

# The Boston Globe

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## GOING TO SCHOOL ON BIAS

### Gay, lesbian students live with harassment, assaults

By Diego Ribadeneira  
GLOBE STAFF

For Andrew Lavin, a senior at Catholic Memorial High School in West Roxbury, coming out to his classmates as gay has carried a harsh price.

"I had food thrown at me in the cafeteria and someone hit me in the back with a full can of Coke," said Lavin, 17.

Randy Driscoll, 18, an openly gay senior at Wareham High School, says he has

had male students blow kisses at him and has regularly been called a "faggot."

A recent report by the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force found that 45 percent of gay males and 25 percent of lesbians nationally had been victims of verbal or physical assaults in high school.

The cruelty that gay and lesbian students suffer can be so severe that it forces many to drop out of school or in some tragic cases, take their own lives, educa-

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### Debate heated over teaching children about homosexuals

By Anthony Flint  
GLOBE STAFF

It is a question that promises to ignite controversy across the country, and it is just now coming to the forefront: Should schools teach students about homosexuality and the lives and achievements of gays, and if so, when and how?

While advocated by some educators as a means of combating discrimination against homosexuals and teaching children the way the world really is, such a curricu-

lum frightens traditionalists who feel it sends a message of support for homosexuality that they do not agree with.

Like sex education, the issue of teaching about homosexuality leads to emotional questions about the roles of parents and government-run schools.

"The debate is going to be highly charged and volatile, and the consensus has not yet emerged," said Ernest Boyer, president of the Carnegie Foundation for

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## Going to school on bias against gays

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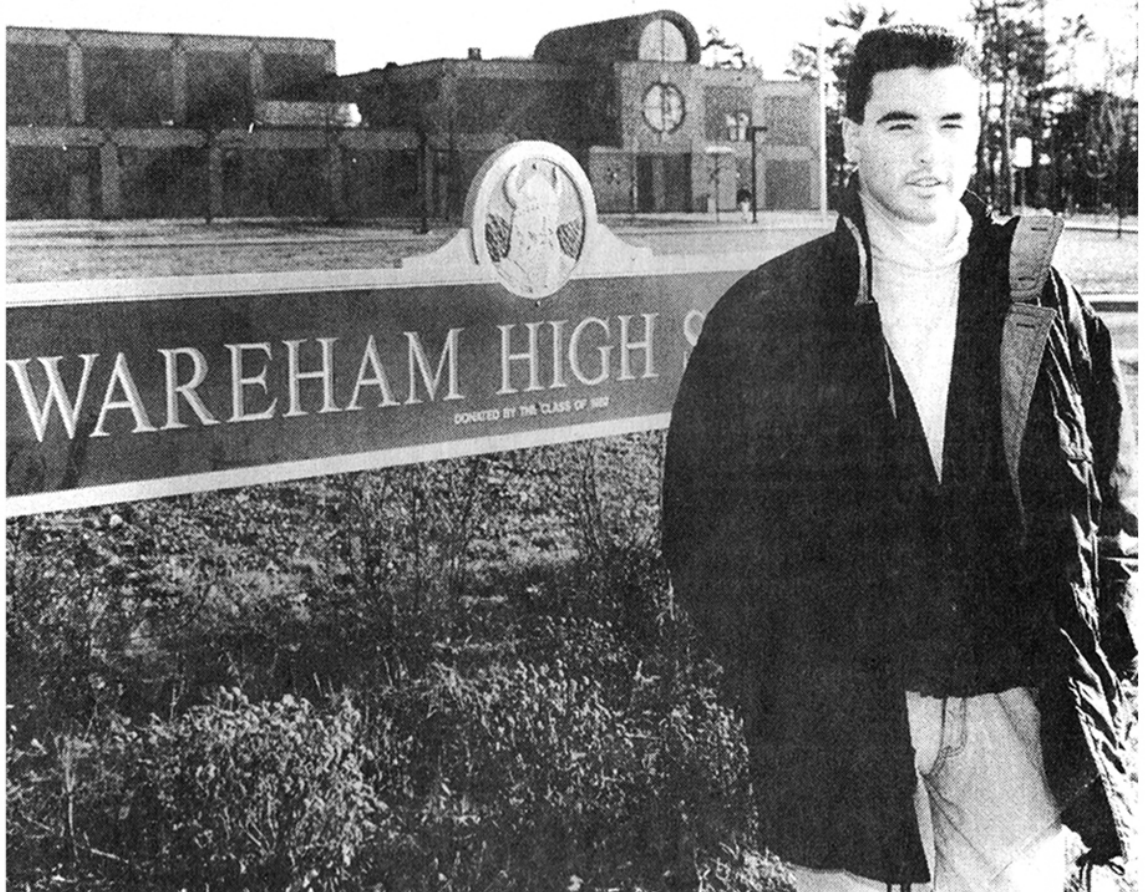
tors and gay activists say. Even when gay and lesbian students remain in school, the constant jeers of classmates create the kind of stress that affects their academic work and batters their self-esteem.

Such problems are the catalysts motivating the work of the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, the first such panel in the nation.

The formation of the commission has helped place Massachusetts in the vanguard of a national movement to foster greater tolerance in schools for gays and lesbians.

As the commission strives to find antidotes to what it perceives as the pernicious homophobic attitudes prevalent in society, panel members have targeted schools as the main arena where tolerance for gays and lesbians must first begin.

Some of the primary measures commission members are considering include sensitivity training for school staff, students and parents about homosexual concerns, requiring schools to include sexual orientation in their policies against bias and infusing curriculums with gay and lesbian issues.



RANDY DRISCOLL... Two years after coming out as gay, school remains a difficult place for him

GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / BILL GREFFI

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## Going to school on bias against gays

"One of the reasons I feel strongly about getting into schools is that the 90 percent of people in society who are straight are really going to make the difference in deciding whether gay people are accepted or rejected," said David LaFontaine, chairman of the commission on gay and lesbian and youth, which was appointed by Gov. Weld in February.

Schools in several communities, including Cambridge, Newton, Lincoln, Sudbury, Arlington and Quincy, are at various stages of developing programs to support gay and lesbian students. At Cambridge Rindge and Latin School and at Newton North and Newton South high schools, student-led groups have formed to provide support for gay and lesbian students as well as host forums to educate the school community on gay and lesbian issues. Such groups have made it easier, educators at the school say, for gay teachers and students to come out.

Part of the impetus for schools grappling with gay and lesbian topics, gay activists say, is that increasing numbers of homosexual students are "coming out" at younger ages.

"The younger generation is not as intimidated as earlier generations were in acknowledging who they are," said Kevin Jennings, a history teacher at Concord Academy who is gay. "Every school is going to have to deal with this. The question is whether this will be a productive or a painful process."

Two years after he came out, school remains a difficult place for Driscoll. "The other day, three girls came up to me and asked me if I wanted a girlfriend and I said no; they asked me why not and I just said I wasn't interested," he said.

"They know I'm gay so when they ask me these questions they're just trying to harass me.

For Lavin, the situation at Catholic Memorial has improved slightly. The school's administration responded to the harassment he experienced by informing student leaders that such behavior would not be tolerated. These days, Lavin said some students refer to him as gay instead of using much more derogatory terms as they had in the past.

Gay activists and educators acknowledge that trying to advocate statewide for broad-based measures such as curriculum changes creates the potential for controversy.

They point to the brouhaha that has erupted in New York because a school board in a conservative Queens neighborhood has refused to adopt a diversity curriculum in which one page is devoted to gay and lesbian lifestyles or propose an alternative that also fostered an appreciation of gays. Some parents suggested it was inappropriate to teach such topics in elementary school, while others objected to treating homosexuality as a normal part of life.

"I think that there would be some communities that would be receptive to dealing with gay and lesbian issues but I think there would be others that would not be very receptive," said Paul Gorden, executive director of the Massachusetts Association of School Committees.

Members of Weld's commission would like schools to include gay and lesbian literature and sprinkle gay and lesbian examples across subject areas, a measure sure to be controversial. "If there is a math word problem that talks about Jack and Jill then why not talk about Jack and Bob?" Jennings said.

Some commission members won-

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KEVIN JENNINGS  
*Teacher, Concord Academy*

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der if Weld will follow through on the recommendations that the panel is expected to issue later this month or early next year. A spokeswoman for Weld said the governor would await the commission's work before commenting.

Gay activists and some educators argue that if schools are dedicated to the notion that all students deserve a quality education, then they must be willing to respond to the plight of gay and lesbian students.

"We're supposed to be in the business of keeping kids in school and here we are systematically driving kids out of school," said Virginia Uribe, founder and coordinator of Project 10, a support and dropout prevention program for gay and lesbian students in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Peter Sack, principal of Swampscott High School, where students and staff have taken an active stance against all types of bias, said, "The most important thing we can do is stress that each kid has a sense of dignity and worth."

Uribe and others suggested that teachers should be sure to challenge derogatory terms used against gay

students by their peers. But Joyce Hunter, cofounder of the Harvey Milk School in Manhattan, the nation's only school for gay and lesbian students, said teachers may refrain because "they are afraid of being seen as either promoting homosexuality or contributing to the delinquency of a minor."

Changes in curriculum that would include discussions of gay and lesbian issues are crucial to combating intolerance because they serve to validate gays and lesbians as a natural and legitimate community in American society, gay activists and educators said.

"By understanding the gay and lesbian experience, there will be less fear, misunderstanding and hatred," said Arthur Lipkin, a research associate at the Harvard Graduate School of Education who has written several curriculums on gay and lesbian issues, piloted at Cambridge Rindge and Latin School.

One Rindge and Latin School senior wrote in an evaluation of such a course that he "used to think" homosexuals "were not regular people so they should all get eliminated from our society. But now I have a different perspective . . . People should not be discriminated against no matter what."

Convincing schools to incorporate gay and lesbian issues into their curriculums and programs will not be easy, said Frances Kunreuther, executive director of the Hetrick-Martin Institute, a social service agency for gay and lesbian youths in New York.

"This is not the first issue this country has faced that has been emotional," Kunreuther said. "I expect it to be painful. But fortunately in this country, we just don't protect the majority."

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## Reaching consensus on teaching about homosexuality isn't easy

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the Advancement of Teaching. "The consensus will be different from one region to another. It's like abortion - there are the same kind of battle lines, about who's to be the moral arbiter.

"We may find a way to acknowledge individual differences and still draw the line and say, 'This is a preference, a practice, perhaps even a genetically established inclination that I can't endorse personally, but I still respect you as a human being,'" Boyer said.

"That's a very tough call for the schools. But schools have never been able to go too far beyond the community consensus of people want the schools to teach."

Consensus does not seem at hand. Angry parents in Queens rose up in revolt recently against a proposed multicultural curriculum "Children of the Rainbow" for first graders that included on a suggested reading list two books on gay and lesbian parents, "Heather Has Two Mommies" and "Daddy's Roommate." The books were part of a lesson teaching respect for homosexual parents.

Boston University president John Silber, speaking at a forum in New York while the curriculum debate raged, spoke out against what he termed gay activist "bullies" who try to "force their sexual lifestyles down everybody's throats."

In an interview, Silber said he thought the New York curriculum was "outrageous," and that "the state and institutions are very wise to leave these issues to the individual." It is a point that many conservatives stress.

"Anytime we have something difficult to solve we look to the schools to solve it. But they're just not that powerful as social institutions, and they're not that good as behavior modifiers, either," said Chester E. Finn Jr., a former aide to William Bennett, education secretary under President Ronald Reagan, and now with Whittle Communications.

"It's like teaching about drug abuse, or the threat of the hole in the ozone layer: These are difficult matters that adults worry about, but I'm not sure that any of them has a very large place in the school curriculum, at least not at the elementary and secondary level," Finn said.

Silber and others, however, take the issue a step further: they suggest that if homosexuality is presented to young children in totally neutral terms, the schools could end up promoting homosexuality.

A similar argument was put forth by E.L. Pattullo, former director of the Center for the Behavioral Sciences at Harvard University, in an article in this month's issue of Commentary magazine.

"Young waverers," as Pattullo calls impressionable young children in schools, "who until now have been raised in an environment overwhelmingly biased toward heterosexuality, might succumb to the temptations of homosexuality in a social climate that was entirely evenhanded in its treatment of the two orientations."

Utter nonsense, gay advocates say. "I don't think heterosexuality is as fragile as people think it is," said Josephine Ross, executive director of the Gay and Lesbian Advocates and Defenders in Boston. "I disagree with the notion the people will be flocking to give up their opposite-sex attraction simply because being gay no longer has a stigma."

Ross and others say that teaching about homosexuality in schools has support for very basic reasons: Young children should be taught about the way the world is, and more important, that gay people should be treated with respect and fairness, and not discriminated against or harassed - that is, they should be treated as one more group in the rainbow of humanity, alongside whites, blacks, Hispanics, Asians and so forth.

"It should be part of the same package," Ross said.

"We need to create an atmosphere in the schools where everybody is treated with respect," said Charlotte Patterson, associate professor of psychology at the University of Virginia. "The task of the schools is not to advocate but to educate. Kids should learn there are Jews and Catholics as well as Protestants and that there are gay and lesbian parents as well as heterosexual parents."

Patterson, who recently completed a study about the children of lesbian parents, said children are likely to find out about homosexuality regardless of whether it is taught in the schools - so the schools might as well try to provide the information.

But beyond the issue of teaching that there are homosexuals is the question of the achievements of gay people, and whether they warrant special attention in the curriculum. These decisions are supercharged because of the implications they have in society.

Ross, for example, said that the schools "have an obligation to teach the truth: that there were many gay people in history who have contributed to the world today," from Alexander the Great to James Baldwin... The silence about the sexual orientation of these figures "allows the hatred to go unchecked."

Dinesh D'Souza, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington and author of "Illiberal Education," a conservative critique of the multicultural curriculum, said the "outing of homosexual figures throughout history" is of questionable scholarly relevance.

The tendency to analyze homosexual figures from history in this way, D'Souza said, reflects how teaching about homosexuality can evolve "from being a fact to an ideology... A lot of parents fear that what is being taught is not tolerance but a new form of indoctrination, that is masquerading as tolerance.

"There's a public suspicion that homosexual activists are moving in a three-step maneuver - first demanding tolerance, then demanding neutrality, and then demanding subsidy."

But supporters of teaching about homosexuality see no such conspiracy taking place. The goal of the schools should be to teach respect for different groups, they say, and to put an end to ignorance and gay-bashing.

"As educators, we've waited too long to respond to the reality of social structures," said Benjamin Ladner, president of the National Faculty, a national organization that seeks to improve teaching using university arts and science professors. "We have a moral obligation to provide understanding to children about the way things are.

"We can do it - in collaboration with the neighborhoods and communities the children live in," Ladner said. "But it's our task to provide a base of understanding. We need to own up to this issue."