LGBT Youth in America's Schools

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Teachers, Administrators, and Staff

In a 1991 study of 289 school counselors, one in five reported that counseling adolescent lesbian or gay students was or would be gratifying. An almost equal number reported just the opposite. Seventy-one percent reported having counseled at least one lesbian or gay student, although only 25 percent believed they were competent to do so. In a 1993 study of 120 gay and lesbian adolescents, the same researchers also found that only one-quarter of students felt able to talk with their school counselors about their sexual orientation; none of the respondents identified school personnel as being a major source of support. Given the low level of interest and competence reported by counselors in the earlier study, such an outcome was predictable.

Many teachers and other school staff members hesitate to discuss sexual orientation or LGBT issues in general. For heterosexual teachers, the reason may be moral or religious objections or a lack of knowledge or understanding. For LGBT teachers, such reticence may stem from fears of eliciting parental complaints or jeopardizing their jobs. One teacher from rural Georgia, recalling what happened after she came out to her principal, said he told her that “if the parents found out, he didn’t need that kind of shit in his life, and he’d hang me out to dry.” Human Rights Watch reported that these kinds of fears were expressed most often in states and school districts that do not have nondiscrimination policies.

A study of fifteen lesbian and gay educators found that their apprehensions about disclosing their sexual orientation centered on harassment and discrimination, job loss, and accusations of child molestation or “recruiting” students into the “gay lifestyle.” Many gay and lesbian teachers have grown wary of charges of pedophilia. Anti-LGBT activists and right-wing politicians regularly conflate homosexuality with pedophilia and claim that gay men are more likely to molest children than
heterosexual men, a claim regularly repudiated by social science research. A 2000 report titled *Homosexuals Recruit Children*, published by the Traditional Value Coalition, even claims that “homosexual militants” have an ongoing “campaign to legalize sex with children” and are “pushing for aggressive recruitment programs in public schools.” The report concludes, “Since homosexual couples can’t reproduce, they will simply go after *your* children for seduction and conversion to homosexuality.” Such hate-filled lies are all too typical of organizations on the far right.

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**Social Science Research Finds No Link between Sexual Orientation and Child Sexual Abuse**

Any notion of a link between pedophilia and homosexuality has been definitively refuted by peer-reviewed social science research. A study in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* noted that 90 percent of pedophiles are men and that 98 percent of these individuals are heterosexual. One researcher explained this statistic by noting, “Gay men desire consensual sexual relations with other adult men. Pedophiles are usually adult men who are sexually attracted to pre-pubescent children. They are rarely sexually attracted to other adults.” In fact, gay men and lesbians may be *less* likely than heterosexuals to sexually abuse children. Two peer-reviewed studies that examined the sexual orientation of convicted child molesters found that less than 1 percent in one study and 0 percent in the other were lesbian or gay.

About four in five cases of child sexual abuse reported to child protection authorities involve a girl who is abused. But because the sexual abuse of boys is less likely to be reported, it is estimated that one-quarter to one-third of all sexually abused children are boys, while two-thirds to three-quarters are girls. Because 90 percent of child molesters are men, some have argued that “homosexual child abuse” is widespread and that homosexuals abuse children at a rate higher than their proportion of the population. Such claims are based on the false belief that men who sexually abuse boys are homosexual. In fact, the overwhelming majority of men who sexually abuse children live their lives as heterosexual men. A review of existing social science literature on the relationship between sexuality and child sexual abuse that was published in 2000 found that “a gay man is no more likely than a straight man to perpetrate sexual activity with children.” Further, “cases of perpetration of sexual be-
havior with a pre-pubescent child by an adult lesbian are virtually nonexistent.”

A review of 352 medical records of children evaluated for sexual abuse during a twelve-month period at a Denver children’s hospital found that less than 1 percent had been abused by a gay man or a lesbian. Of 269 adult perpetrators of child abuse identified among the 352 cases of abuse, only two were gay or lesbian. The vast majority of the children in the study (82 percent) “were suspected of being abused by a man or a woman who was, or had been, in a heterosexual relationship with a relative of the child.” The review concluded that in this sample, “a child’s risk of being molested by his or her relative’s heterosexual partner is over 100 times greater than [the risk of being molested] by someone who might be identifiable as being homosexual, lesbian, or bisexual.” In an earlier study of convicted male child molesters in Massachusetts, none of the 175 men were found to have an exclusively homosexual adult sexual orientation or to be primary attracted to other adult men.

Despite the evidence to the contrary, LGBT people are often characterized as a threat to youth, and some argue that gay people should not be allowed to teach, parent, or serve as Boy Scout troop leaders. Some conservatives have even suggested that nondiscrimination laws protecting LGBT people and the recognition of their rights will lead to an increase in child molestation. One author noted that due to fear of accusations of pedophilia, LGBT adults are the “only oppressed group that is severed from its relationships with youth. Youth then experience the absence of adult mentoring, support, counseling, or befriending of both queer and non-queer adults.” Because LGBT youth usually grow up in heterosexual households, they often lack role models with an understanding of their unique situations and remain without access to accurate information about their sexuality, their community, and themselves. Researchers found that the majority (77 percent) of the supportive adults in the lives of the seventeen LGB youth they interviewed were not family members.

Literature on the emotional development of ethnic minority children has revealed a definitive need for affirmative adult role models from their own racial or ethnic backgrounds. Similarly, research has shown that having an openly gay role model improves health outcomes for gay youth. An exploratory study with twelve self-identified LGBT youth
found that they perceived peers and unrelated adults to be more supportive than family members. Peers and adults who were also LGBT provided especially valuable information and support. Unfortunately, the participants reported that their teachers, counselors, coaches, and administrators “strove to uphold the heterosexual model as normative,” in direct conflict with the students’ emerging sexual identity.\(^{20}\) In a study of 101 school counselors, only six indicated that there was at least one faculty member at their school who was openly gay or lesbian.\(^{21}\)

Fortunately, some students are able to rely on teachers, counselors, or coaches who are LGBT or who are, in some way, perceived to be accepting.\(^{22}\) According to Human Rights Watch, when LGBT students reported positive school experiences, they attributed them to the presence of supportive teachers.\(^{23}\) In GLSEN’s 2007 National School Climate Survey, eight out of ten respondents reported that they knew of at least one school staff member supportive of LGBT students at their school. Students who had support from faculty or staff were less likely to miss school because of feeling unsafe, and they were more likely to have higher GPAs and to go to college. These positive numbers increased as the number of supportive teachers and faculty members increased. Only 15 percent of students with many (six or more) supportive teachers/staff members said they did not plan to go to college, compared with 27 percent of LGBT students with no support from teachers/staff members.\(^{24}\)

Students’ awareness of which teachers and school staff are supportive can come from a multitude of sources, including rumors, a passing expression of tolerance, a poster or a book in a classroom, and the enforcement of an antiharassment policy.\(^{25}\)

While the school environment is often hostile toward LGBT students, supportive teachers can help them avoid a broad range of problems often associated with being young and LGBT.\(^{26}\) In their analysis of National Adolescent Health Study data, one group of researchers found that “feelings about teachers play the largest role in predicting the troubles of both boys and girls with bisexual attractions in school—paying attention, getting homework completed, and getting along with other students.”\(^{27}\) Data from the 1998–99 \textit{Nuestras Voces} study of Latino gay and bisexual men show that the presence of an adult gay role model while growing up increased self-esteem, lowered psychological distress, and lessened the likelihood of engaging in high-risk sexual behavior later in life.\(^{28}\)

The presence of out gay men and lesbians among teachers, administrators, and staff has a positive impact on all members of a school com-
The insight that students gain from experiences with openly LGBT teachers in the school environment can be significant. A survey of eleven former students in their late twenties and early thirties did not elicit any intense concerns about having had a gay teacher while in middle school. The experience even seems to have left them with a more open-minded perspective on issues related to sexual orientation. Though further research is needed with a larger population, the results of this study suggest that openly LGBT teachers can be important role models for both LGBT and heterosexual students.

Reporting on the decision of a Massachusetts teacher to come out to members of his school community, one author writes,

"His motivations for taking this action were twofold: first, he did it for the students. "It was an attempt to alleviate some of the fear, shame, loneliness, and despair of kids in high school today that I also felt as a closeted teen," he told me. And second, he did it for himself and other staff members. "It takes much more energy to be closeted than it does to be out," he continued. "All of the energy I used in worrying that I would say the wrong thing is now freed up for other things. I think I’m a much more effective teacher now on many levels.""

The response to this teacher’s acknowledgment of his sexual orientation was mixed. While some students and parents expressed concern, there were also messages of support and encouragement from the community. One father wrote, "I . . . support your courageous statements. You will undoubtedly pay a price for your honesty, yet others would pay a price for your silence, and that price could be fatal."

**Staff Development and Training**

The failure of many teachers and counselors to serve LGBT youth originates from a lack of training. Advocacy groups and educators who support the inclusion of training on sexual orientation and gender identity and expression in tolerance programs assert that prejudice and harassment can only be overcome by talking directly and frankly about the issue and through providing resources for in-school mentoring and support. The use of staff training as an essential tool for creating a school atmosphere free of anti-LGBT harassment and discrimination is also
supported by a small but growing body of research. School staff should be equipped with the tools and knowledge necessary to assist students who are struggling with their own or another’s sexual orientation or gender identity and to identify and intervene on behalf of students who are harassed, discriminated against, or facing detrimental health consequences as a result of prejudice.\textsuperscript{34} In addition to providing the tools to deal with such situations, training gives teachers, administrators, and other staffers the opportunity to work out their feelings related to sexual orientation and gender diversity and to learn how to handle the discomfort of colleagues, students, and parents around such issues.\textsuperscript{35}

Published in 1998, a study of 101 junior and senior high school counselors found that only 8 percent felt they had a high level of competence in counseling LGBT youth; almost the same percentage indicated they had little or no competence. Eighty-nine percent of the counselors said they would be interested in such training.\textsuperscript{36} Most of the teachers interviewed for a 2001 Human Rights Watch report also said their teacher training programs had not addressed harassment or discrimination based on sexual orientation or gender identity.\textsuperscript{37} Analysis of data from the 2004 California Safe Schools Policy Survey, conducted by the California Safe Schools Coalition, found that the majority of school districts in the state who participated in the survey do not require middle and high school teachers to attend trainings on how to deal with discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation. Of the trainings that do occur, the majority do not include training on how to deal with harassment or discrimination that occurs because of gender identity, appearance, and behavior. Lack of resources, expertise, and time were the most frequently cited reasons for lack of training. This is despite the fact that California law explicitly protects students from discrimination and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity.\textsuperscript{38}

A survey of over fifteen hundred primary and secondary school principals, conducted in 2007 by GLSEN in collaboration with the National Association of Secondary School Principals, found that while half of principals say that harassment of students is a serious problem in their school, only 20 percent have engaged their schools in efforts to create a safe environment specifically for LGBT students. Nearly 70 percent of principals believe that professional development for school personnel would be most helpful in reducing that harassment of LGBT students.\textsuperscript{39} This is supported by a study by the Massachusetts Safe Schools Project, which found that students in schools where the staff had been through training sponsored by that organization were twice as likely to report
feeling supported by teachers and counselors than were students in schools without trained staff. Clearly, there is a growing need for effective training curricula and programs for teachers and school staff.

The ACLU, the NCLR, and GLSEN offer training workshops for school districts seeking to address and prevent anti-LGBT harassment and violence. These workshops show teachers and administrators how to create a safe environment for LGBT students and are designed to alert school districts to their responsibility to change any environment hostile to LGBT youth and to provide the skills and resources needed to promote an environment intolerant of harassment. The ACLU emphasizes that its workshop is not about sex or teaching morality.

[I]t is about safety, equal access and equal protection. It is about making sure every student feels that they can achieve their best in school in an environment free of hostility. And it is about taking proactive steps to prevent the antigay attitudes that may exist in a school from turning into harassment and escalating into violence.

Staff development and training workshops can have a significant effect on the experiences of LGBT students. One student described her experience at a new school with more supportive teachers, compared to the previous school she attended, as follows:

It’s wonderful here. My science and English teachers are so nice. If someone says “fag” or “dyke,” they stop them. My teachers are really good about stopping homophobic words from being spread. There was one girl who used to give me complete hell. She’d tell me I’m fruity, stuff like that. The teacher took her into the hall and talked to her. My teachers are really cool.

Unfortunately, most students never receive this kind of support. The most common response to anti-LGBT harassment and violence is no response at all. One student interviewed by Human Rights Watch described the lengths to which he went to document the harassment he experienced, only to be completely ignored by his school principal.

I took a folder, wrote down dates and times every time I was harassed. I took it down to the principal. He said, “Son, you have too much time on your hands to worry about these folks. I have more
important things to do than worry about what happened two weeks ago.” I told him, “I wanted to give you an idea of what goes on, the day-to-day harassment.” He took the folder away from me and threw it in the trash. That was my freshman year, first semester. After that I realized [the school] wasn’t going to do anything.44

Staff development and training programs about anti-LGBT harassment, in conjunction with nondiscrimination policies that include sexual orientation and gender identity, can effectively address the ignorance, fear, and apathy that prevent effective intervention on behalf of such students. Teachers interviewed by Human Rights Watch emphasized that students would benefit from staff training programs like the one described in the ACLU publication Making Schools Safe.45 According to one teacher in Georgia, “If a model was in place, something designed to stop violence and take advantage of what teachers always refer to as ‘teachable moments,’ there’s a lot of kids that would embrace it.”46

The New York City Department of Education began implementing a training program for teachers and school administrators in 2007 as part of its Respect for All initiative (for more on this initiative, see the section on safe schools programs later in this chapter).47 The formal training program prepares teachers, guidance counselors, and other staff members to address bullying, harassment, and intimidation of students.48 In the first year, sixty-nine trainings were delivered to over one thousand educators from nearly 250 New York City schools serving students grades six and above. Representatives from the remainder of New York City’s school districts were scheduled to attend additional trainings over the following two school years. Curricula for these two-day trainings included group discussions, mini-lectures, videos, and role-playing exercises designed to increase participants’ awareness of anti-LGBT bias and behaviors in school and to stress the importance of intervening when anti-LGBT harassment occurs. Attendees were also provided with materials they could use with students, including a poster that identified district antibullying policies and the names of staff to contact to report incidents of harassment and bullying.49

The Respect for All curriculum was created based on a foundational program theory designed to increase participants’

- Awareness of prevalence of anti-LGBTQ [“Q” stands for “questioning”] behaviors in school;
- Self-awareness regarding own behaviors and professional practices;
• Knowledge of LGBTQ-related terminology;
• Empathy for LGBT students;
• Understanding of the importance of intervening in anti-LGBTQ remarks;
• Knowledge of and access to LGBT-related resources; and
• Self-efficacy related to the desired behaviors.

The expected outcomes and results of the training included

• An increase in participants’ intervention in anti-LGBTQ behaviors;
• An increase in participants’ engagement in efforts to create safer schools;
• An increase in participants’ communication with students and other staff about LGBTQ issues; and
• A decrease in participants’ use of hurtful language.50

GLSEN conducted an evaluation of the first year of the training program through pre- and post-training surveys completed by 813 of the participants and through a series of focus group interviews. According to GLSEN,

Findings from the Year One evaluation demonstrate that this training program is an effective means for developing the competency of educators to address bias-based bullying and harassment, and to create safer school environments for LGBTQ students. The findings suggest that providing such training to all school staff, including administrators, would result in an even stronger effect on the school environment.51

Curricula and Textbooks

Even schools that recognize the need for the protection of LGBT students and teachers can make positive changes to curricula.52 In many schools, the only time LGBT issues are discussed is in health classes, where homosexuality is only discussed within the context of sexually transmitted diseases and AIDS. Teachers should include discussions about LGBT people in other classes as well. Such curricular expansion might involve a discussion of the Mattachine Society, the Daughters of Bilitis, and the Stonewall Riots in the context of social change move-
ments in recent U.S. history or the inclusion of a novel by a gay author like James Baldwin in a class on American literature. Information on the family lives of same-sex couples should be included in life planning curricula, and school libraries should include books on the history of the LGBT rights movement. The National Education Association, among other groups, supports the inclusion of LGBT issues in curricula and textbooks, and recent research indicates that such inclusion can have a significant impact on school climate and safety.

The California Safe Schools Coalition analyzed data from the Preventing School Harassment and Safe Schools Policy surveys to determine what effect LGBT-inclusive curricula may have on school safety. Over three hundred school districts participated in the 2006 study, and an overwhelming majority (83 percent) reported that they include LGBT issues in their tolerance curriculum for all or some of their high school students. Smaller majorities reported including LGBT issues for some or all of their middle school students (64 percent) and elementary school students (54 percent). All students, LGBT and straight, reported feeling safer in schools that include LGBT issues in their curricula. Nearly three-quarters of LGBT students in schools with LGBT-inclusive curricula (73 percent) reported feeling safer, compared to 58 percent of those in schools with no inclusion. The difference was not as large but still significant for straight students (83 percent vs. 77 percent). Students attending schools with inclusive curricula also reported that they were less likely to have rumors or mean lies spread about them or to be made fun of because of the way they look or the way they talk and that there was less anti-LGBT bullying in their schools.

While schools in more progressive states, such as California, are beginning to see the positive effects of LGB-inclusive tolerance curricula, the majority of textbooks used across the United States in other subjects either exclude or devote very little attention to LGBT issues and history. A review of five content analyses of textbooks for the high school and college levels published from 1992 through 2005 found very brief mentions of LGBT issues, often within a negative context. For example, an analysis published in 2005 of twenty high school textbooks in five subject areas (personal and social education, moral education, family economics, human biology, and Catholic moral and religious education) found that 95 percent of the 610 textbook pages reviewed did not reference same-sex sexuality at all; 133 pages only defined sexuality as heterosexual, and only 33 pages mentioned same-sex sexuality at all. Almost 80 percent of the time, same-sex sexuality was mentioned in negative con-
texts, including sexually transmitted diseases, sexual abuse, and prostitution. A content analysis of eight textbooks for courses on the foundations of education, used in teacher preparation programs, also found little inclusion and coverage of LGBT issues. Of the nearly 214,700 estimated lines of text analyzed, only 3 percent were dedicated to LGBT content.

GLSEN’s 2007 National School Climate Survey confirms that LGBT-related curricula and resources are not available to most students. Less than half of the students surveyed were able to access information about LGBT history, people, or events in their school library, and even less (30 percent) were able to access this information on the Internet at school. Only 15 percent of students reported that LGBT issues were included in their textbooks or assigned readings, and the majority (87 percent) were not taught about LGBT history, people, or events in any of their classes. Of the small portion who were taught about LGBT-related topics in their classes, only one out of ten were exposed to positive representations.

There were also significant differences in availability and access to these resources between youth in rural communities and those in suburban or urban communities:

- Only 9 percent of rural students reported that LGBT issues were taught in class, compared with 14 percent of suburban students and 15 percent of urban students.
- 20 percent of rural students reported that LGBT issues were represented in their textbooks, compared with more than 43 percent of suburban students and 37 percent of urban students.
- 24 percent of rural students reported that LGBT resources were available in their school libraries, compared with 45 percent of suburban students and 32 percent of urban students.
- 22 percent of rural students had access to LGBT resources via Internet connections at school, compared to 42 percent of suburban students and 32 percent of urban students.

GLSEN also found that LGBT students in the South are disproportionately unsupported when compared to LGBT students in any other region. Students from the South were least likely to have a gay-straight alliance at their school, least likely to have LGBT resources in their school library and access to LGBT community resources from the school Internet, and least likely to report having a comprehensive protective school policy about bullying and harassment in their schools.
Multicultural education with curricular integration of LGBT issues reduces the alienation felt by LGBT students who do not see themselves reflected in school materials. It also makes all students more aware of a greater diversity of human experience. The development of LGBT students is enhanced through their exposure to their diverse and rich cultural history; even heterosexual students exposed to LGBT-inclusive education may come to better understand themselves and their own sexuality.63 Unfortunately, there is an overall lack of support for the inclusion of LGBT-related materials in school curricula. In 1993, Massachusetts governor William Weld and his education department rejected two key recommendations of the Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth: that schools purchase library books positively portraying gay men and lesbians and that curricula incorporate gay issues wherever appropriate. This rejection came a year before Weld’s reelection and at the height of the Children of the Rainbow curriculum controversy in New York, during which the proposed adoption of a multicultural curriculum that included two minor references to gay people and gay families was defeated amid charges that it “promoted” homosexuality. Seven years later, however, Massachusetts amended the state’s Equal Educational Opportunity regulations regarding curricula and sexual orientation:

1. All public school systems shall, through their curricula, encourage respect for the human and civil rights of all individuals regardless of race, color, sex, religion, national origin or sexual orientation.
2. Teachers shall review all instructional and educational materials for simplistic and demeaning generalizations, lacking intellectual merit, on the basis of race, color, sex, religion, national origin or sexual orientation. Appropriate activities, discussions and/or supplementary materials shall be used to provide balance and context for any such stereotypes depicted in such materials.64

Safe Schools Programs

Massachusetts launched the country’s first safe schools initiative nearly two decades ago, after the Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth documented the hostile school climate pervasive in most of the
state’s schools and its negative impact on gay and lesbian students, the children of gay parents, and other students who were perceived as somehow different. The Safe Schools Program sought to fulfill four recommendations made by the Massachusetts Board of Education in 1993:

- develop policies that protect gay and lesbian students from harassment, violence, and discrimination;
- offer school personnel training in violence prevention and suicide prevention;
- offer school-based support groups for gay, lesbian, and heterosexual students;
- provide school-based counseling for family members of gay and lesbian students.65

The Massachusetts legislature appropriated funds to support the Safe Schools Program through the Department of Education and the Department of Public Health. Within a few years, more than 140 schools across the commonwealth had gay-straight alliances, and many teachers and counselors were trained in how to deal with antigay harassment and violence. The program showed results very quickly. One study found that in schools with gay-straight alliances, 35 percent of students said LGB students could safely choose to be open about their sexuality. In schools without GSAs, only 12 percent said students could openly identify as LGB safely. It also discovered that in schools where the faculty had undergone training on gay issues, 54 percent of students said that gay students felt supported by teachers and counselors. In schools that had not undergone faculty training, only 26 percent of students said that gay students felt supported.66

The Massachusetts Safe Schools Program was a national model until 2002, when Governor Jane Swift vetoed funding for the program—the only such program fully funded by state money at the time. In other states and municipalities with safe schools programs, private funding is the primary source of support. These initiatives cannot succeed without the dogged determination of community-based supporters. Even in Massachusetts, many urban and rural communities did not have GSAs and had not conducted promised teacher trainings until recently. Most safe schools activity occurred in white, suburban, middle- and upper-class communities. However, the number of GSAs in Boston schools has significantly increased, and more safe schools work has been done in
other cities with large communities of color. In California, over eight hundred GSAs exist across the state, in urban, rural, and suburban school districts.\textsuperscript{67} Minneapolis, St. Paul, and Chicago also have many GSAs in their public schools, which are predominantly comprised of students of color. However, GSAs were still less likely to exist in rural school districts and in southern states as of 2007.\textsuperscript{68}

Prior to the founding of Project 10, a school-based support program for LGB students in the Los Angeles public schools, informal discussions with LGB students revealed that they felt they were without any traditional support systems, sympathetic adults to talk to, or peers like themselves with whom to socialize. In 1985, after Project 10 had been in place for a full school year at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles, a study of the general student population was conducted. Of the 342 (out of 500) surveys that were returned, 56 percent of the respondents said they knew an LBG person and felt that there should be outreach to such students on every campus. Fifty-one percent felt that the effect of Project 10 on Fairfax High School had been positive. Only 11 percent felt that the effect had been negative and that it had given the school a bad name; 38 percent were unsure as to the effect. Seventy-nine percent of students surveyed felt that “the greatest benefit of Project 10 was that it provided all students with a place to get accurate information” on LGB-related issues.\textsuperscript{69} Portions of the Project 10 model have since been replicated in schools across the country.

In 2007, the New York City Department of Education began implementing its Respect for All initiative, a safe schools program designed “to combat bullying and harassment based on ethnicity, national origin, religion, gender, sexual orientation, disability, and other factors.”\textsuperscript{70} Overall, the initiative “requires schools to develop annual plans to convey appropriate standards of behavior to students and staff, to track and monitor all bias incidents, to investigate complaints properly, and to take follow-up steps to ensure that schools maintain safe and respectful learning environments.”\textsuperscript{71} The initiative began with a formal training program that prepares teachers, guidance counselors, and other staff members to address bullying, harassment, and intimidation of students (for more on the training component of the initiative, see the section on staff development and training earlier in this chapter).\textsuperscript{72} Developed in collaboration with GLSEN, the Anti-Defamation League, Morningside Center for Teaching Social Responsibility, Operation Respect, and Youth Enrichment Services (YES) of the New York City LGBT Community Center, the goals of the initiative are to:
1. Build the capacity of school personnel to actively promote a community of inclusion in each school so that all students feel both safe and respected
2. Increase the likelihood that school personnel will intervene when witnessing anti-LGBTQ language, harassment, and/or bullying
3. Build the capacity of school personnel to serve as a resource and support for students who may be lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or questioning
4. Build the capacity of school personnel to serve as a resource for other school personnel regarding issues faced by lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and questioning students
5. Decrease hurtful, offensive, or exclusionary language and/or practices

In addition to training teachers and school staff, the Respect for All initiative was expanded in 2008 to include mandated reporting and investigation guidelines for incidents of bullying and harassment. In 2009, the number of school staff required to attend trainings was increased, and principals were required to develop antibullying plans for their schools. Evaluation of schools’ efforts to prevent and respond to bullying were also included in their overall quality review. In 2010, the initiative was expanded again to include an annual Respect for All Week (March 8–12), which is designed to focus schools’ attention on creating safe and supportive environments for all students. The Department of Education provided a variety of resources and lesson plans to help teachers develop activities for the week. At the press conference launching Respect for All Week, the Speaker of the New York City Council, Christine Quinn, summarized the ultimate goal of the Respect for All initiative.

We have a responsibility to provide every student in New York City with a safe and inclusive learning environment. Teaching our students to embrace diversity is essential to preventing hate among future generations. For the past two years, we’ve been working with advocates and community members to expand our Respect for All program. This week is part of our long-term effort to make this subject matter part of our school culture. We will use this opportunity to build awareness of this issue and the tools that are available to educators, students, and parents as they seek to eliminate bias-based harassment in our schools.
Gay-Straight Alliances

Gay-straight alliances are in-school, extracurricular groups that support LGBT students, those questioning their sexual orientation or gender identity, and their straight friends and allies. They are an important part of an overall strategy to insure that schools provide education in a safe and welcoming environment. GSAs bring together students and school staff to end anti-LGBT bias and homophobia or transphobia in their schools, and they are the most visible and widely adopted component of safe schools programs. As of 2008, there were more than four thousand GSAs in U.S. schools registered with GLSEN.

The Gay-Straight Alliance Network, a youth leadership organization that connects GSAs to each other and to community resources through peer support, leadership development, and training, helps students start, support, and maintain GSAs in their schools. Founded in 1998, the organization initially worked with forty GSAs in the San Francisco Bay Area. Today, the GSA Network supports over eight hundred GSAs across the state of California. Through its National Association of GSA Networks program, launched in 2005, the organization has also established GSA networks in twenty-six states, with a goal of fifty states by 2020.

While there has been significant progress in growing the number of GSAs available to support LGBT students, there is still significant need: only one-third of students report having a GSA in their school.

GSAs are often the only school-based place where LGBT youth can safely discuss issues associated with their sexual orientation or gender identity, and GSAs foster communication with others who understand what they are going through. Students are able to make friends without hiding their sexual orientation or gender identity, helping them develop social skills and self-esteem. Among LGBT students and their allies, GSAs also increase interest in learning about cultural and social issues related to sexual orientation or gender identity. A teacher in Connecticut and GSA coadviser told Education World magazine,

I have seen changes in students who come to the GSA. Kids with support move away from risk behaviors and experience school success. You can’t pretend these kids don’t exist. Even kids who won’t step foot in the room benefit. At least they know there is a safe place; someone is acknowledging them and the issues they face.
A study of the Massachusetts Safe Schools Program published in 2001 found that the presence of GSAs made a positive difference. In those schools with a GSA, 52 percent of the students indicated that there were members of the faculty, staff, or administration who supported LGB students, in contrast to only 37 percent of students in schools without a GSA. Students in schools with a GSA were also more comfortable referring a friend with questions about sexual orientation to a counselor, and staff in schools with a GSA were more comfortable assisting students with questions about sexual orientation.87

Guidance for Students, Parents, and Staff Who Want to Create a GSA

In *Gay-Straight Alliances: A Handbook for Students, Educators, and Parents*, Ian Macgillivray offers the following guidance to students, teachers and counselors, principals and superintendents, school boards, and parents in dealing with LGBT students and GSAs:

*For students wanting to start GSAs:*
- You must be absolutely certain you want to do this. This may put you in the spotlight.
- Find a teacher or counselor whom you trust to be an advisor for the GSA.
- Get the required form from the office for starting a new student club.
- Make a list of objectives and goals.
- Decide on a mission statement that reflects your objectives.
- Decide if you will have a president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer, or alternative leadership, such as rotating facilitators or a steering committee, and choose a name for your club.
- Prepare information on GSAs and the 1984 Equal Access Act for your principal.
- Submit the New Student Club form and meet with the principal.
- Be patient. It’s not going to happen overnight.
- Protect yourself if things get ugly.

*For teachers and counselors working with LGBT students and GSAs:*
- The club’s advisor should ensure that straight allies feel comfortable attending the meetings and also that the concerns of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, transgender students, disabled students, and students of color are taken into consideration.
- Understand that for students with same-sex attractions, their primary identity may not be their sexual orientation.
- Some transgender students and students with same-sex attractions will not be comfortable joining the GSA and they should not be antagonized by students in the GSA for choosing not to attend meetings.
- Sometimes educators feel a stronger need for a GSA than do students. While it’s okay to inspire students and let them know you will support them, there is a fine line between that and pushing your own agenda on them. Ultimately, it must be the students who initiate and run the GSA.

For principals and superintendents seeking information on their responsibilities regarding GSAs:
- The 1984 Equal Access Act states that if a school district allows non-curricular clubs then they cannot prohibit a GSA.
- Some school districts try to finagle their way around the law, but this often results in costly lawsuits. A better use of time and money is to honor the students’ right to form the GSA and educate the school and community members who oppose it.
- The freedom of speech and assembly clauses of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution support the provision of safe spaces (such as GSAs) in which groups of students can assemble and speak about topics of importance to them.
- The equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment has been cited in court cases where school administrators did not stop antigay abuse directed at students. School districts risk losing their Title IX funds if they do not stop peer sexual harassment of all students, including LGBT students.

For school boards managing debates that may arise regarding GSAs:
- Listen to the opposition’s concerns.
- Get advocates and opponents to talk with one another.
- Draw on the expertise of organizations, religious establishments, or individuals in the community.
- Build support for the GSA by showing how it can help enhance school safety.
- Invite students to speak at school board meetings.

For parents seeking information about LGBT youth and GSAs:
- Parents and community members may not regularly attend or participate in meetings of student clubs, including GSAs.
• Parents who support students’ right to form GSAs should make their voices heard. Often it is the minority of religious fundamentalist parents who get noticed because they are better organized and protest the loudest.
• Students who start GSAs need the support of parents and caring adults who respect their rights and can help teach them important lessons about democracy.
• Don’t presume your child has same-sex attractions just because he or she is involved with a GSA. Many students involved in GSAs are heterosexual allies.
• School districts have substantial discretion to set their own policies and curricula. Under a state’s opt-out provisions and for religious reasons, parents often have the right to pull their children from educational activities that are part of the mandated curriculum.  

Research on GSAs published in 2002 found that they have a positive impact on the academic performance of students and enhanced their sense of belonging to the school community. Students’ sense of physical safety improved as well, and they reported that they attended school more often and worked harder when they were at school. They also improved their relationships with their families, developed a higher comfort level with their own sexual orientation, learned strategies for dealing with others’ presumptions about their sexuality, and felt better about their ability to contribute to society. A 2003 study of GSAs in twenty-two schools describes four key roles that they can play in the school environment:

1. Counseling and support: Two of the GSAs in the study served as places where students could meet as a group or individually with the GSA advisor. These GSAs focused on assisting students with issues about sexual orientation or gender identity issues.
2. Creating “safe” space: Six of the GSAs became highly visible throughout the school through announcements over the school’s public-address system and posters advertising their meetings. Their goal was to provide a place where students could socialize and talk about common interests and experiences. Typical activities included watching movies, eating pizza, listening to an invited speaker, and discussing school safety issues. (Students of color or students who were not openly gay were underrepresented in these GSAs. The authors of the study
consequently used the word *safe* in quotation marks to underscore that not all students felt safe and included there.

3. Raising awareness, educating, and increasing visibility: Nine of the GSAs had regularly scheduled meetings that included both social and educational or political activities. These groups not only were visible through announcements and posters but also played a lead role in calling attention to safety issues affecting LGBT students. These GSAs initiated LGBT-supportive school programming and lobbied for staff training; students planned schoolwide assemblies that addressed LGBT issues and visited classrooms to talk to their peers.

4. Becoming part of broader efforts: Five of the GSAs partnered with other schools, community members, or groups addressing LGBT issues. School-based safe schools task forces comprised of staff members, parents, and students took on a primary role and sponsored community-wide and school-based projects, such as administering school climate surveys to students. In partnership with the GSAs, these organizations also developed mandatory staff development programs on LGBT issues and facilitated the inclusion of LGBT curricula in the classroom. The staff in these schools also created intervention strategies for ending anti-LGBT harassment and fought for the inclusion of domestic partnership benefits for LGBT staff.

A review of studies of GSAs by GLSEN further confirmed that they can have a significant effect on school climate. Compared to students in schools without a GSA, students in schools with GSAs are

- less likely to hear homophobic remarks in school on a daily basis;
- less likely to report feeling unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation or the way they express their gender;
- less likely to miss school because they feel unsafe;
- two times more likely to say they hear teachers make supportive or positive remarks about lesbian and gay people;
- more likely to be aware of a supportive adult at school;
- more likely to feel a sense of belonging to their school community.

The positive effects of GSAs may also save lives. A study of 142 LGBT youth ages fourteen to twenty-one in Denver, Colorado, found that those
who attended a school with a GSA were significantly less likely to report that they attempted suicide.92

_GSA in Utah Fights for Its Right to Meet at School_

A Profile of Kelli Peterson

A struggling student and out lesbian, Kelli Peterson had been beaten up on occasion. She also battled depression, isolation, and thoughts of suicide. “I hated high school,” she recalls, “I didn’t feel like I had anything there.”93 In the autumn of 1995, her senior year at Salt Lake City’s East High School, Kelli began talking with a friend about the difficulties LGBT students faced. “Wouldn’t it be great,” they wondered as they compared stories, “to have a place where we could meet regularly and talk about stuff . . . a place where we could feel safe and just be ourselves?”94 Kelli found inspiration for action in the activism of Candace Gingrich, the openly gay half sister of former House Speaker and archconservative Newt Gingrich. After attending a November 1995 speech by Candace, Kelli and twenty-five other students formed the East High Gay-Straight Alliance.

In February 1996, the Salt Lake City School District Board of Education banned all extracurricular clubs rather than allow the alliance to meet.95 Although the alliance’s mission was initially approved, resistance arose once some religious conservatives got involved, and on February 20, the school board voted four to three to discontinue all clubs rather than permit the existence of the GSA.96 On February 23, students of both East High School and West High School walked out of school in protest, marched to the Utah State Capitol Building, and held a rally.

While protests against the ban continued, the school board began a reclassification project, which allowed selected clubs defined as “curricular” to continue their meetings. In a special session, the state legislature passed a law that allowed schools to deny a free meeting space to any group that they believed encouraged criminal conduct, promoted bigotry, or involved human sexuality. As a result, the school board began charging the GSA rent for its meeting space at the school. In addition, the school denied the alliance official standing, and it was not allowed to announce meetings or post notices of its activities, nor was it represented in the high school yearbook, as other clubs were.
Two years after Kelli and her friends inadvertently caused a statewide controversy simply because they wanted a safe space for LGBT students to meet, three civil rights groups joined forces to file a lawsuit against the school board. In 1999, the U.S. District Court for the District of Utah ruled that the school board had violated the Equal Access Act by banning some extracurricular clubs while allowing others to meet.

Despite a senior year filled with hate mail, scorn from her relatives, and a death threat, Kelli finished high school on a high note. Her grades and her relationship with her friends improved. Kelli graduated with no regrets, believing that “people should not always take the middle ground, because you definitely need to take sides on issues.” Standing up for the right of LGBT students to meet on school grounds ultimately led to positive changes in Kelli’s personal life. For Kelli, a life of depression, isolation, and thoughts of suicide turned into a life full of friendship and support.

The Harvey Milk High School

New York City’s Harvey Milk High School, named for a slain civil rights leader, was established to create “a public school where some of the city’s most at-risk youth—those who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, and questioning (LGBTQ)—could learn without the threat of physical violence and emotional harm they faced in a traditional educational environment.” The only school of its kind, it provides a place for LGBT youth to go to high school in a safe and supportive environment. It was established in 1984 as an accredited program of the New York City Department of Education’s Career Education Center, in partnership with the Hetrick-Martin Institute, a social service agency serving LGBT youth since 1979.

Employing the same curricula and teachers and requiring the same regents exams and graduation standards as any other New York City public high school, it is similar to other specialized public schools, including the Frederick Douglass Academy in Harlem, which serves primarily African American students; the Young Women’s Leadership School for Girls in East Harlem; and the Urban Academy Laboratory School, a multicultural, multiracial, 120-student school on Manhattan’s
East Side. Admissions standards are the same as those for other New York City public schools.\textsuperscript{102}

The majority of students at Harvey Milk High School belong to racial minorities: nearly three-quarters of the seventy-one enrollees in 2002–3 were either African American or Latino. Forty percent reported a family income below twenty thousand dollars. Although the school is located in Manhattan’s Greenwich Village, 60 percent of its students come from Brooklyn, the Bronx, and Queens. A significant number of its students are either homeless or living in group homes with a guardian because they have been thrown out of their own homes by their parents.\textsuperscript{103} In the 2008 school year, 96 students were enrolled in grades nine through twelve, and nearly 90 percent of seniors graduated, well above average in New York City.\textsuperscript{104} More than 60 percent of Harvey Milk High School students go on to attend advanced programs or college.\textsuperscript{105} Given that, according to Hetrick-Martin, LGB adolescents drop out of school at a rate three times the national average, such success is extraordinary.\textsuperscript{106}

\textbf{From Group Home to Harvey Milk High}

\textit{A Profile of Luis A.}

Luis A. does not believe that Harvey Milk High School in New York City is successful because it is a “gay high school.”\textsuperscript{107} He thinks it is successful because the teachers and staff actually care about the students and view all races, sexual orientations, and gender identities as legitimate. A recent graduate, Luis feels that Harvey Milk High School provides a safe and supportive environment for all students—gay or straight. This level of support was not present in his home life.

Early in his adolescence, Luis felt the need to verbalize and understand his attraction to men, and he began exploring the Internet for a community. As he searched Web sites and visited chat rooms, his identity as a young gay man slowly began to solidify. However, he was forced to come out to his family prematurely when his mother checked the computer’s Internet history and saw the Web sites he had visited.

Luis characterizes his mother as “old school,” to explain why she reacted negatively and blamed herself for his sexual orientation. As a result, Luis became depressed, and his relationship with
his mother suffered greatly. Due to their tumultuous relationship, in addition to other factors, Luis ended up in a group home when he was fifteen.

Going through the New York City Administration for Children’s Services was not a pleasant experience for Luis. However, it did lead him to a group residence in Harlem run by Green Chimneys Children Services, which uniquely provides a homelike environment for LGBT young people outside of the traditional foster care system. During his stay at Green Chimneys, Luis began attending Harvey Milk High School, which allowed him to create an even stronger connection to the LGBT community in New York City. The lure of the “big city” and its thriving queer community caused Luis to act out and break certain rules set up by the group home. As a result, he was transferred to another Green Chimneys group home in upstate New York when he was sixteen.

While upstate, Luis was enveloped in a whole new world. He was free from the congested streets and smog of the city and began adjusting to the small community. He enjoyed the simple pleasures of rural high school life, like homecoming and other school functions that brought the small community together. Although this upstate life did not provide him with a supportive LGBT community, he still enjoyed the two years he spent there. Luis initially wanted to transition to the independent living program through Green Chimneys upstate, but when he turned eighteen, he decided to drop out of school and restart his life in New York City.

Although Luis’s mother was not initially supportive of his sexual orientation, she never closed her doors to him, and he moved back in with her in Harlem. This time, his home life was good, and he felt like he was on the right track. He reenrolled at Harvey Milk High School and graduated a year and half later. Luis then explored his interest in theater by writing short plays and performing them with his friends in small theaters. Many of his plays discussed his coming-out process, allowing him to express himself in a new way.

An only child, Luis was frequently alone after school and on the weekends while his mother worked numerous jobs. As a result, he became extremely passionate about creating and implementing a successful after-school program. His ultimate goal is to help create after-school programming that provides a safe, supportive space for youth to engage with each other while also participating in the arts.
For Luis, acting and writing plays allowed him to work through a number of his own struggles, while showcasing his talents at the same time. He believes all youth should have a similar opportunity to explore their potential, and he wants to do what he can to make those opportunities a reality for youth who, like him, may have a lot of obstacles to overcome but even more talent to offer.

In June 2002, the New York City Board of Education approved $3.2 million in funds for the renovation and expansion of the Harvey Milk High School, and in September 2003, the school opened its doors as a full-fledged public high school. The allocation of those funds led to intense media and community scrutiny. Acknowledging the good intentions behind the Harvey Milk High School and supporting its basic aim, the New York Times nonetheless could not “condone the concept of establishing a special school specifically for students based on their sexual orientation.” The Wall Street Journal accused the school system of creating an institution for an “education elite” in response to pressure from a “politically influential group.” Ignoring the economic background of much of Harvey Milk High School’s student body, it concluded, “Only in America’s big-city public schools do you get better treatment if you’re gay than if you’re poor.”

Of the major newspapers in New York City, only the Daily News called the concern over the school’s expansion overblown, noting that many of the students at the school had been ostracized by their families or their former schools. The paper wrote, “[A] lot of people reasonably contend it would be better if New York didn’t have dozens of differently themed schools—that students should adjust to their surroundings, as they one day will have to do when they are adults. . . . But since the goal of education is not just to teach students, but to enable them to learn, policies that help that process along are worth trying.”

Democratic state senator Ruben Diaz, a politician with a long record of antagonism toward the LGBT community, even sued to block the school’s opening, with the help of attorneys from the Florida-based Liberty Counsel, a group that defends “traditional families, sanctity of life and religious liberty.” Cloaked in the language of civil rights and decrying the school as a “separate but equal” institution, Senator Diaz accused the school of “taking from the poor and giving to the rich,” segregation, and “leaving my Spanish children, my black children behind.”

Even segments of the LGBT community were ambivalent. Michael
Bronski, a prominent journalist, activist, and academic, writing in the *Boston Phoenix*, commented,

[S]egregating these students for their own protection also patronizes them, and that’s why [the Harvey Milk School]—as helpful as it may be for a few queer kids at the moment—is not really a solution. . . . The Harvey Milk School made sense in the 1980s, when the prevailing politics on GLBT youth favored carving out private spaces to protect them. But the gay-rights movement has grown since then, and the politics of privacy has given way to a more forceful politics of public intervention. . . . At this point the public-school system should mandate a series of measures that will make all schools safe for all students.”

In fact, a separate school is not the best solution. It is available only to a small percentage of youth who need it: those whose parents have either abandoned them or who will allow them to go. Making sure that all schools are safe for LGBT youth is, of course, a better and necessarily long-term goal. But that goal for future LGBT youth should not come at the expense of the mental and physical well-being of today’s students. Given the dismal statistics on the treatment of these youth in American schools, LGBT-supportive institutions like the Harvey Milk High School are an important interim solution to the epidemic of violence and harassment against LGBT students in America’s public schools.

Only one other such school has ever existed. Founded in 1997, the Walt Whitman School in Dallas, a private school with a sliding-scale tuition, closed its doors in 2003, having repeatedly failed to win accreditation from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools.