

# *Opening Up the Classroom Closet: Responding to the Educational Needs of Gay and Lesbian Youth*

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*Eric Rofes, gay community activist and author, explores the issues surrounding the schools' failure to meet the educational needs of gay and lesbian youth. He argues that there has been an across-the-board denial of the existence of gay and lesbian youth, and that this has taken place because "their voices have been silenced and because adults have not effectively taken up their cause." Rofes goes on to present some promising initiatives that are designed to change the status quo: Project 10 in Los Angeles and the Harvey Milk School in New York City. He concludes by proposing needed changes in U.S. schools if they are to become truly accessible to gay and lesbian youth.*

Someday, maybe, there will exist a well-informed, well considered and yet fervent public conviction that the most deadly of all possible sins is the mutilation of a child's spirit.

— Erik Erikson

Andy is a middle-class, White sixteen-year-old who ran away from his family home in Oregon after suffering years of abuse from his father after the man read his son's love letters from another boy. Arriving in Los Angeles, Andy worked in a fast-food restaurant in the evenings and attended high school during the day, resolving to complete school and get his diploma, despite the obstacles caused by the relocation. Instead of a supportive environment at his new school, Andy found his peers hostile and harassing. Openly gay to his classmates and teachers, Andy was mocked during class time by other students, and received no support from teachers. After he was physically assaulted at the bus stop after school, Andy felt pushed to the point of either quitting school or demanding action.

Nina is a Black fifteen-year-old from Harlem. She had difficulty coping with the rejection she faced in her inner-city high school because she was upfront about being a lesbian. Her mother and brother tried to lend support, but school authori-

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ties had little assistance to offer. Name-calling, harassing notes, and verbal threats of violence, including rape, began to turn an upbeat, cheerful girl into a jumble of dysfunction and misery. As Nina faced the unpleasant task of steeling herself for two more years of such assaults, she found herself moving toward leaving school.

Gay and lesbian youth attend schools throughout the nation, and they have existed quietly throughout the history of U.S. education. These students—from every ethnic and racial background, in urban, suburban, and rural schools—have sat passively through years of public school education where their identities as gay and lesbian people have been ignored and denied. They have done this because of their own fears and isolation, and because of the failure of gay men and lesbians to effectively take up their cause. The result has been the creation of a population within our schools who exhibit significant indications of lack of self-esteem, emotional problems, and substance abuse.

Yet the late 1980s have seen a new, radical assertiveness by this population, which has forced individual schools, and then entire school systems, to grapple with the reality that gay and lesbian youth are in the schools and are not going to go away. Almost a decade after a gay male student in Cumberland, Rhode Island, threatened legal action if his right to bring a male date to his prom was violated, high schools in diverse parts of the nation are confronted with informal networks of gay youth, formal gay and lesbian student groups, students “coming out” to teachers and classmates, and the need for appropriate AIDS prevention information for the particularly high-risk population of gay male youth.

Ten years ago, as an openly gay schoolteacher, I found myself frequently raising issues related to the educational and social needs of gay and lesbian youth at educational conferences. Most often, I was challenged by other teachers who insisted that the term “gay youth” was essentially a contradiction: youth were sexually neutral, because sexual orientation was formed during late adolescence. While I was facilitating social programs and rap groups for gay youth—some as young as thirteen and fourteen years old—my colleagues in the field of education were insisting that this population didn’t exist. “It’s just a phase of rebellion they’re going through,” I was told.

Yet in working with other projects as a youth advocate for the Massachusetts Committee for Children and Youth, I saw the urgent needs of this population. I sat on a youth suicide task force and found numerous cases of young men and women who had attempted or completed suicide where homophobia was an issue. Some were simply taunted by their peers as “fags” or “dykes.” Others had histories that revealed deep conflict over gender issues. Some were actively homosexual and had experienced rejection from family, church, or peers.

Yet the entire field of research on youth suicide neglected to discuss any relationship between homosexuality and suicide among young people. I was a member of a team of advocates who consulted on a television media piece on youth suicide that focused on four young men and women who had killed themselves during the past two years. In studying these case histories in depth, it was clear that the trigger which sent two of the youths over the edge involved their homosexuality—or peer assumptions of homosexuality. One young man had been taunted as a “fag” for years. One young woman had recently been rejected by her girlfriend and

had been devastated. Yet, the final television special omitted any references to gay issues; viewers were left mystified that such wonderful young people would kill themselves. A key clue had been censored by producers.

It has been frustrating to observe critical youth issues enter the field of public debate, while widespread censorship results in the exclusion of the issues of gay and lesbian youth. Street outreach workers in urban centers throughout the nation know that a large proportion of street kids are gay and lesbian youth who have been kicked out of family homes or who have fled abusive family situations—yet academic research on this population rarely acknowledges or probes the needs of gay and lesbian youth. Social workers counseling pregnant teenage women regularly come across young women who have attempted to deny their lesbianism by having a baby—yet few programs exist that are prepared to assist these women in coming to terms with their lesbian identities. AIDS prevention counselors working with teenagers in the schools frequently find themselves educating young people about how to remain uninfected, yet without giving any training or materials to deal with the issue of male-to-male sexual activity among youth.

This across-the-board denial of the existence of gay and lesbian youth has been allowed to take place because their voices have been silenced and because adults have not effectively taken up their cause. And, except in rare instances, gay and lesbian adults have clearly taken steps to ensure that youth issues are *not* a part of the greater community agenda. The stereotypical fears of gay people “recruiting” children into our ranks have been a key barrier to significant moves toward advocacy for youth, but other factors clearly restrict these efforts as well. Many adult gay men and women have not come to terms with their own youth and have not faced the pain of those years of repression, stigma, and harassment. Working with young people would force them to confront difficult, unresolved feelings. Other gay and lesbian adults harbor many of the unfortunate and simplistic views of teenagers held by the larger adult population: adolescents should be seen and not heard. Hence the ageism of the adult gay and lesbian community has restricted efforts to develop an agenda for youth.

Professionals who work with young people—including those in the school system—are finding gay and lesbian youth issues difficult to ignore as we enter the 1990s. Part of this is due to the increased visibility of the gay and lesbian movement, but part is also due to the emerging strength of upfront, outspoken young people who are asserting their identities as young gay men and lesbians. This has resulted in more investigation of the needs of gay and lesbian youth by a wide range of youth-serving institutions. In December, 1988, the Seattle Commission on Children and Youth, after extensive public hearings and investigation, issued twenty-one recommendations addressing the “special needs” of gay and lesbian youth. A survey of all public high schools in the state of Illinois has resulted in a large volume of requests from counselors throughout the state for positive information on counseling gay and lesbian youth. A task force of the Minnesota Department of Health recommended that teachers and other AIDS educators of young people ensure that students “see and hear images of gay and lesbian teenagers that are nonprejudicial” as part of a prevention plan focused on gay adolescents.

Perhaps most notable has been the development of two key educational programs focused on meeting the special needs of some gay and lesbian youth. These

programs—in Los Angeles and New York City—though different in essential ways, share a commitment to keeping gay and lesbian youth within a public system of education. Formed primarily by lesbians and gay men already involved in public education or youth services, Project 10 in Los Angeles and the Harvey Milk School in Manhattan offer two models of educational programs centered on the needs of gay and lesbian teenagers.

### Project 10

Project 10 is run by the Los Angeles Unified School District. It began as a program designed to prevent gay and lesbian youth from dropping out of Fairfax High School. A high school teacher, Virginia Uribe, began the program in 1985 after years of observing the school's failure to serve the educational needs of students who self-identify as gay or lesbian or who express conflicts over sexual orientation. The project has evolved into a general counseling and educational vehicle for both gay and non-gay students and faculty.

Uribe developed the Project 10 model in a manner that acknowledges that different schools within her district will have different needs for programs serving gay and lesbian youth. This flexible model has four components: education, school safety, drop-out prevention strategies, and support services. The program is coordinated by Uribe, who teaches classes during the first two periods of the school day and uses the remainder of the day for Project 10 activities.

Educational components of the project include a speakers' bureau that brings gay and lesbian youth and adults into schools throughout Los Angeles, training and consciousness-raising for school staff members, and the expansion of school libraries to include positive materials on homosexuality accessible to teenagers. Project 10 also provides specific training for teachers on methods of recognizing and responding to harassment of gay and lesbian students, and has created a model back-up system that allows anti-gay incidents to be quickly reported and responded to by school authorities.

A key component of the Project 10 model involves counseling of gay and lesbian youth and of those struggling with issues of sexual orientation. Uribe facilitates informal rap groups, offers drop-in counseling, and has created a peer counseling program. Existing school programs that focused on substance abuse, suicide, and depression have been evaluated and updated to include the experiences and needs of gay and lesbian youth.

Uribe currently serves between two and three hundred youth annually. Seventy percent of the gay-identified teenagers in her school have been young men. She hopes to expand Project 10 throughout the school district, first by designating regional coordinators, and then by establishing resource centers throughout the district run by trained staff members. Project 10 has been the focus of much recent publicity throughout California. Fundamentalists have organized conservative state legislators to sponsor a bill that would cripple programs such as Project 10 by requiring schools not only to obtain parental consent for classroom discussions of homosexuality, AIDS, abortion, and other sex-related topics, but to verify parents' permission. On the positive side, the California Democratic Party recently adopted a motion at its annual state convention, stating that the party "does here-

by join the growing list of professional and civic bodies which believe that all persons regardless of sexual orientation should be afforded equal opportunity within the public educational system. We resolve that every school district in California should provide counseling for students who are struggling with their sexual/gender orientation based on the Project 10 model." Similar endorsements of the project have come from the Los Angeles City Council and the National Education Association.

Critical to the success of Project 10 has been the strength of social service organizations in Los Angeles serving the needs of gay and lesbian youth. The Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Community Services Center has a Youth Services Department staffed by about twenty employees. The department offers seven weekly rap groups for youth throughout Los Angeles County, as well as a Youth Talkline that allows isolated gay and lesbian youth to reach out to their peers several evenings a week. The Center also operates an emergency shelter for youth and AIDS prevention programs, and provides emergency clothing, food vouchers, and case management. In addition, another organization, Gay and Lesbian Adolescent Social Services, provides two long-term residences for gay and lesbian youth, as well as a foster care placement service focused on these young people. Gay-sensitive job training, mental health, and medical services are also available to gay and lesbian youth in Los Angeles.

Uribe counts many students among her successes. Project 10 allows gay and lesbian youth to continue within the mainstream of public education in Los Angeles. She describes one young man who transferred to her school from another high school because he was being harassed due to peer assumptions that he was gay. Charlie stopped going to school and began to abuse alcohol and marijuana. His supportive father suggested he go to a therapist, who referred Charlie to Fairfax High School and Project 10. Uribe saw to it that Charlie was assigned a trained guidance counselor sensitive to gay issues and worked to see that any harassment of Charlie was confronted by teachers and other staff members. When Charlie was repeatedly attacked both verbally and physically by a classmate, the harassing student was first reprimanded, then suspended, and finally transferred to another school. As Charlie found support in his new school, his self-confidence increased. He managed to graduate from Fairfax High School and was selected to be class speaker at graduation. During his speech at the Hollywood Bowl, Uribe listened proudly as Charlie credited Project 10 with his success. He is currently in college and off drugs and alcohol.

Project 10 has begun to be considered as a model by other cities. Uribe has had inquiries from places as diverse as Roanoke, Virginia, and San Diego, California. She has assisted other school districts in creating quiet peer-support groups for gay and lesbian youth, and she has trained hundreds of teachers in responding to anti-gay slurs in the classroom. Her commitment has been to designing a program that provides the advocacy and support services that allow a gay or lesbian youth to remain in the local high school and that force non-gay peers and staff members to confront their homophobia. While she readily admits that her model might not work everywhere, she sees it as flexible and responsive to local community needs, and she believes its key components of education, counseling, and support services are critical to gay youth programs within the schools.

## The Harvey Milk School

Named after the assassinated openly gay San Francisco supervisor, the Harvey Milk School opened in New York in 1985 as part of a larger organization originally called The Institute for the Protection of Gay and Lesbian Youth. The Institute, recently renamed The Hetrick-Martin Institute in honor of the group's co-founders, Dr. A. Damien Martin and Emery Hetrick, currently has a budget over one million dollars, employs twenty-six staff members, and functions as a social-service agency with an interdisciplinary approach.

The school was founded because youth advocates working with gay and lesbian youth found that many homosexual young people were not succeeding in the New York City public schools. Many young people—especially those who were cross dressers, or young men who were effeminate, or young women who were “too butch” (tough, independent, and “masculine”)—found their peers hostile, often to the point of violence. For gay youth who could “pass” and remain undetected in the school system, advocates found that the hiding process robbed students of much of their energy and vitality. Whether lesbian and gay youth were open about their identities or were closeted, societal prejudice took its toll; young gay people were often antisocial, alcohol- and drug-abusing, and/or depressed to the point of suicide.

A group of gay and lesbian youth advocates noted these difficulties and drafted a proposal to the Board of Education for an off-site alternative school. It was clear to the founders that some gay and lesbian youth could survive in the public schools, but it was also apparent that many youth were terminating their formal education because they felt unsafe or alienated in the school system. There was little public interest in the project when the school opened its doors, but, in June, 1985, after the *New York Times* placed a story about the school on the front page, the media swiftly beat a path to their door. Students and staff members alike faced cameras, microphones, and careful scrutiny by editorial writers nationwide.

Immediately the concept of a “gay high school” was challenged not only in the media, but also by certain members of the gay and lesbian community. Was the Harvey Milk School “ghettoizing” gay and lesbian youth? (The gay and lesbian community has long debated the pros and cons of separating ourselves from mainstream culture or integrating into it. The “gay ghetto”—an urban neighborhood with a substantial, visible gay and lesbian community—is a subject of continuing community debate.) Was it appropriate to take these young people away from their non-gay peers? What was the school attempting to accomplish?

Alternative high schools in New York City generally serve as transitional programs and attempt to mainstream young people back into society and traditional schools. At the Harvey Milk School, most of the students learn coping skills, such as how to deal with the homophobia of others while focusing on one's own educational needs. Counselors and teachers assist students in acquiring these skills, primarily through focus groups, individual counseling, peer counseling, and role playing. The aim is frequently to process the nightmares these young people have endured in the past and build confidence in facing the future.

Most of the young people at the Hetrick-Martin Institute—and at the Harvey Milk School—are between fifteen and seventeen, although youth have ranged

from twelve to twenty-two. Students experience a traditional academic curriculum, but are also provided with substantial social services. Students come from a wide range of backgrounds, and most parents generally appear to approve of their child's placement in the program—often they are simply relieved that their child is back in school. Many families take advantage of the Institute's family-counseling program.

There is no requirement regarding one's sexual orientation for a student to enroll at the school. Most young people find their way to the Harvey Milk School through referrals or from the criminal or family court system. Despite the arguments that this school might "ghettoize" gay youth, very little formal work has been done within the New York City School System to provide in-school services to gay and lesbian youth. Hence many gay and lesbian youth, simply refusing to deny their identities, find few alternatives outside of the Harvey Milk School. The school currently serves about twenty-four youth, with an additional two hundred served in some of the Institute's other programs, including Project First Step, a street outreach program for street kids. The Institute also offers a support group for HIV-positive youth and assists young people diagnosed with AIDS.

### The Future of Educational Programs for Gay and Lesbian Youth

As someone who has worked with gay and lesbian youth for over a decade, it is clear to me that neither our school districts nor the gay and lesbian community have made significant progress in addressing the educational and social service needs of these young people. Several factors seem to serve as barriers to the development of services to meet the needs of gay and lesbian youth, including a lack of courage from adults of all sexual orientations, a lack of information available to the public about the needs of these young people, and the failure of school systems to confront controversial matters, especially in the area of youth sexuality.

The criticism faced by the Harvey Milk School provides a good starting point for evaluating an appropriate response to the needs of gay and lesbian youth. If by removing these youth from the mainstream we are placing them in an artificially supportive environment, what are educational administrators doing to change the homophobic atmosphere in our public schools? Can we guarantee safety for openly gay youth in most of our schools throughout the United States?

In a fascinating essay, "Gay Youth and the Right to Education," in the *Yale Law and Policy Review*, Donna I. Dennis and Ruth E. Harlow argue that the Harvey Milk School "presents an unacceptable solution for the education of gay youth because it does not have the resources to provide gay students with the quality of education that heterosexual students receive in regular schools."<sup>1</sup> The authors note that "Courts have recognized that segregation of children on the basis of characteristics that the dominant group regards as inferior inflicts serious, possibly irreparable injury on the segregated children" (p. 454). They go on to cite *Brown v. Board of Education* in arguing for a program designed to mainstream gay and lesbian youth into our schools, and insist that a legal strategy might be the best route to take in making educational services available to gay and lesbian youth:

<sup>1</sup>*Yale Law and Policy Review*, 4 (1986), pp. 445–455.

We propose a litigation strategy based on state constitutions to enforce gay students' right to an equal, integrated education. Advocates for gay youth should sue, in state courts, school districts that abridge gay teenagers' educational opportunities. We urge judges to protect the right to education articulated in state constitutions by enjoining such discriminatory school practices as harassment of gay youth by teachers, the uneven enforcement of disciplinary rules, and censorship of texts of library books that show tolerance toward gay persons. In addition, judges should require school districts exhibiting pervasive discrimination to institute programs that will abate homophobia in the schools and repair the harm done by past discrimination. (p. 454)

While legal advocacy groups have yet to take up these strategies, significant work has started in random districts throughout the nation in addressing the social and educational needs of gay and lesbian youth. Often operating in complete isolation, sympathetic educators, counselors, administrators, and school nurses are leading the way by quietly making changes in the educational opportunities for gay and lesbian youth. One suburban Massachusetts school district offered a weekly support group for gay youth, but refused to acknowledge the existence of the group when a journalist called seeking information. Are these small efforts able to make an impact when their existence remains unpublicized due to fear of public reaction?

There are several things that will need to change if U.S. schools are to become truly accessible to self-identified gay and lesbian youth:

—Schools are going to have to focus on the needs of young people rather than on the demands of parents or the larger community. Rarely will a program for gay and lesbian youth receive widespread public support, particularly outside urban centers such as Los Angeles or New York City. When schools return to a focus of student-centered curricula, gay and lesbian youth will stand a chance of receiving appropriate attention.

—Issues of sexuality must move from the taboo into a public forum. It will be impossible to adequately serve the educational needs of this specific population without acknowledging the role that sexuality has had in forming the identity and culture of gay men and lesbians. During a time when schools rarely provide sex education and face pressure from certain church groups to avoid discussions of birth control, abortion, or sexuality outside of marriage, it seems unlikely that schools will comfortably move towards open discussion of homosexuality. Yet, particularly in the age of AIDS, education concerning sexual safety for young gay men should be a key part of curricula developed for this group of students.

—Teachers will need to be comfortable with gay and lesbian issues. This will not only require rigorous training, but also courageous educational leadership. Because many educators believe that homosexuality is sick, sinful, or criminal, it is tremendously difficult for them to truly adopt an "objective" stance when addressing gay and lesbian issues in the classroom. The situation is exacerbated by the tension teachers have faced for years concerning discussions of homosexuality: by allowing positive treatment of homosexuality in the classroom, teachers are vulnerable to witch-hunts by parents and school committees attempting to root out homosexual teachers. In certain parts of the nation, laws have been proposed and successfully passed that forbid positive discussion of homosexuality in public school classrooms.

— School curricula will need to be integrated to include the historical contributions of gay men and lesbians, as well as literature that reflects the experiences and culture of lesbian and gay writers. While homosexual women and men are included in current high school classes—people such as Walt Whitman, Gertrude Stein, James Baldwin, and Adrienne Rich—rarely do teachers discuss the contribution of these individuals in the context of their true lives as gay people. This “de-gaying” of U.S. literary and historical figures sends a message of shame and denial to lesbian and gay youth and is a missed opportunity to provide historical role models for our youth.

— Educators must abandon the concept that by discussing homosexuality in a positive way, they will cause young people to grow up to be gay or lesbian. Until we get beyond thinking that all our youth are heterosexual and some only appear to be gay because they are “stuck” in an “immature phase of social development,” teachers will hinder the natural development of gay and lesbian young people and will rob them of their healthy adolescent experiences. Perhaps one of the saddest aspects of what our culture does to gay and lesbian youth is that a period of life that could be filled with the discovery of one’s own identity in a positive and growth-filled way becomes mired in shame, denial, and self-hatred.

We are finally left to wonder, “Who will initiate the changes necessary in U.S. schools to make them more responsive to the needs of gay and lesbian youth?” The answer does not come easily. Neither gay and lesbian adults nor non-gay adults have proven themselves particularly ready to take leadership in moving schools towards a more progressive approach to educating this population.

Yet, particularly when we look at statistics regarding the spread of the HIV infection into the youth population, it is difficult to deny that the time to confront these issues is now. Many AIDS experts see young people as the third wave of individuals affected by HIV—following adult gay men and IV drug users. While it is certainly true that youth are increasingly infected with HIV due to drug use and heterosexual sexual activity, it is difficult to deny that the population of youth most at risk for AIDS has been—and continues to be—young men who are sexually active with other men.

Many of these teens do not identify as gay or bisexual and do not see themselves as especially vulnerable to AIDS or any other life-threatening illness. Reaching this population with effective AIDS prevention information has been difficult and problematic. The key element that has proven most helpful in educating gay men and IV drug users—introducing peers who have AIDS and who can discuss risk factors in becoming infected with HIV—is especially difficult to do with youth, primarily due to the long time period between exposure to HIV and development of AIDS. Many people who are developing AIDS in their early twenties were exposed during their teenage years; yet few fifteen-year-olds are able to identify with a twenty-four-year-old man with AIDS. The generation gap is just wide enough to prevent identification and to continue to foster denial. We need to find other ways to reach youth with information and get them to put that information into action to protect themselves. Since we have found limited success in the area of pregnancy prevention or substance-abuse prevention, many youth-AIDS educators see their task as particularly difficult.

And yet AIDS education will prove totally fruitless if young gay men do not have enough self-esteem and enough sense of their identities as gay men to make the effort to protect themselves. As we approach the 1990s, it is clear that we no longer have the luxury of ignoring our gay and lesbian youth; continued denial of the existence of this population will result in a devastating spread of infection with HIV. Many of us failed to respond when we heard that gay and lesbian youth were disproportionately at risk for suicide, homelessness, assault, and sexual abuse. Can we continue our pattern of averting our eyes from the tremendous threats to the lives of these children, or will we find the courage and commitment to educate and serve this special group of young people?

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