

INTRODUCTION

Beyond “Safe” Schools

Educating the Next Generation of LGBTQ Students

An education that creates silence is not an education.

—Roger Simon¹

FOR CENTURIES American educators, philosophers, educational historians, researchers, and policy makers have grappled with and debated the most fundamental question of all about public schooling in the United States: *What is it for?* To what ideal should it aspire? Do children attend school so that they can become active, engaged participants in our democracy? To develop the knowledge and skills needed to assume a satisfying vocation? To learn how to use their minds well and grapple with complex intellectual questions?

At a practical level, these ideals are not mutually exclusive—few educators aspire to one and only one—and certainly many other theories and philosophies about the primary reasons we send children to school exist in addition to those discussed here. It is beyond the scope of this book to address this far-reaching question, regardless of how engaging or important it might be. Yet a common thread connecting all these goals is a focus on *optimal learning and development*—nurturing the knowledge and skills of children and adolescents so that they might achieve to their full potential, whatever one might think that highest level of achievement should look like or to what end it should lead.

2 Introduction

Few educators or philosophers of education would argue that schools' sole purpose is to keep children safe. Yet a particular subset of students in the United States—lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ)* students—are often served by their schools as if their mere safety were a sufficient objective in and of itself.² This book's purpose is to challenge the all-too-prevalent attitudes and practices that suggest “safe” schools are enough for LGBTQ students, and to articulate what it might look like to take public schools in the United States to the next level in their service to LGBTQ students and their treatment of LGBTQ issues. Fortunately, this vision need not emerge out of some utopian vision of the future. Today, right now, educators working in different parts of the country and in various capacities—as teachers, administrators, librarians, and counselors—realize aspects of this vision every day with their students. Their efforts illustrate not only that schools *should be* more than safe for LGBTQ students but that they *already are* in many respects, in a wide range of communities and contexts around the country, and that they therefore *can be* in many others.

“SAFE” SCHOOLS AND HOW WE GOT THERE

Safety is, of course, a basic prerequisite for schooling—children and adolescents need to feel and be safe at school in order to learn. The language of safety has therefore been central to programming in support of LGBTQ students throughout its often-contentious history over the last three decades.

* In discussions of the issues that affect LGBTQ students, language can be problematic. Before the 1990s, most studies about LGBTQ people referred only to lesbian (L) and gay (G) individuals, but researchers have become increasingly aware that bisexual (B) people are a distinct group with specific concerns. More recent research also has recognized the special issues that affect transgender (T) individuals, those who do not conform to traditional man/woman or boy/girl gender norms in a variety of ways. (See chapter 5 for a more detailed discussion of transgender identity.) In addition, some individuals identify as queer (Q), a designation that implies a rejection of societal norms and/or labels associated with sexuality and gender. The Q in LGBTQ is also used to designate “questioning” here, referring to students who are unsure of their sexual orientation or gender identity. When citing sources that use different abbreviations such as “LGBT,” I use those abbreviations in the interest of accuracy.

The universal belief in the need for students to be safe at school was key to the arguments educators and activists made in the 1980s and early 1990s, when efforts to improve schools for LGBTQ (or, as was the focus at the time, gay and lesbian) youth were in their early stages. As these education advocates urgently and accurately pointed out, gay and lesbian students were being verbally and physically harassed on a daily basis at school, did not feel safe, and were suffering a host of academic, health, and mental health consequences because of it—conditions that persist in many school environments to this day.

In 1989, Massachusetts was the first state to tackle the issues affecting LGBTQ youth in schools and communities by establishing what was then called the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth.³ Although it was a tough sell in that era, even in relatively progressive Massachusetts, advocates succeeded at getting Republican governor William Weld to issue an executive order starting the Commission primarily by highlighting the public health epidemic of gay and lesbian youth suicide. National statistics at the time showed that about a third of adolescent suicides were by gay and lesbian young people, a crisis advocates argued could be addressed through community- and school-based programs that made these environments safer for gay and lesbian students.⁴

Eventually, the commission's work led to the nation's first state-funded programs to benefit gay and lesbian youth, and policy makers made the language of safety prominent in these initial efforts. Massachusetts' school-based program, first founded in 1993, was and continues to be called the Safe Schools Program. (It began as the Safe Schools Program for Gay and Lesbian Students, and the name was changed to the Safe Schools Program for LGBTQ Students in recent years.) Outside Massachusetts, other educators and activists used similar language in establishing some of the earliest programs focused on the needs of LGBTQ youth. Washington State's Safe Schools Coalition expanded from a Seattle-based group to a state-level program in 1993 to serve as a resource to educators who wanted to improve school environments for LGBTQ students. The Washington State coalition also provided (and continues to make available) research reports and other publications highlighting the issues affecting LGBTQ youth, which are used by educators, researchers, and

advocates around the state and elsewhere. To reflect this broader focus, the organization is now called simply the “Safe Schools Coalition.”⁵

In another example in which advocates have expressed the needs of LGBTQ students in terms of safety, in 2003 the New York City Department of Education, in cooperation with the Hetrick-Martin Institute (HMI), a social service agency dedicated to the needs of LGBTQ youth, expanded HMI’s Harvey Milk High School into the first four-year school in the United States intended exclusively to serve LGBTQ students. Advocates for the school argued it would serve as a safe haven for young people who might not be or feel safe in other city schools. Although the school has had its detractors on both ends of the political spectrum—conservatives who disagree with the notion of public money used to fund a school exclusively for LGBTQ students and progressives who believe such a school sanctions segregation—its supporters have prevailed largely on the grounds that LGBTQ students need a “safe space” in which to learn.⁶ As a description of the school on the Hetrick-Martin website still points out, it remains a necessary remedy to a less-than-ideal situation for LGBTQ students around the city: “In an ideal world, all students who are considered at risk would be safely integrated into all NYC public schools. But in the real world, at-risk students need a place like the Harvey Milk High School. HMHS is one of the many NYC small schools that provide safety, community, and high achievement for students not able to benefit from more traditional school environments.”⁷

THREE MAIN CHARACTERISTICS OF SAFE SCHOOLS

Although the efforts of educators and advocates to make schools safer for LGBTQ students have taken many forms in different kinds of communities, nationally the “safe” paradigm has primarily centered on three components. Some schools have one or two of these components in place, and many have all three. But even schools with the full triad may be operating under a tacit agreement that “safe” is an acceptable standard for meeting the needs of their LGBTQ populations when they can and should be doing much more.

Antibullying Programs

Largely in response to several high-profile cases of peer-to-peer harassment publicized in the national media, some of which were associated with the suicides of students who were victimized, new or expanded antibullying policies have been implemented at all levels of government in the last several years. Some of these cases have involved LGBTQ-based harassment, including that of a high school freshman from a suburb of Buffalo, New York, who according to news reports was relentlessly harassed with antigay epithets and committed suicide in September 2011. Before taking his own life, he posted on the blog website Tumblr, “I always say how bullied I am, but no one listens. What do I have to do so people will listen?”⁸

Between 2008 and 2012, forty-nine of the fifty states either introduced or expanded antibullying legislation, and although most of these policies do not address the bullying of LGBTQ students specifically, they are often cited as evidence that schools and government are taking the needs of LGBTQ students seriously. Many of these bills use the language of safety in their names, such as Iowa’s antibullying and antiharassment law, also known as the Iowa Safe Schools Law, which protects students from bullying and harassment based on “any of the following traits or characteristics: age, color, creed, national origin, race, religion, marital status, sex, sexual orientation, gender identity, physical attributes, physical or mental ability or disability, ancestry, political party preference, political belief, socioeconomic status, and familial status.”⁹ The United States Congress is currently considering the Safe Schools Improvement Act, a piece of antibullying legislation that would include specific protections for LGBTQ students.

The Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network (GLSEN), a national education and advocacy group that promotes improved school environments for LGBTQ students, strongly advocates such “enumeration”—the explicit listing of factors for which students might be subject to harassment or assault—for all antibullying policies. As a GLSEN policy statement explains, enumeration strengthens a school’s capacity to protect not only LGBTQ students but any others who might be targeted:

Enumeration is essential to protecting as many students as possible from bullying and harassment. The strength of an enumerated law or policy is that it underscores those students who research shows are most likely to be bullied and harassed and least likely to be protected under non-enumerated antibullying laws and policies. While enumerated policies specifically highlight the most vulnerable students, they do not limit the policy only to those students. All students are protected, even if they do not fall into one of the enumerated categories. Enumeration that includes sexual orientation and gender identity removes any doubt that LGBT youth are protected from bullying and harassment.¹⁰

With enumeration, as GLSEN suggests, there is no ambiguity about the fact that anti-LGBTQ harassment and bullying are unacceptable—regardless of any religious or political beliefs that a student, teacher, administrator, parent, or community member might hold—and that educators have a non-negotiable responsibility to address it if it occurs. GLSEN's research has found that enumeration is associated with lower rates of victimization of LGBTQ students and a much higher incidence of teachers intervening when these students are targeted by their peers:

Enumeration provides teachers and school personnel with the tools they need to implement antibullying and harassment policies, making it easier for them to prevent bullying and intervene when incidents occur. Evidence shows that educators often do not recognize anti-LGBT bullying and harassment as unacceptable behavior. Sometimes they fail to respond to the problem due to prejudice or community pressure. When they can point to enumerated language that provides clear protection for LGBT students, they feel more comfortable enforcing the policy. Students in schools with enumerated policies reported that teachers intervene more than twice as often compared to students in schools with generic antibullying policies, and more than three times as often compared to students in schools with no policy at all.¹¹

To the extent that antibullying programs and laws protect LGBTQ and other students from being taunted by their peers in school, online, or elsewhere, they clearly have contributed to important positive change. But some experts on gender- and sexuality-based harassment in schools have questioned whether the focus on bullying prevention has overgeneralized the various kinds of bias, discrimination, and harassment that specific subgroups of students, such as LGBTQ youth, experience. As Nan Stein, senior research scientist at the Wellesley Centers for Women, has noted, “When schools put these new anti-bullying laws and policies into practice, the policies are often overly broad and arbitrary. . . [and] sometimes egregious behaviors are framed by school personnel as bullying, when in fact they may constitute illegal sexual or gender harassment or even criminal hazing or assault.”¹² Moreover, antibullying policies, if they represent the *only* action school administrators take to support LGBTQ students, can create a false impression that the full range of these students’ needs is being met.

LGBTQ “Safe Zones”

Another way in which “safe” language is central to schools’ efforts to improve climates for LGBTQ students is the designation within many school buildings of “safe zones,” often indicated by stickers on the classroom or office doors of individual teachers, counselors, administrators, or staff members who choose to use them. These “safe zone” or “safe space” stickers, which first started appearing in the 1990s and of which there are many versions, serve an important symbolic function in that they announce to students without the need for any discussion that these educators are, in one way or another, LGBTQ-friendly. A safe zone sticker on an educator’s door can imply any number of things: that they will challenge anti-LGBTQ language and harassment when it occurs; they are open to the discussion of LGBTQ issues in the context of classwork or just in conversation; they might be a safe person to whom an LGBTQ student could “come out”; and in some cases, that the educator is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning.

Between 2010 and 2013, GLSEN took the idea of safe zone stickers to the next level by sending a “safe space kit” to every public middle and high school in the United States. In addition to ten safe zone stickers, the kit included a safe space poster as well as a “Guide to Being an Ally to LGBT Students,” which offered strategies for supporting LGBTQ students and teaching about anti-LGBTQ harassment and violence.¹³

Several research studies, including GLSEN’s biennial National School Climate Survey, which draws on the responses of roughly 7,900 students nationwide, have demonstrated that the safe space campaign, like enumerated antibullying policies, makes a tremendous difference in LGBTQ students’ perceptions that their schools are safe and that their teachers are adults they can trust. Unfortunately, only about one-fourth (26 percent) of the students participating in the latest GLSEN survey said they had seen any safe zone stickers in their schools, but those who had felt significantly more positive attitudes toward their teachers and other school staff than their peers who had not. Whereas about half of GLSEN’s survey participants who had not seen a safe zone sticker or poster had an adult at school with whom they felt comfortable talking about LGBTQ issues, nearly three-quarters of students who had seen the stickers had such an adult in their school.

Gay-Straight Alliances

Finally, the notion of safe space has also been central to the emergence of gay-straight alliances (GSAs), extracurricular organizations in which LGBTQ young people and their allies support one another, plan educational programming for the school community about LGBTQ issues, and sometimes just “hang out” in an atmosphere where it is okay to be gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, queer, questioning, or even straight.

Widely considered the precursor to the GSA movement in the United States, Project 10 in the Los Angeles Unified School District began in 1984 and continues today. Project 10 is a broad-based program that includes many components associated with the psychological and academic well-being of LGBTQ students, but one of its primary missions

has always been to ensure “on-campus groups that are safe zones for LGBT students” in Los Angeles schools.¹⁴

GSA s proliferated around Massachusetts starting in the 1990s when the groundbreaking Safe Schools Program began providing seed money and educational and technical support to students and educators who wanted to start them. From the start, GSA s have been controversial in many of the communities in which they have been introduced, where conservative critics have argued that they raise issues pertaining to sexuality that are better left to families and religious communities. (See, for example, the profile of Missouri’s Nixa High School in chapter 3.) The teachers, administrators, and students who have started GSA s have often countered such criticism with the argument that their primary purpose is to provide much-needed “safe space” for LGBTQ students who might not otherwise feel safe in their schools.

Although far too many schools still do not have gay-straight alliances, these groups have grown exponentially over the last decade. The latest National School Climate Survey conducted by GLSEN found that about half of students surveyed indicated there were GSA s in their schools.¹⁵ Many GSA s also register with GLSEN, and at last count the national organization had well over four thousand such groups on its national roster. Whereas at one time GSA s were geographically concentrated in traditionally liberal bastions such as California, New York City, and the Boston area, now they can be found in schools in all fifty states. In many places, GSA s do in fact serve a crucial function as safe havens, offering to LGBTQ young people the only place in their schools where they feel comfortable enough to talk openly and be themselves.

There is overwhelming evidence that gay-straight alliances make a tremendous difference in the school lives of LGBTQ students. GLSEN’s most recent survey found that students who attend schools with GSA s are less likely to feel unsafe for reasons associated with their sexual orientation, are less likely to hear homophobic language regularly at school, report considerably higher levels of peer acceptance, and generally feel more connected to their school communities.¹⁶ Another study associated GSA s with feelings of both personal and institutional “empowerment” for

LGBTQ students—for example, feeling comfortable holding a same-sex girlfriend's or boyfriend's hand in the hallway or having the confidence to work toward change in school and government policies.¹⁷

Like an antibullying program, however, the presence of a GSA, while essential, can also allow school officials who feel the pressures of competing priorities (such as raising test scores), or who fear controversy around LGBTQ-themed programming, to claim that the issue has been “covered” and therefore no further action is required. As long as LGBTQ students and their allies have a place to go once a week and a faculty advisor to talk to, school decision makers may not see the need for these young people to be supported all day, every day at school. They can fail to examine curriculum, athletics, extracurricular clubs, or other aspects of school life from which students may still feel excluded.

SAFETY FIRST

Let me be *very* clear: “safe schools” policies and programs, enumerated antibullying initiatives, LGBTQ safe zone stickers and posters, and gay-straight alliances all make a critical, life-saving difference in the school experiences of LGBTQ students. Given LGBTQ youths’ persistently disproportionate risk for harassment, feeling unsafe at school, substance abuse, and suicide, safety is a critical baseline from which all subsequent work must follow.¹⁸ The educators and advocates who built the early successes of the LGBTQ student rights movement understood this. As a result, many schools are much, much safer places for LGBTQ students than they were thirty, twenty, even ten years ago. And it has become clear to more and more people that those schools that still offer no basic protections or safe space to LGBTQ students need to change immediately.

Yet the notion of GSAs as a “safe space” or certain teachers’ rooms as “safe zones,” as well as the framing of initiatives to benefit LGBTQ students as “safe schools” programming, raises a number of crucial questions as educators and advocates look toward what must happen next to build on these successes. If a certain place in the school is designated as a safe space, what does that say about the rest of the building? If certain educators are seen as “safe” for students to talk to about issues that

are central to their lives, what about the others? Does a school administration have a responsibility to ensure that LGBTQ students feel supported by *all* their teachers in *every* learning space in the building, not just treated with mere “tolerance” by the majority? Is safety the only thing to which LGBTQ students are entitled at school? What about the skills and knowledge they need to be effective, engaged members of their society *as LGBTQ youth*? Finally, are LGBTQ students a monolithic group with one basic common need: safety? What differences exist among various subgroups within the LGBTQ student population—boys and girls, transgender students, LGBTQ students of color—and the way they experience the school climate and programs? What would an optimal education for all these young people look like?

A CRITICAL MOMENT

While much remains to be done, our country is arguably at a watershed moment with regard to both LGBTQ rights and shifting public attitudes about LGBTQ issues. The right to marry for all couples, regardless of their sex, is now the law of the land in all fifty states. Perhaps even more significantly, the recent changes in marriage law have occurred with far less public outcry than would have been imaginable even ten years ago. Although there are still conservative activists around the country working to overturn the Supreme Court’s decision legalizing same-sex marriage and to challenge other LGBTQ rights—and these are more prevalent in some geographical areas than others—the chances that such challenges will ultimately succeed seem to be growing increasingly slim.

One of the reasons for this wave of policy change may be the dramatic shift in public attitudes about homosexuality and LGBTQ rights that has occurred in recent years. Whereas through the late 1980s only about a third of participants in Gallup’s annual polls said they believed gay or lesbian relations between consenting adults should be legal, that number rose to two-thirds by 2014. On the issue of same-sex marriage, the changes have been even more dramatic: as recently as 1996, only 27 percent of Americans said they believed marriages between same-sex couples should be recognized by law as valid, but 55 percent approved of

their legal recognition by 2014 (and a 2015 CBS News poll prior to the Supreme Court's ruling found this number to be as high as 60 percent).¹⁹

Although popular media still depict heterosexuality and traditional expressions of gender as the norm, images of same-sex relationships and LGBTQ identities are now more common in mainstream popular culture than ever before. And while LGBTQ people of color and transgender people are still sparsely represented in the media, they are certainly more visible than they were a decade or two ago (the celebrity of openly gay black NFL player Michael Sam and the Amazon web series *Transparent* being two such examples). Moreover, the wide availability of information and resources about LGBTQ issues and identities online has contributed further to the emergence of a new age that might have seemed unimaginable even twenty years ago.

Within this larger cultural context in which attitudes about LGBTQ people and identities have shifted so favorably and so quickly, progress has also been made on the school front, but much more slowly and inconsistently. GLSEN's latest National School Climate Survey showed that significantly fewer students hear homophobic remarks "frequently" or "often" in their schools than did at the beginning of the century, but this was still a problem for about two-thirds of the students polled. The percentage of students reporting that they have a GSA in their school was higher in the latest survey than in all prior survey years but still hovered around the 50 percent mark, indicating that nearly half the students polled still do not have access to a GSA. The percentage of students reporting representation of LGBTQ people and issues in their school curricula also was higher than ever in the latest survey; nevertheless, four out of five students still said there was no positive representation of LGBTQ people or issues in any of their classes, and less than half (44 percent) said they had access to LGBTQ-related information in their school library.²⁰

Despite the progress that's been made, unwelcoming school climates continue to take a toll on the physical, emotional, and academic well-being of LGBTQ students. Nearly one-third of the students in the last GLSEN survey said they had missed at least one entire day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable, and one in ten

missed four or more days. LGBTQ students who had experienced high levels of victimization were significantly more likely than other LGBTQ youth to miss school because of feeling unsafe, have lower grade point averages, report that they did not plan to go to college, and suffer from depression and low self-esteem.²¹

Finally, progress on LGBTQ issues seems to have come further for some students than others depending on geography and on their specific identities under the LGBTQ umbrella. Students in the South and Midwest regions of the United States reported the highest levels of harassment, perceived lack of safety, and anti-LGBTQ language in their schools on the 2013 survey, and they were the least likely to report access to GSAs, LGBTQ-inclusive curricula, and teachers they felt they could talk to about LGBTQ issues. (Whereas 60 percent of students responding to the survey from the Northeast said their schools had GSAs, only 33 percent of students in the South said so.) Moreover, transgender students in the GLSEN survey reported the highest levels of harassment and the lowest levels of perceived safety among all participating students, and transgender identities tend to be the least represented in curricula, library resources, and other school materials and programs.²²

This larger context of progress in some, but not all, aspects of society and of schooling has led me to the three related premises on which this book is based:

- Safety is an essential baseline for schools' ability to meet the needs of LGBTQ students effectively and has served as a critical foundation for efforts to introduce policies and programs at all levels of government to benefit LGBTQ students, *but it is not a sufficient goal in itself.*
- Considerable progress has been made in recent decades on LGBTQ issues in schools, but inconsistencies with regard to geographical location, identity categories within the LGBTQ spectrum, and other factors have created *inequities that are unacceptable.*
- Recent political progress and shifts in public attitudes about LGBTQ issues suggest an opportune time for educators and policy makers to move beyond "safe" and create schools that *affirm LGBTQ*

students and integrate respect for LGBTQ identities through multiple aspects of school life.

A NEW PARADIGM: BEYOND “SAFE”

If the safe spaces represented by antibullying policies, LGBTQ safe zones, and gay-straight alliances were viewed not as ends in themselves but merely as foundations for schools that are supportive, inclusive, and affirming of all LGBTQ students—all day and every day—what might these “new and improved” schools look like? And, perhaps even more importantly, how would we get there? What steps might educators take to bring their schools to the next level?

The chapters that follow map out eight aspects of such a vision and profile district leaders, school administrators, classroom teachers, counselors, and others who embody each aspect in their day-to-day practice. Working in various contexts that pose different sets of challenges—from urban poverty to political or religious conservatism to the age of the students they serve—all of the educators interviewed for this book are engaged in *a process* of moving their work on LGBTQ issues to a higher level. Some are further along in this process than others. Yet despite the limitations these educators face, each is engaged in practices that show not only that we *should* do more for the LGBTQ youth in our schools, but that we *can* push toward a new standard of practice, beyond keeping students safe, even in schools where many might not think it possible.

The classroom is in many respects the heart of school life, yet for the vast majority of students—even those attending ostensibly safe schools—it is also a place in which LGBTQ people and identities are never mentioned. Chapter 1, “Bringing the Conversation into the Classroom,” draws primarily on the work of two teachers who engage high school students in critical discussions about gender and sexual orientation. Contrary to the all-too-common practice of having a gay-straight alliance be the only space in the school where words such as *transgender* or *lesbian* are spoken, these educators bring LGBTQ issues directly into their classrooms. The chapter also profiles a statewide curricular initiative from

which educators all over the country can acquire ideas for making their classes LGBTQ-inclusive.

Ideally, schools and districts would not implement curricular programs in isolation; they would integrate them in a comprehensive way to create an overall climate of inclusiveness that is palpable in every hallway and classroom of the school. Chapter 2, “Transforming the Building,” profiles a suburban New York–area school that has done just that and exemplifies how LGBTQ issues can be integrated across multiple aspects of school life. Certainly, the school’s location in the nation’s largest metropolitan area lends itself to a relatively hospitable environment for LGBTQ issues. Nevertheless, one factor that makes this school exceptional is that it is not a high school, but a middle school serving students in grades six through eight. Countering the common misconception that students in the middle grades are too young to have serious discussions about issues such as transgender identity or the LGBTQ rights movement, the teachers, administrators, staff, and students interviewed for this chapter exemplify how, as one staff member put it, “it’s just part of what we do here.” Especially important at this school is the leadership provided by a Spanish teacher who also serves as the school’s GSA advisor and facilitates professional development sessions for faculty, both in formalized group settings and through one-on-one coaching, to help teachers integrate LGBTQ-inclusive content with their own curricular goals.

As indicated previously, gay-straight alliances are life-saving programs in schools that provide LGBTQ young people and their allies a “safe space” to meet once a week or so. Chapter 3, “Turning Adversity into Activism,” focuses on schools that have taken their GSAs to the next level, largely by necessity. These schools in Missouri and Utah illustrate how educators working in politically or religiously conservative areas have special responsibilities to their LGBTQ students. The GSA advisors in these two schools have helped students develop a stance of resistance not only to homophobia and transphobia in their schools, but also to government policies and religious doctrines in the communities surrounding them that threaten the rights and dignity of LGBTQ people.

Just as it is important to affirm the aspects of students' identities that relate to their being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning, it is equally important to remember that these identities exist in a broader context that also includes issues such as race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. Chapter 4, "Tapping into Community Assets," examines the work of educators in a high-poverty urban school in Hawaii that serves a large population of immigrant students from Asian and Pacific Islander families. For these educators, supporting their students also means helping them negotiate what it means to be LGBTQ within families and communities in which nontraditional expressions of gender and sexuality may prompt cultural conflict, and to see their place in a larger culture that often represents LGBTQ identity primarily as white and middle-class. The work in this school shows how role modeling and media literacy can be especially important for helping LGBTQ youth of color develop strong, confident identities *as LGBTQ youth of color*.

Among all students under the LGBTQ umbrella, transgender students are often the most underserved by their schools: they face the highest rate of harassment, see little or no representation of their identities in curricula, and face daily indignities related to everything from locker room and bathroom usage to the use of their preferred names and pronouns. Even in schools with strong GSAs and related programming, transgender students can feel excluded and marginalized. Moreover, transgender students often face high levels of parental rejection, making school acceptance and education all the more important. Chapter 5, "Respecting the 'T' in LGBTQ," looks at school practices specifically intended to make schools more welcoming for transgender students at three levels: district policy, building-level leadership, and the day-to-day experiences of teachers, students, and families.

GSAs are often cited by researchers—and by youth themselves—as places in which LGBTQ students can talk openly without fear of being judged, rejected, or ostracized. But in many schools, the GSA isn't the only place in which students can talk about the challenges—or the joys—they experience being lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning. Chapter 6, "Opening Up Spaces for Discussion," profiles an LGBTQ-specific counseling group in Georgia, a book club

centered largely on LGBTQ-themed titles in Florida, and a California health teacher who serves in more informal ways as a trusted mentor and resource to LGBTQ students. Collectively, these educators and programs illustrate the value of having many spaces in the school building, beyond the GSA, where LGBTQ youth can talk about their feelings and experiences.

Most of the work profiled in chapters 1 through 6 takes place in high schools or, in the case of Jericho, New York, middle school. Secondary schools, however, are not the only schools that need to move beyond the “safe” paradigm. Chapter 7, “Making It Elementary,” profiles three programs—one developed by a national LGBTQ rights organization, one by the parent of a gender-nonconforming child in Washington State, and another by a teacher conducting her own classroom-based research in Chicago—to address issues related to gender and sexuality with elementary school students. Recognizing that children’s prejudices about gender and LGBTQ individuals are formed early, the educators interviewed for this chapter use everything from children’s books to visual art to lining up for recess as teaching tools that help students think critically, in age-appropriate ways, about prevailing stereotypes and their effects.

If the educators profiled in chapters 1 through 7 are implementing practices to which school leaders who want to make their schools more than “safe” might aspire, where does this process begin? Chapter 8, “Where Do You Start? Beginning with Core Values—but Not Ending There,” illustrates how progress toward many of the changes proposed in this book can begin by tapping into core values and common beliefs on which an entire community already agrees. This chapter includes a case study of a high school in a politically conservative suburb of Indianapolis where educators have successfully justified the creation of a more LGBTQ-inclusive climate on the grounds that the district’s mission statement, strategic plan, and established policies already require it. Although this school has room to grow toward integrating LGBTQ issues across all aspects of school life (as the superintendent and building-level administrators and teachers acknowledge), educators there have made great strides in a relatively short time largely by drawing on broader themes and district trends.

Finally, the afterword invites readers to think even beyond the notion of “better” schools for LGBTQ youth toward an ideal educational experience for these students. Drawing on the progress outlined in the previous eight chapters, this afterword looks toward a future in which “safe spaces” will be a given and LGBTQ issues will be woven into the fabric of school life.

ABOUT THIS BOOK

The idea for this book sprung from my belief—based on years of work in schools as a teacher, researcher, and teacher educator—that for every educator doing innovative, “outside the box” work to support LGBTQ students, there are about a dozen more who want to do the same but need ideas and guidance. My hope is that teachers, administrators, counselors, and other education professionals (as well as those studying to enter a school-related field) will learn from the colleagues they read about here not only what is possible but also how to make it happen, even in the face of considerable obstacles.

Since my purpose in this book is to report on a broad range of work going on in schools across the country rather than to investigate a specific research question, I have approached collecting the information herein as an education journalist as opposed to a qualitative researcher (although other work I have published has been more qualitative in nature). I sought out information about outstanding teachers and schools from a variety of sources: professional organizations, colleagues, database searches, news reports, even word of mouth. I gathered information through a combination of in-person, telephone, and e-mail interviews (sometimes using multiple methods for the same interviewee). The educators I spoke with often referred me to colleagues in their schools, whom I contacted to round out the portrait of work going on there. In many cases, educators referred me to current and former students, who were also interviewed either in person or by telephone, or answered questions over e-mail. (Some were interviewed in multiple ways.)

Because readers may wish to learn more about the programming in some of the schools they read about here, the names of all schools and

educators quoted in this book are real. Students, however, are either unnamed or are given pseudonyms to protect their anonymity (and, for consistency, I have used pseudonyms both for current students and for former students, even those who are now well into adulthood). Except where indicated, the comments of people quoted in these chapters are based on communication with me directly for the purposes of this book.

In addition, it should be noted that the subtitle of this book is “Better Schools for LGBTQ Students” for the sake of brevity and clarity. This is not intended to exclude all the other LGBTQ-positive work going on in schools, such as support for students whose parents might be LGBTQ, support for straight allies in student groups (e.g., gay-straight alliances), or efforts to teach students to be better allies to their LGBTQ peers, all of which are also represented.

The ideas presented here and the examples of schools and educators that are implementing them by no means constitute a comprehensive list of all the possibilities. Other creative educators are no doubt doing outstanding work in other schools not represented in these pages. Moreover, the schools profiled are all works in progress, the educators all doing good work but striving to do better. But they share a belief that “safe is not enough” for their students, and their collective efforts help point the way toward what I hope can be a new standard for schools that are more than just safe—not only for LGBTQ youth, but for all children and adolescents.