

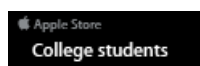
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SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS ARTICLE

Are Schools Doing Enough to Support Gay Students?

Could Matthew Shepard's murder have been prevented by education in our schools? Should school curricula put the spotlight on gay heroes as it does on famous black Americans or great women in history? Are schools doing enough to support gay teens? Those are among the questions that educators are grappling with in the days following the brutal slaying in Wyoming. Recent court decisions might help educators as they attempt to do the right thing for their students and communities.



Was the brutal slaying this month of college student Matthew Shepard preventable? Was it a crime condoned by a society that -- subtly or not-so-subtly -- reinforces or legitimizes anti-gay and -lesbian attitudes? Was it a crime that could have been prevented by education in the schools?

"What happened to Matthew is a magnification of the sort of hate that is normalized and goes on in our schools and our society, without consequence or rebuke, every day," says John Spear, national field director for the [Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network](#) (GLSEN). "It's critical that we let our schools and teachers in our communities know that there are things that they can do to make a difference."

Talking about the Matthew Shepard murder is one of those "things."

"Approach this as you would any pertinent current events issue and allow your students to share what they know, and to discuss their feelings," adds Spear.

In the days after the murder, GLSEN posed a series of questions worth discussing and writing about in the classroom setting:

- What in our society perpetuates the attitudes that make this violence occur?
- Do you think it made a difference that Shepard's murderers knew he was gay?

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- Did Shepard do anything wrong? Do you think Shepard should have kept secret the fact that he was gay? (Do you have any secrets about yourself that you choose to keep hidden?)
- Have you ever hurt anybody -- physically or verbally -- for being different?
- Have you ever used homophobic language -- even if you were only kidding? Did the people around you know that you were just kidding?
- Where and how might Shepard's murderers have learned that it was okay to hurt someone?
- How about the girlfriends of the murderers? Have you ever stood by and watched someone be harassed or insulted or hurt? Why didn't you (or the girlfriends) get involved?
- What kind of message does your community send out about gay people? How could that message be changed?

"This is a hot topic that is worth of discussion in *all* our schools, at *all* grade levels!" one teacher stated on a recent listserv posting. "The 'seeds of bigotry' are sown early in life, and we must try and reach as many young minds as we can before they become any further contaminated."

"As they say, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out a major component of solutions to these nightmarish scenarios," states Robert Lupo in a letter to the editor of the Miami Herald. "To reduce these horrific behaviors, schools must teach respect for all... [Education] can make the world a safe place for all, and lessen the chances that brutal savagery as witnessed in Wyoming will occur."

A MOTHER SPEAKS OUT

"My name is Leslie Sadasivan. I am a nurse, a Catholic, and the mother of a gay son, Robbie Kirkland."

So began [Sadasivan's story](#), told last month at the Back to School News Conference sponsored by GLSEN.

"By the time Robbie knew he was gay, at age 10, he was already aware of society's hatred of people like him," Sadasivan continued. "...When my family and I realized that Robbie was gay we let him know immediately that we loved, supported, and accepted him. After all, we had raised him to believe that God loves and accepts everyone despite their differences... But our efforts could not protect him from the rejection and harassment he experienced..."

Robbie Kirkland made his first suicide attempt when he was in the eighth grade. His suicide note began "Whatever you find, I'm not gay" and ended "Robbie Kirkland, the boy who told himself to put on a smile, shut up, and pretend you're happy. It didn't work."

In spite of a family that rallied to support him after that attempt at suicide, the harassment continued.

"Robbie shot himself in the head on January 2, 1997," Sadasivan told the audience, "four months into his ninth grade year. It was the end of Christmas break. He was fourteen, and

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was found by my nineteen-year-old daughter, Danielle. I believe his timing to be intentional so that he could avoid the pain of returning to school."

[Basics](#)

Since Robbie's death, Sadasivan has told his story to anyone who would listen, "in the hope of bringing some good from this tragedy."

IT'S NOT PRETTY!

"On the evening of Labor Day for 25 years I'd get a little nauseous," recalls Kevin Jennings. "My Mom nicknamed this my 'funny feeling' and I always got it on Labor Day because the next morning school would start."

"My funny feeling was brought on by the anxiety I felt about going back to school -- an anxiety which was not unique to me..." says Jennings. "But my funny feeling was heightened as a teenager when I realize I was gay and when other kids started calling me faggot. Whereas the end of summer meant simply a return to the grind of homework during elementary school, it came to mean the return to a place of terror in high school, a place where I could count on harassment and isolation as being part of my normal school day."

Today, Jennings is the executive director of GLSEN, and he shared his "funny feeling" at the press conference held to release the results of the [1998 GLSEN Back to School Report Card](#). The results, said Jennings, "are not pretty."

In a survey of the nation's 42 largest school districts, attended by approximately five and a half million students (or nearly 10 percent of all students in school in America), we have precious little evidence that school districts care at all about what happens to gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered (GLBT) students, says Jennings. Nearly half of the districts receive a failing grade because "they do not have a single policy or program in place to protect the rights of GLBT students."

Jennings pointed to additional statistics that support GLSEN's findings:

- The Minnesota Attorney General's 1998 "Safe Schools" report cited GLBT students as the most frequent victims of harassment in the state's schools.
- The Massachusetts Department of Education reported that one in five GLBT students skips school at least once a month because they feel unsafe there (which is five times the rate of non-GLBT students).
- The Seattle public school districts found that one in six GLBT students would be attacked and physically injured so badly at some point in their high school careers that they'd have to see a doctor.

"When students are confronted with such harassment and bigotry, and authority figures remain silent, they learn too well the lesson that they are literally worth less than their peers -- as Robbie [Kirkland] did -- and often with equally tragic consequences," said Jennings.

EIGHT DISTRICTS GET A'S

Eight U.S. school districts received the highest grade of "A" in GLSEN's Back to School Report Card. Schools in Boston, Denver, Los Angeles, Miami, Philadelphia, San Diego, San Francisco, and Seattle were recognized with GLSEN's high

mark. More than twenty of the 42 large U.S. school districts received failing grades.

School administrators in Miami-Dade County were honored for developing a board policy that forbids discrimination against gay and lesbian students and teachers; for providing awareness training for teachers; and for providing counseling and clubs for gay and lesbian students.

"Our big issue is safety," Edda Cimino, a retired Dade teacher who co-chairs the South Florida Chapter of GLSEN, said in a [Miami Herald news story \(9/10/98\)](#). "These students have a right to learn in a safe environment. If they don't feel safe, they won't learn."

About 300 to 400 of Dade's 83,000 high school students are openly gay, according to GLSEN estimates published in the Herald. Guidance counselors at 22 of the 31 high schools in Dade offered support last year for gay and lesbian students, said Cimino. Five high schools had clubs for their students.

But the schools have a long way to go, adds Cimino. Currently, training is voluntary for teachers and security personnel. GLSEN wants the training to be mandatory.

"Everything is relative," Cimino told the Herald. "If you're going to put it on a normal scale of what we should have, we're a D-. But when we're compared to what's going on in other school districts, we're an A."

"MAKING HEADWAY!"

Schools in other parts of the country are making progress too.

"I think we are making headway," Patricia Terrell told Education World. Terrell is a high-school special education teacher and a trainer in the California Teachers Association's "Gay and Lesbian Youth: Breaking the Silence" program. The program provides tips and strategies for caring people to put in place in their classrooms or schools.

"Put-downs and name-calling are actions which are increasingly frowned on in schools," says Terrell. "Sexually explicit names as well as homophobic slurs are being discouraged, but I fear the specter of lawsuits contributes to this rather than a genuine acceptance or tolerance of sexual minority youth."

"Educators who come to our workshops do so entirely by choice," she adds. "As such, we often find we are 'preaching to the choir.'"

Terrell tells of several successful programs, including Project 10 at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles. That project provides dropout prevention support targeted at gay, lesbian and bisexual youth. Another school program, Eagle Pride, is an alternative school sponsored by the Los Angeles city schools and located in the former Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center. Eagle Pride was featured in a video, "Setting the Record Straight."

"ADULTS ARE NOT STANDING UP FOR KIDS"

Gay and lesbian students need adults to stand up for them, says Beth Reis, public-health liaison to the Safe School Coalition of Washington (State) and author of a report released by the Coalition.

Adults have even participated in the harassment of some students thought to be homosexual, adds Reis.

The Safe Schools Coalition's report documents 91 incidents of anti-gay harassment, abuse, or assault in 30 school districts statewide, according to a [Seattle Times report \(11/12/97\)](#). Seventy-four of those incidents targeted teens or children. There were 19 physical assaults. Adults witnessed about one-fourth of those incidents, but took action in only half of them. Among the incidents documented by the Times:

- "A teacher challenged a boy labeled as gay for giving blood. The boy later was badly beaten, and when he reported it to a vice principal, the administrator quizzed him on his sexuality and offered little help.
- "A principal was reported to have said to a young man, "Homosexuality is wrong... If you ever get hurt, I'm not going to help you because it's your fault.
- "A principal asked a guest speaker to leave the school after the speaker, who was HIV positive, revealed that he was gay."

The Safe School Coalition's report of the statewide survey, the [Safe Schools Anti-Violence Documentation Project](#), included students responses to questions about the effects of gay/straight alliances and other gay-related clubs. Among the responses were these:

- "Having a group at school makes school a safer place for gay/lesbian youth;
- "Having a support group helps me stay in school; and
- "Youth involved in the support groups are less likely to attempt or commit suicide."

HOW SHOULD SCHOOLS RESPOND?

More and more GBLT teens are being open about their orientations. While that might be a good thing, it has also created "a more visible problem," Linda Shevitz, a Maryland education official who monitors discrimination issues, said in a [Washington Post news report](#).

"In trying to prevent and respond to harassment," the report continues, "school officials are confronting a problem not even acknowledged a decade ago... Harassment laws are in flux, attitudes among parents vary widely, and there is no consensus about how schools should respond to openly gay students."

If a racial slur is used to address somebody, "usually the staff know what to do," Oliver Lancaster, head of human relations for Montgomery County (Maryland) schools, told the Post. "But that has not been the case with words related to homosexuals." And if anti-gay remarks aren't dealt with, students might quickly conclude that those remarks are acceptable.

Part of the problem is that when some school officials "think of homosexuality, they think of sex," Carol Dopp, counseling

director at the National Cathedral School in Washington, D.C., told the Post. And that's a sensitive issue. The training sessions Dopp leads focus instead on the issues of fear, self-hate, isolation, and depression that youths often deal with as they struggle with their gay identities.

THE WALT WHITMAN COMMUNITY SCHOOL

The [Walt Whitman Community School](#) in Dallas is a private high school dedicated to educating GLBT students. "There's a population of gay kids out there who may be happy and thriving, and there are some kids out there who are surviving by passing [as heterosexuals]" Becky Thompson, one of the school's founders, told the Houston Chronicle. "But there's another percentage who are not being tolerated, who are being picked on in a way that's so serious that they're afraid to walk the halls."

At her previous school, student Shawn Kymn was uncomfortable. "Every time you went to class, you'd stop outside, take a deep breath, and then pull the door open," she told the paper. "All the focus [at Walt Whitman] is on studying and getting ready for tests, not on sexuality."

But in its first weeks of operation in 1997, the school attracted strong criticism from conservative groups. Cathie Adams, president of the Texas Eagle Forum said the schools leaders should have a responsibility to steer young people away from homosexuality. "At the real heart of this is that some people believe that homosexuals are born," Adams told the Chronicle. "I disagree with that. I think it's a behavior, like one child might have a behavior where he's prone to tantrums."

A LIGHT ON THE HORIZON?

School officials in many communities are in a difficult situation. They must remain open to opinions on both sides the issue. But the results of at least two recent headline-making stories might lighten the load. They might make it easier for schools to develop programs that will support GLBT teens and educate others:

- In Ashland, Wisconsin, the school district was ordered to pay nearly a million dollars in damages to Jamie Nabozny. School administrators, the suit said, had ignored Nabozny's repeated pleas for help in putting an end to the harassment he was suffering at the hands of other students (and even school administrators).
- In Fayetteville, Arkansas, student William Wagner, endured the taunts of fellow classmates while he was a student in grades 8 to 10. His parents complained to school officials repeatedly. After Wagner was beaten by several students, his parents filed an official complaint noting that new Title IX guidelines prohibited sexual harassment directed at gay and lesbian students. In June, 1997, the superintendent of schools signed a "commitment to resolve" the complaint which stated the district would hold sexual harassment workshops for teachers and students; discipline any student who engaged in harassing behaviors; and report its progress to the Department of Education.

THE NEA TAKES A STAND

"Sexual harassment of gay students is illegal and will not be tolerated."

With those blunt words, National Education Association President Bob Chase reminded educators that they face "legal liability" when they do not protect sexual minority students.

"Having someone like Bob Chase take such a strong stance should send a clear and potent message to all schools that their sexual minority students are entitled to protection," said Sharon Miken, co-chair with Jim Testerman of the NEA Gay and Lesbian Caucus.

Chase noted the landmark decision on behalf of Jamie Nabozny and the "historic civil rights agreement" between the Department of Education and the Fayetteville school district.

"Hopefully, this message will be heeded and next year I will be able to say gay students are as safe in schools as other students," Chase concluded.

ADDITIONAL INTERNET RESOURCES OF INTEREST

- [GLSEN Blackboard](#) The official Web site of the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network. Founded in Boston in 1990 as a small volunteer group, GLSEN is now the largest national organization that brings together teachers, parents, students, and concerned citizens to work to end homophobia in our schools. Over a third of GLSEN members are non-gay, and an equal number work outside of schools. GLSEN's work focuses on three main areas: in-school programming (including the development of staff training materials), advocacy, and community organizing.
- [THE PERSON Project](#) PERSON is an acronym for Public Education Regarding Sexual Orientation Nationally. The group's focus is on providing proactive strategies to improve the treatment of GLBT persons in K-12 schools and ensuring that fair, accurate, and unbiased information regarding GLBT people and about the nature and diversity of sexual orientation is presented to America's youth as part of public school education. The site includes a handbook, the latest news from around the U.S., and a listserv that interested educators can join.
- ["Stop Student Sexual Harassment Now"](#) This online pamphlet from the NEA's Office for Civil Rights Title IX Guidance aims to help school officials act immediately to stop student sexual harassment and head off lawsuits that might result in the awarding of substantial money damages. The pamphlet provides practical advice on how to recognize student sexual harassment, what to do to stop it, and how to prevent it from occurring in the future.
- [NEA-GLC](#) This Web page provides information about the National Education Association's Gay and Lesbian Caucus.
- ["Out of the Past"](#) An announcement on the PERSON Project Web site about "Out of the Past, Into the

Future," a film that won the Audience Award at the 1998 Sundance Film Festival, and which will air on PBS this fall. The film chronicles 300 years of American lesbian and gay history. Includes a listing of airdates during October and November.

- [Gay Teens in Schools](#) The struggle for gay and lesbian tolerance is one of the most recent civil rights issues in this country, a struggle that impacts the lives of many of California's school children. Gay teens make up 30 percent of all teen suicides and 28 percent of gay students drop out of school. Fear of rejection keeps many of them from talking to their parents. CTA Quest (a weekly television program produced by the California Teacher's Association) takes a look at what those students go through and makes a plea for awareness that could save the lives of many teens. Story and transcript available on this site.
- [Safe Schools: Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Students](#) A description of a 28-minute video from the Massachusetts Department of Education provides information about the department's program for gay and lesbian students.
- [Teaching Respect for All... "It's Elementary"](#) A message posted to the NEA Web site provides some information about a film by Debra Chasnoff: "'It's Elementary' is a ground-breaking testament to appropriateness and positive effects of teaching about respect for people of all sexual orientations. Actual classroom lessons in grades from 1-8 are shown, which provide moving accounts of children's capacity to understand and respect differences in each other and in their families."
- [Gabi Clayton's Web Site](#) Clayton is a certified mental health counselor in Olympia, Washington, who is active in gay issues. One of her sons, Bill, was openly bisexual. He was assaulted in a hate crime in April, 1995, and committed suicide at age 17 in May of that year. This site was created in honor of Bill and includes "Bill's Story," excerpts from Clayton's journals, and a picture album of Bill.

RECENT NEWS ARTICLES WORTH A LOOK

- "Growing Up Gay" by Richard Jerome, *People* magazine, August 17, 1998.
- "To Be Young and Gay" by David Lipsky, *Rolling Stone* magazine, August 6, 1998.
- "Gay Student Battles Bashers" by Michael D. Simpson, *NEA Today*, October 1997.

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