina Owen, Alliance's lead teacher and founder, is quick to clarify that the school is not about sexual orientation. "We're about creating a safe space free from bullying," she says.

Owen prefers the term "open and affirming," a phrase she borrowed from her church. "We're open to everyone," she says, "and everyone is valuable for who they are."

Owen started Alliance after teaching in another Milwaukee school where administrators did little to address the bullying and harassment of LGBT students. When she proposed Alliance — whose name comes from *gay-straight alliance* — "some people were skeptical, but we received mostly support. Everyone could remember a time when they didn't want to go to school because of a bully."

Alliance is tiny for an urban school, with 20 staff and 166 students. Almost 80 percent of students here qualify for free or reduced lunch, and 40 percent are students of color. While teachers legally cannot survey students' sexual orientation, they know anecdotally their students

represent a diverse mix of orientations and identities.

"You can be yourself here," says Nona, a ninth-grader, "and the teachers help you learn to work together."

The weekly class representatives' meeting proves Nona's point. Six students, a mix of straight, gay and transgender, gather around a table in the empty Spanish classroom, debating themes for the upcoming Homecoming dance. The group includes a teen mom with a nose ring, a pony-tailed girl with tattoos around her neck, and a freshman who frequently pauses to check his hair in a mirrored compact plucked from the bottom of his purse.

They might easily be considered misfits in other schools. They're the ones who might watch their backs, avoid locker rooms, and feel unwelcome at school dances. These are kids who, judged solely by the superficial, might get written off.

"Many of our students were unhappy in school," Owen says. "Here, they can focus on getting their education, and they have people who support them."

Local data suggest it's working. The suspension rate at Alliance is 18 percent lower than the district average. In its first year, 90 percent of Alliance seniors graduated, compared to the district's 69 percent average.

And, notable for a school accused by some of segregation, Alliance is one of the most racially integrated campuses in one of the nation's most segregated cities.

Demetris Green, a tall, studious-looking 12th-grader, transferred to Alliance at the start of his senior year, in search of teachers who would expect more of him. "For 11 years," Demetris says, "I didn't believe in myself, because my school didn't believe in me."

#### 'The Problem is the Bullies'

These are the concerns: By creating a separate school for LGBT kids and straight allies, districts give other schools a free pass, do little to help students get along and respect each other's differences, and leave a lot of LGBT kids behind.

"We can't fit every gay kid in a gay school," says Equality Illinois' Rick Garcia. "The problem isn't gay kids; the problem is the bullies. If we're going to create a special school, let's create it for them."

Ten years ago, while serving on the governor's hate crimes commission, Garcia traveled to high schools across Illinois, asking kids about racism, sexism and other forms of intolerance. Almost everywhere, anti-gay slurs were the No. 1 complaint.

"Kids can't wait for our system to be perfect," Garcia says. "Something has to be done quickly, but someone needs to

raise these questions so that one school doesn't become a dumping ground for 'problem' kids, and so we don't absolve other schools from having to create safe spaces."

Ryan Roemer, executive director of Iowa Pride Network, which worked to make Iowa one of the few states with an anti-bullying law that includes protections for sexual orientation and gender identity, supports the mission of schools like Alliance. He understands the criticism, too.

"Can we make sure training is being provided to teachers and counselors on mainstream campuses, so they're educated on these issues?" he says. "What about the students who can't go to that high school? What happens to them?"

On the other hand, Cindy Crane, executive director of the Wisconsin-based GSAs for Safe Schools, which sup-

ports gay-straight alliances in middle and high schools, finds the segregation argument "almost offensive."

"Students in minority groups can experience a particular kind of long-term stress that creates barriers to thriving academically and socially," Crane says. "If there is a way to help students avoid that stress so they can thrive, we should do it."

Besides, she argues, "the thought that all gay kids would

want to flock to a gay school is silly — and mistaken. A gay school might be the answer for some students, but it certainly wouldn't be the answer for all. Being gay is only one part of our identity. Kids who are gay are also a lot of other things, and there may be other parts of their identity that guide school satisfaction."

Yet in the beginning, even Owen questioned whether a separate school was wise: "Are we just taking students away from the problem, and leaving the problem there? But I was finding that the victims of bullying in any one school didn't have the tools to change the powers-that-be."

#### Examining the Risk

Bullying for any reason can be harmful. For LGBT kids, the stakes are arguably highest.

According to the National School Climate Survey, released last October by the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, almost nine out of 10 LGBT students experienced harassment during the previous year. LGBT students were seven times more likely than straight kids to skip school to avoid bullying. In all, 61 percent felt unsafe at school.

From these statistics emerge horror stories: the Minnesota student who was repeatedly harassed by teachers who assumed the student was gay; the 15-year-old

**LGBT students were seven times more likely than straight kids to skip school to avoid bullying. In all, 61 percent felt unsafe at school.**

Oxnard, Calif., boy who was shot in the head by a classmate after coming out as gay; the Massachusetts 11-year-old who hanged himself after enduring anti-gay bullying at school.

Attempts to tackle anti-gay harassment can elicit strong, often coordinated, opposition from social conservatives. In this context, safe schools advocates argue, "gay-friendly" schools become a crucial stopgap.

Harvey Milk High School, for example, opened 25 years ago — the first explicitly gay-friendly school in the country — to address the alarming number of LGBT kids for whom school was a dangerous place. The school continues to serve LGBT students at risk of dropping out. Most students report "negative experiences in other schools," says Harvey Milk principal Alan Nolan. "They're seeking a safer, more accepting environment."

Adds GLSEN Executive Director Eliza Byard: "Given the inequalities in the existing system, these schools are essential resources of last resort for students who may otherwise not graduate. They fill a pressing need."

#### 'I Always Got Picked On'

After school on a recent Monday, the basketball club practices in the gym. The musical club watches *Rent* on a classroom TV. And Alliance sophomore Tarrell Hogle pores over his science presentation in the computer room.

It's hard to call anyone "typical" here, though in many ways, Tarrell comes close. At his old school, with few openly gay classmates, Tarrell was hounded by bullies. He skipped so often he faced regular suspension. His grades plummeted. "It's hard to pay attention when other people are taking your things and trying to provoke you," Tarrell says.

He transferred to Alliance midway through ninth grade, and the harassment stopped. "Growing up, I thought all straight kids were bullies," Tarrell says. "But I have straight friends here. I never thought in a million years that could happen."

Here, Tarrell hasn't missed a day. He seeks out extra credit, loves math and recites the periodic table like most people rattle off their birthdates. "I used to *hate* math," he says. Now, he wants to be a forensic scientist.

"I used to leave my house early and steal my report card from the mailbox," Tarrell says. "I never brought home a test paper. Now, I run home, because I can't wait to show my dad."

Classmates share similar stories. "I always got picked on," says Emiliano Luna, a pink-haired freshman wearing lime green pants. "It made me feel so angry, inside and outside. Here, the way I look isn't a big deal."

Not everyone comes to Alliance to escape harassment; some come because the smaller class sizes and supportive learning environment offer them a chance to succeed that can elude them in larger, traditional schools. And while potential students are told of the school's LGBT-friendly mission, some come with homophobic views.

Jahqur Ammons, now a junior, failed seventh grade.

"I spent more time chasing girls than chasing grades," he says. Jahqur's brother, already at Alliance, told him about the open campus, the small classes, the helpful teachers. Jahqur enrolled at start of his freshman year.

"When I came here," he says, "I thought all gay people were nasty. I used to say snide things. But I got to know them instead of judging them. Now I realize they're just like me."

Last year, when a conservative Christian group picketed the campus, it was Jahqur who led the response. "The protesters were saying this school was teaching us to be gay and that we were all going to hell," Jahqur recalls. "I didn't think that was very a Christian thing to say. So we got all the students to go outside and show them: Gay, straight, trans, goth, emo — we're all one."

#### Not Either/Or

Who is right? Proponents like Tina Owen, or skeptics like Rick Garcia? At the end of the day, they aren't that far apart.

"It doesn't have to be 'either/or,'" says Cindy Crane, from GSAs for Safe Schools. "If these schools help students thrive, let's do it — but we should work on the existing structure, too, so all schools can be safe places for all students." At their best, what Alliance and Harvey Milk offer the rest of us isn't the suggestion they be replicated from scratch in other communities, but that existing schools learn from their success.

"This is an environment we want to create in *all* of our schools — inclusive, safe, welcoming," says Nolan, from Harvey Milk. "I believe that should be every administrator's goal."

In Milwaukee, officials are paying close attention to Alliance, turning the school into something of an incubator. Already, several campuses have adopted Alliance's restorative justice model, to which Owen credits the school's low suspension rate. And Alliance students and staff regularly travel to other schools to help educators learn how to improve the climate there. "All we're doing is offering best practices that haven't become institutionalized in most places," Owen says. "These are practices all students benefit from, not just gay students."

Back in Chicago, proponents haven't given up. A new proposal is in the works, though Stovall says they've learned some important lessons.

"I don't think we were explicit enough the first time around that we wanted to create a training ground for other schools," Stovall says. "There are schools that have no clue how to address LGBT students' issues and concerns. We can use this campus to help them learn how to address those issues within the walls of their own schools. Therein lies the power." ♦

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## THE MARRYING KIND

*Why social conservatives should support same-sex marriage*

Last year the Census Bureau reported a statistic that deserved wider notice than it received: during the 1990s the number of unmarried-partner households in the United States increased by 72 percent. Cohabitation has actually been on the rise for decades, but it started from a small base. Now the numbers (more than five million cohabiting couples) are beginning to look impressive.

Marriage, meanwhile, is headed in the other direction. The annual number of weddings per 1,000 eligible women fell by more than a third from 1970 to 1996. A lot of factors are at work here—for example, people are marrying later—but it seems clear that one of them is the rise in cohabitation. Couples are simply more willing to live together without tying the knot.

Whether this is a bad thing is a contentious question, but it is almost certainly not a good thing. Cohabitation tends to be both less stable and less happy than marriage, and this appears to be true even after accounting for the possibility that the cohabiting type of person may often be different from the marrying type. Research suggests that marriage itself brings something beneficial to the table. Add the fact that a growing share of cohabiting households—now more than a third of them—contain children, and it is hard to be enthusiastic about the trend.

Whom to blame? In part, homosexual couples like me and my partner. Cohabitation used to be stigmatized. “Living in sin” it has been called in recent memory, even among the educated classes. Today cohabitation is often viewed as a different-but-equal alternative to wedlock. Although the drift toward cohabitation would no doubt have happened anyway, the growing visibility and acceptance of same-sex couples probably speeded the change. As one gay activist told the *Los Angeles Times* last year, “Just the term ‘unmarried partner’ gave it a dignity and social category.”

So (conservatives say) it’s true! Homosexuals undermine marriage! To the contrary. The culprit is not the presence of same-sex couples; it is the absence of same-sex marriage.

The emergence into the open of same-sex relationships is an irreversible fact in this country. Traditionalists may not like it, but they cannot change it, so they will have to decide how to deal with it. The far right’s plan—try to push homosexuals back into the closet—is not going to work; the majority of Americans are too openhearted for that. Indeed, the currents of

public opinion are running the other way. An annual survey of college freshmen found that last year 58 percent—a record high, and up from 51 percent in 1997—thought that same-sex couples should be able to marry.

Seeing those numbers and others like them, conservatives are desperate to stave off same-sex marriage. For that matter, many moderates remain queasy about legalizing gay marriage; they are sympathetic to homosexuals, but not *that* sympathetic. Liberation-minded leftists, who spent the 1970s telling us that our parents’ marriages were outdated and stuffy, were never crazy about matrimony to begin with. As for gays, the vast majority want the right to marry, but most agree that domestic-partner benefits and other “marriage-lite” arrangements are a lot better than nothing.

The result is the ABM Pact: Anything But Marriage. Enroll same-sex partners in the company health plan, give them some of the legal prerogatives of spousehood, attend their commitment ceremonies, let them register at city hall as partners—just DON’T CALL IT MARRIAGE. In America, and in Europe, too, ABM is rapidly establishing itself as the compromise of choice. Gay partnerships get some social and legal recognition, marriage remains the union of man and woman, and everybody moves on. A shrewd social bargain, no?

No. The last thing supporters of marriage should be doing is setting up

an assortment of alternatives, but that is exactly what the ABM Pact does, and not only for gays. Every year more companies and governments (at the state and local level) grant marriagelike benefits to cohabiting partners: “concessions fought for and won mostly by gay groups,” as the *Los Angeles Times* notes, “but enjoyed as well by the much larger population of heterosexual unmarried couples.” To which might be added what I think of as the *Will & Grace* effect: homosexuals are here, we’re queer, and nowadays we’re kind of cool. ABM, perversely, turns one of the country’s more culturally visible minorities into an advertisement for just how cool and successful life outside of wedlock can be.

I doubt that most homosexuals would take their marital vows less seriously than heterosexuals do, as some conservatives insist. Even if I’m wrong, however, surely the exemplary power of failed or unfaithful gay marriages would pale next to the example currently being set by a whole group—an increasingly fashionable group—among whom love and romance and sex and commitment flourish entirely outside of marriage. And can you imagine social conservatives telling any other group to cohabit rather than marry? Can you imagine them saying, “The young men of America’s inner cities won’t take marriage as seriously as they should, so let’s encourage them to shack up with their girlfriends”?

Those who worry about the example gays would set by marrying should be much more worried about the example gays are already setting by *not* marrying. In getting this backward the advocates of ABM make a mistake that is both ironic and sad. At a time when marriage needs all the support and participation it can get, homosexuals are pleading to move beyond cohabitation. We want the licenses, the vows, the rings, the honeymoons, the anniversaries, the benefits, and, yes, the responsibilities and the routines. And who is telling us to just shack up instead? Self-styled friends of matrimony. Someday conservatives will look back and wonder why they undermined marriage in an effort to keep homosexuals out. ■

COMMENT

**JONATHAN RAUCH**

# School's Out

Creating a safe environment for gay and lesbian students sometimes means starting from scratch

**W**alking into his new school for the first time, Lavar couldn't help but harbor feelings of uncertainty and dread. No student, after all, looks forward to being the "new kid," an often miserable status fraught with social awkwardness and isolation. Surviving this transition should have been fairly easy for a friendly, outgoing 16-year-old like Lavar. But he knew his acceptance at

this enormous public high school in Brooklyn, N.Y., hinged more on how his new classmates and teachers would treat a student who is openly gay.

Out of the closet for two years, Lavar was well aware of how traumatic school could be for gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered (GLBT) youth. Still, he had reason to be cautiously optimistic. His previous school, located on Long Island, provided an accepting and supportive environment, attributable in no small part to the presence of a small but significant group of gay students. Lavar

weathered the indignities of being whispered about in the hallways — "That guy's gay" or even "There's the faggot" — because he never felt he was in any physical danger. Every kid has to put up with something, he told himself.

It didn't take very long, however, for Lavar to realize that the homophobia that was merely an occasional nuisance on Long Island was a much



more menacing presence in his new surroundings. By the end of his first week in school, he had become easy prey for a daily onslaught of insults and intimidation. Midway through his second week, harassment escalated to open threats of physical violence.

"The abuse was just unbearable," he says. "Right to my face. This wasn't just name-calling or insensitive comments. Just walking around going from class to class I felt I was in danger. I felt like I was in a prison. I was afraid to walk outside. I was afraid to leave school. I was afraid for my life."

Convinced the treatment was no rite of passage or hazing ritual for a new student, Lavar came home one day and announced to his mother in no uncertain terms that he wasn't going back.

"There was no way I was going to return," he recalls. "I didn't have any other place to go, but at that point I didn't care. I was scared out of my mind."

by Tim Walker • illustration by Nikki Middendorf

## Hatred in the Hallways

According to recent studies, including a 1999 report by Cornell University, the average coming-out age for a gay and lesbian young person in the U.S. today is around 14 to 15 years, significantly younger than the average age of 19 to 23 during the late '70s and early '80s. Confidence and openness about their sexual orientation at a younger age, however, almost invariably exposes young people to homophobia and abuse at an early age.

Anti-gay bias has been called the last acceptable form of discrimination in the U.S. Many of the nation's public schools, often a microcosm for society at large, have been complicit in cultivating this intolerance. Although some institutions, by supporting gay-straight alliances (GSAs) and initiating effective responses to harassment, are creating welcoming environments for gay and lesbian teens, the situation has deteriorated according to some experts.

"The U.S. school system gets a failing grade when it comes to providing a safe place for gay students to get an education," says Michael Bochenem of Human Rights Watch (HRW). "Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender kids face a greater risk of bullying than any other students in American high schools."

Unchecked verbal harassment can escalate into intimidation, threats and even violence, taking a devastating toll not only on their academic performance but also their psychological and emotional well-being.

In May 2001, HRW documented the treatment of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered teenagers in public schools in a controversial report entitled *Hatred in the Hallways* (see Resources). The 200-page report, based on interviews with 140 youth and 130 school officials and parents in seven states, describes the time and energy many students spend just trying to get to and from school safely. Walking the hallways was, according to one student in Illinois, being in "survival mode."

Just as disturbing are the inaction and neglect on the part of school staff, who have an obligation to protect *all* students who have been victims of abuse. As many schools have become more adept over the years at responding to incidents relating to racial and gender bias, the development of strategies to address anti-gay harassment remains largely on the administrative

back burner. Given the national frenzy over "zero tolerance," the lax attitude toward identifying and punishing perpetrators of anti-gay harassment seems all the more alarming.

"In many ways, some in the administration appeared homophobic themselves," Lavar says. "I was shocked that the teachers and administrators just didn't seem to care. Then I became even more frightened. They weren't willing to transfer me out of the school and they refused to confront the people who were doing this. So I was stuck. I didn't have anywhere to turn — at least that's what I thought at the time."

## High School Controversial

Emblazoned on the wall in the reception area of the Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI) in New York City is the maxim "We Will Leave No GLBT Person Behind." For more than 20 years, HMI has been a relentless advocate and service provider to young people who have been marginalized because of their sexual orientation. Drs. Emery S. Hetrick and A. Damien Martin founded the Institute in 1979 in response to a brutal gang rape of a gay teenager in a New York City bar. HMI offers a wide array of services, including a drop-in center, counseling for individuals and families, and Project First Step for homeless kids (30 percent of the city's more than 20,000 homeless youth are gay or lesbian). Reaching more than 8,000 young people every year, these programs are designed to provide them with the tools and knowledge necessary not only to survive, but also to prosper in the larger world.

In 1985, HMI, in collaboration with the NYC public school system, launched the Harvey Milk School. One of the Institute's smaller programs, Harvey Milk was also its most famous and controversial. Named after the San Francisco city

*"Just walking from class to class, I felt I was in danger."*

"Here they get to be their age, make friends and learn in relative peace and quiet."

official and gay activist who was assassinated in 1978, Harvey Milk is the first and, with the Eagles Academy in Los Angeles, is now one of only two public schools in the U.S. that exist to serve gay and lesbian students.

Harvey Milk welcomes students who have been ostracized by the system because of their sexual orientation (or perceived orientation) and provides an opportunity for them to complete high school in a safe environment. The school also offers a full college preparatory program, including administration of the SAT exam on-site. On average one-third of each graduating class is admitted to college programs.

Lavar quickly applied after a friend told him about the school. Three weeks after vowing never to return to his school in Brooklyn, he began classes at Harvey Milk.

"I can't tell you what a relief it was," he says. "I had somewhere to turn after all."

The Harvey Milk School is ensconced on the third floor of a narrow office building located on the fringes of Greenwich Village. Annual enrollment usually doesn't exceed 50 students. On a typical day, approximately 15 to 25 students attend classes in the two designated classrooms, overseen by three or four teachers.

While the space allotment may sound restrictive, the floor is also home to HMI's administrative offices, a laundry room for homeless kids, a kitchen and an art room. The students wander around freely, talking among themselves or to HMI staff. The floor is open and spacious and has the look and feel of a school, college dormitory, office and community center merged into one. Walls are decorated with colorful flyers reminding everyone about the upcoming graduation, prom and Gay Pride festivities. The "Memory Wall" adorning the reception area is a magnificent collage of photos and drawings of friends, family and celebrities who have passed away.

"What we provide is a friendly and stabilizing environment," says Carl Strange, director of communications for HMI. "Once kids walk



through our doors, they don't have to worry about homophobia, abuse or relationships. Here they get to be their age, make friends and learn in relative peace and quiet."

Although the school's primary mission is to serve GLBT students, staff members recognize that many young people defy labels and categorization.

"Confusion can dominate a teenager's mind if he or she is trying to figure out their sexual orientation," explains Strange. "We have to respect this, so the last thing they need is to be stamped with the polarizing labels we adults deem so useful. Some of the kids at Harvey Milk may merely suspect that they're gay or lesbian. Others enroll because they're *perceived* to be gay by their former classmates and abused because of it. These kids may well be straight but we welcome them here."

The Institute also works to cultivate much-needed reforms in the system so that eventually students can feel secure in returning to their mainstream schools. HMI sends consultants into the schools to help educators eliminate anti-gay harassment — an ongoing, frustrating and often unproductive task.

"We haven't been particularly successful at sending students back to mainstream schools," says Strange. "For this to happen, a certain level of community transformation has to take place. And so far, it hasn't."

### "We Need to Take Care Of These Kids Now"

In Dallas, Texas, 1500 miles and a world away from Greenwich Village, Becky Thompson and Pamela Stone opened the Walt Whitman School in 1997. Like Harvey Milk, Walt Whitman is a haven where gay youth can complete high school in a safe and constructive climate; unlike its New York counterpart, however, Whitman is a private institution. Formerly colleagues at an alternative school in north Dallas, Thompson and Stone received encouragement and support from leaders in the gay and lesbian community when they started designing the school.

Recalls Thompson: "They told us that gay students were dropping out and had no place to go once they had abandoned their regular school. Pamela and I were confident that the necessary support and financial help would be there if we needed it. So we looked at each other and said, 'Let's do it.'"

When Thompson and Stone announced the opening of Walt Whitman, local and national media came calling. The two educators welcomed the opportunity to publicize the school and speak about the issues that inspired them, but were leery of how the conservative citizens of this quintessentially Texan city might respond. To their surprise, the backlash never materialized.

"People's attitude was more or less, 'Hey, it's a private institution and it is education, so let them do what they want,'" recalls Thompson. "I guess no one wants uneducated kids walking the streets."

The Harvey Milk and Walt Whitman schools have on occasion been subject to "friendly fire" from gay and lesbian activists. Some critics argue that these schools are, in the final analysis, segregated environments that do not help these young people to accept themselves in the context of a larger, predominantly straight society. Supporters respond that the segregation occurred long before they entered Harvey Milk or Walt Whitman.

"Remember: These kids were already isolated at their schools, or worse, they weren't going to school at all. That's *real* segregation," says Jim Anderson of the Gay Lesbian Straight Education Network (GLSEN). "If the public school system knew how to maintain a safe haven for these kids, then these schools wouldn't be needed."

Lavar believes the environment at Harvey Milk is in many ways similar to other public schools.

"Just because we're gay or lesbian doesn't mean we learn side-by-side in constant harmony. At Harvey Milk, we have cliques, rivalries, popular kids, unpopular kids, fights — just like any other school. People move around in a group throughout life, be it based on gender, color, religion, whatever. It happens all the time. We're gay. So what?"

But does the existence of these schools, by physically segregating gay and lesbian students come at the expense of promoting tolerance towards GLBT youth in the general classroom?

Educators at Harvey Milk and Walt Whitman point out that the principal intent of their institutions is to provide essential and immediate services for young people who can't afford to sit by and expose themselves to harm while waiting for change — change that may come too late.

"I don't see myself as an activist," explains Becky Thompson. "I'm just a teacher trying to get these kids through school. I admire the work GLSEN and PFLAG and others are doing to change attitudes in classrooms. But we need to take care of these kids *now*."

She looks forward to the day, however, when she has to look for another job.

"I can't wait for Walt Whitman and Harvey Milk to become obsolete. That would mean our public schools have been transformed enough to welcome back gay and lesbian students. I can put a sign up outside saying *Out of Business. No Longer Needed*. Wouldn't that be great?" ●

*Tim Walker is a staff writer at Teaching Tolerance.*

### RESOURCES

Hatrick-Martin Institute  
2 Astor Place  
New York, NY 10003  
(212) 674-2400  
[www.hmi.org](http://www.hmi.org)

Walt Whitman  
Community School  
P.O. Box 181781  
Dallas, Texas 75218  
(214) 855-1535  
[www.waltwhitmanschool.org](http://www.waltwhitmanschool.org)

Gay Lesbian and Straight Education Network  
121 West 27th St.  
Suite 804  
New York, New York 10001-6207  
(212) 727-0135  
[www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)

*Hatred in the Hallways* is available online or can be ordered from Human Rights Watch for \$15.

HRW  
350 Fifth Ave, 34th floor  
New York, NY 10118-3299  
(212) 290-4700  
[www.hrw.org](http://www.hrw.org)