Introduction

From controversy over bringing a same-sex date to the prom to incidents of harassment and violence, every school year brings new headlines about the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) youth in America’s classrooms. In September 2010, unprecedented national attention to anti-LGBT bullying in schools occurred after several students, some as young as thirteen years old, completed suicide. All of them were frequently bullied and harassed at school because of their real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity, and at least three were openly gay.¹ As pundits and activists on all sides of the LGBT rights debate argued over what needs to be done to protect students, these tragedies highlighted the fact that LGBT youth are simply “coming out” at younger ages, forcing teachers, school administrators, and policymakers to address a variety of school safety, curricular, and other education policy issues at the intersection of sexual orientation, gender identity, and public education.

In the 1970s and 1980s, surveys found that the average age at which youth self-identified as gay or lesbian was nineteen to twenty-one for men and twenty-one to twenty-three for women. As a result, the coming-out process for most young adults occurred either during college or after having established an independent life. More recent studies have found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) youth first become aware of their sexual orientation between ages eleven and thirteen and come out to others around the age of fifteen.² There is a dearth of research on self-identification for transgender youth, but many also become aware during childhood that their gender identity does not match their biological sex.³ Self-identification at an earlier age can expose LGBT youth to rejection, harassment, and violence at home and at school, creating a greater need for appropriate advice, comprehensive and age-appropriate sex education, and referrals to available resources from supportive adults.⁴

Access to support systems at home and at school is critical because violence and harassment against LGBT students is widespread. The 2007
National School Climate Survey of 6,209 LGBT students, conducted by the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network, found that 86 percent were verbally harassed at their school because of their sexual orientation and that 67 percent were verbally harassed because of the way they expressed their gender. Nearly half had been physically harassed because of their sexual orientation, and 61 percent felt unsafe at their school. Data from a variety of state and federal government surveys also confirm that LGBT youth are more likely than their heterosexual peers to experience harassment and violence in school, including from teachers and school administrators.

“Outed” by His Guidance Counselor and Forced to Read Aloud from the Bible at School

A Profile of Thomas McLaughlin

When Thomas McLaughlin was a thirteen-year-old student at Jacksonville Junior High School in Jacksonville, Arkansas, the assistant principal called him out of his seventh-period class and asked if his parents knew that he was gay. When Thomas replied no, the assistant principal said that Thomas had until 3:40 p.m. that day to tell them, or the school would. Too upset to sit through eighth period, Thomas went to his guidance counselor for help. Despite Thomas’s protest, she called his mother and told her that Thomas was gay.

This chain of events began when Thomas’s science teacher overheard him refuse to deny that he was gay when another student was teasing him. Along with calling in the assistant principal, the science teacher also gave Thomas a four-page, handwritten letter. Referencing the Bible, it told Thomas he would be condemned to hell if he “chose” to be gay.

Thomas’s parents were accepting and understanding of his sexual orientation. However, back at school, the trouble had only just begun. While other students generally did not have a problem with Thomas’s sexual orientation, several teachers and administrators did. One teacher told Thomas to stop talking about being gay because she found it “sickening.” Another publicly scolded Thomas for talking with a female friend about which boys in class they thought were cute. (The female student was not disciplined.) Several teachers also attempted to silence Thomas by warning him
that he was going to be beat up in school because he was gay, that the school would not protect him, and that if he did not keep quiet, he would end up like Matthew Shepard, the gay college student from Laramie, Wyoming, who, in 1998, was tied to a fence, beaten, and left to die.9

Over the course of the school year, the situation grew worse. After arguing with a teacher who had called him “abnormal” and “unnatural” for being gay, Thomas was sent to the assistant principal’s office again. As part of his disciplinary action, the assistant principal forced Thomas to read aloud passages from the Bible that condemn homosexuality. When Thomas, who is also a Christian, told his friends about having to read the Bible aloud at school, he was suspended for two days. The principal also warned him that if he told anyone why he was suspended, he would immediately be expelled from school. When Thomas told his mother about the suspension and forced Bible readings, she called the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU). “We’re Christians,” she said, “but this isn’t the school’s business. It’s something for us, his parents, to talk about.”10

On April 8, 2003, after repeated attempts to resolve this problem with various school administrators, the ACLU filed suit against Pulaski County Special School District on behalf of Thomas and his parents. The lawsuit charged that school officials violated Thomas’s religious liberty and his rights to free speech, equal protection, and privacy. Thomas said he simply wanted to go to school without being harassed by his teachers: “All I want out of this is for me and other gay students to be able to go to school without being preached to and without being expected to lie about who we are.”11

On July 17, 2003, in a court-ordered settlement, Thomas got his wish. Under the terms of settlement, school officials agreed not to disclose any student’s sexual orientation to others, not to punish students for talking about their sexual orientation during noninstructional time, not to discriminate against students on the basis of their sexual orientation in disciplinary matters, and not to preach to students by any means, including forced Bible readings.12

In addition, the school district issued a formal apology to Thomas and his parents, expunged Thomas’s disciplinary record, and agreed to pay twenty-five thousand dollars in damages and attorneys’ fees. After the settlement, Thomas said, “I’m really glad
that this is all over and that the ACLU is making the school treat gay students the way they should have been treated in the first place. No more students should have to go through what I did.”

LGBT youth who do not have access to support systems at home or at school can become dangerously isolated. A number of studies have found that many parents react negatively when their child comes out to them, with emotions ranging from shock, grief, disbelief, and self-guilt to anger and rejection. A small but no less significant percentage of LGBT youth may even be kicked out of their homes. Many are also cut off by their friends and by members of their religious communities, harassed and attacked by their peers in school, and demeaned by society at large. For some LGBT youth, these situations lead to poor academic achievement and dangerous physical and mental health outcomes, including a higher incidence of substance abuse, homelessness, and suicide.

More than fifteen studies have consistently shown that gay and lesbian youth attempt suicide at higher rates than their heterosexual peers. In a study of transgender youth in New York City, nearly half (45 percent) seriously thought about taking their own lives. Of homeless youth in major metropolitan cities, 20 to 40 percent identify as gay or lesbian and may engage in sex work (prostitution) to feed and support themselves. Transgender homeless youth face similar choices when rejected by their families. Homelessness and reliance on sex work to survive may be even more prevalent among LGBT youth of color, who already face social prejudice and stigmatization because of their race or ethnicity. By coming out, they also risk rejection by members of their own racial or ethnic community and, therefore, intensified isolation.

Despite the harassment and violence they experience on a daily basis, most LGBT youth display amazing strength and resiliency. In many instances, they have organized to demand policy changes that make schools safer and more inclusive, often without the support of the school officials responsible for protecting all students. After they graduate from high school, many continue working to increase awareness and understanding of the harassment and violence they experienced and the impact it had on their academic achievement, as well as on their mental and physical health. In cooperation with a broad coalition of advocates, these youth have led successful interventions in a growing number of schools and communities, including nondiscrimination and antiharassment policies, safe schools programs, and community- and school-based sup-
port groups that provide peer and adult mentors, role models, and age-appropriate information.

The ultimate reach of these initiatives goes beyond making schools safer for LGBT youth. A program that acknowledges and values the LGBT members of a school community changes the atmosphere for everyone, making it safer for other students perceived to be different. The children of LGBT parents, regardless of their own sexual orientation or gender identity, benefit greatly from an environment that allows them to be honest about their families. In addition, many young people use anti-LGBT epithets against peers they perceive as different for a variety of gender-related reasons. They might target boys who do not like sports; who are introverted, studious, and sensitive; or who have many female friends. They might target girls who are athletic, tomboys, or aggressive; who do not wear makeup; or who have rejected boys’ advances. While some of these youth may be lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender, it is likely that a substantial proportion, perhaps even most, are not.

This book was written to support the common goal that schools should be safe and affirming institutions of learning for all students, regardless of real or perceived sexual orientation or gender identity. It addresses this critical issue by combining a comprehensive and accessible review of social science research with analyses of school-based best practices; local, state, and federal laws; and the gaps in available academic research that affect LGBT students across the country. To contrast the quantitative information in the text, we included over a dozen real-world case studies of LGBT youth and their experiences in schools. These stories “put a face” to the data and are strategically incorporated to illustrate issues discussed in specific sections. To provide context and help the reader navigate to the information most relevant to his or her needs, this book is divided into three sections.

Section 1, a comprehensive review of decades of social science research on LGBT youth and their experiences at school, bridges the gap between academia and real-world practice by incorporating information from nearly two hundred studies, journal articles, books, and other sources of information about LGBT youth. In this section, chapter 1 defines and explores the universe of youth impacted by LGBT issues at school and answers basic questions, including how many LGBT youth there are and how the experiences of LGBT youth of color differ from those of their white peers. Chapter 2 summarizes research on the incidence of anti-LGBT harassment and violence in schools and its effects on the health and educational outcomes of students.
Section 2 provides a comprehensive review of school-based practices, laws, and policies that affect LGBT students. Chapter 3 summarizes federal, state, and local laws, including constitutional protections for LGBT students and state antibullying laws. Chapter 4 summarizes school-based programs and practices, from gay-straight alliances to the inclusion of LGBT issues in school curricula and textbooks. Chapter 5 is a detailed analysis of specific provisions of the federal No Child Left Behind Act that affect the experiences of LGBT students. Chapter 6 reviews the history and impact of abstinence-only programs in sex education, including how such programs portray homosexuality and affect the spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases in youth, particularly among youth of color.

Section 3 completes the book with a detailed research agenda designed to inspire the scholars, researchers, and graduate students whose work will inform future public policy. In this section, chapter 7 addresses political and methodological issues affecting research on LGBT youth and students, summarizing a variety of research on ways to standardize and accelerate the availability of reliable information about this population. Chapter 8 enumerates specific research questions and projects that would help fill existing knowledge gaps about LGBT students and issues in schools, and chapter 9 includes a brief conclusion and a set of policy recommendations.