**Queering the Schools**

Gay activist groups, with teachers’ union applause, are importing a disturbing agenda into the nation’s public schools.

By [Marjorie King](http://www.city-journal.org/contributor/marjorie-king_298)

At a high school in prosperous Newton, Massachusetts, it’s “To B GLAD Day”—or, less delicately, Transgender, Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian Awareness Day. An advocacy session for students and teachers features three self-styled transgendered individuals—a member of the senior class and two recent graduates. One of the transgenders, born female, announces that “he” had been taking hormones for 16 months. “Right now I am a 14-year-old boy going through puberty and a 55-year-old woman going through menopause,” she complains. “I am probably the moodiest person in the world.” A second panelist declares herself an “androgyne in between both genders of society.” She adds, “Gender is just a bunch of stereotypes from society, but I am completely personal, and my gender is fluid.”

Only in liberal Massachusetts could a public school endorse such an event for teens, you might think. But you would be wrong. For the last decade or so, largely working beneath public or parental notice, a well-organized movement has sought to revolutionize the curricula and culture of the nation’s public schools. Its aim: to stamp out “hegemonic heterosexuality”—the traditional view that heterosexuality is the norm—in favor of a new ethos that does not just tolerate homosexuality but instead actively endorses experimenting with it, as well as with a polymorphous range of bisexuality, transgenderism, and transsexuality. The educational establishment has enthusiastically signed on. What this portends for the future of the public schools and the psychic health of the nation’s children is deeply worrisome.

This movement to “queer” the public schools, as activists put it, originated with a shift in the elite understanding of homosexuality. During the eighties, when gay activism first became a major cultural force, homosexual leaders launched a campaign that mirrored the civil rights movement. To claim their rights, homosexuals argued (without scientific evidence) that their orientation was a genetic inheritance, like race, and thus deserved the same kind of civil protections the nation had guaranteed to blacks. An inborn, unchangeable fact, after all, could not be subject to moral disapproval. There ensued a successful effort to normalize homosexuality throughout the culture, including a strong push for homosexual marriage, gays in the military, and other signs of civic equality.

But even as the homosexual-rights campaign won elite endorsement and lavish funding, even as supportive organizations proliferated, the gay movement began to split internally. By the early nineties, many gay activists viewed goals such as gay marriage or domestic partner unions as lamely “assimilationist”—an endorsement of standards of behavior that “queers,” as they called themselves, should reject as oppressively “straight.” And they militantly began defending the “queer lifestyle” not as an ineluctable fate but as the result of a fully conscious choice.

Underlying this militant stance was a radical new academic ideology called “queer theory.” A mixture of the neo-Freudianism of counterculture gurus Norman O. Brown and Herbert Marcuse and French deconstruction, queer theory takes to its extreme limit the idea that all sexual difference and behavior is a product of social conditioning, not nature. It is, in their jargon, “socially constructed.” For the queer theorist, all unambiguous and permanent notions of a natural sexual or gender identity are coercive impositions on our individual autonomy—our freedom to reinvent our sexual selves whenever we like. Sexuality is androgynous, fluid, polymorphous—and therefore a laudably subversive and even revolutionary force.

Rutgers English professor Michael Warner, a leading queer theorist, observes that categories like “heterosexual” and “homosexual” are part of “the regime of the normal” that queer theory wants to explode. “What identity,” he writes, “encompasses queer girls who f\*&k queer boys with strap-ons, or FTMs (female-to-male transsexuals) who think of themselves as queer, FTMs who think of themselves as straights, or FTMs for whom life is a project of transition and screw the categories anyway?” To overturn the old dichotomies of hetero/homo and even male/female, Warner encourages continuous sexual experimentation.

A relatively recent arrival on college campuses, queer theory has swiftly dominated the myriad university gender-studies programs and spread its influence to other disciplines, too, “queering” everything under the sun. Type “queering” into Amazon.com’s search engine, and up comes *Queering the Middle Ages, Queering the Color Line, Queering India*, and many other books, many from prestigious academic presses.

It would be tempting to dismiss queer theory as just another intellectual fad, with little influence beyond the campus, if not for gay activists’ aggressive effort to introduce the theory’s radical view of sexuality into the public schools. Leading the effort is the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Educational Network (GLSEN, pronounced “glisten”), an advocacy group founded a decade ago to promote homosexual issues in the public schools. It now boasts 85 chapters, four regional offices, and some 1,700 student clubs, called “gay/straight alliances,” that it has helped form in schools across the country.

GLSEN often presents itself as a civil rights organization, saying that it is only after “tolerance” and “understanding” for a victim group. Sometimes, therefore, it still speaks the old gay-rights language of unchangeable homosexual “identity” and “orientation.” But it is, in fact, a radical organization that has clearly embraced the queer-theory worldview. It seeks to transform the culture and instruction of every public school, so that children will learn to equate “heterosexism”—the favoring of heterosexuality as normal—with other evils like racism and sexism and will grow up pondering their sexual orientation and the fluidity of their sexual identity.

That GLSEN embraces queer theory is clear from the addition of transgendered students to the gays and lesbians the group claims to represent. By definition, the transgendered are those who choose to change their gender identity by demeanor, dress, hormones, or surgery. Nothing could be more profoundly opposed to the notion of a natural sexual identity. Consider as evidence of queer theory’s influence, too, the GLSEN teachers’ manual that says that middle-schoolers “should have the freedom to explore [their] sexual orientation and find [their] own unique expression of lesbian, bisexual, gay, straight, or any combination of these.” What is this but Michael Warner’s appeal to pansexual experimentation?

One of the major goals of GLSEN and similar groups is to reform public school curricula and teaching so that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender—or LGBT—themes are always central and always presented in the approved light. GLSEN holds regular conferences for educators and activists with workshops bearing titles such as “Girls Will Be Boys and Boys Will Be Girls: Creating a Safe, Supportive School Environment for Trans, Intersex, Gender Variant and Gender Questioning Youth” and “Developing and Implementing a Transgender Inclusive Curriculum.” Every course in every public school should focus on LGBT issues, GLSEN believes. A workshop at GLSEN’s annual conference in Chicago in 2000 complained that “most LGBT curricula are in English, history and health” and sought ways of introducing its agenda into math and science classes, as well. (As an example of how to queer geometry, GLSEN recommends using gay symbols such as the pink triangle to study shapes.)

Nor is it ever too early to begin stamping out heterosexism. A 2002 GLSEN conference in Boston held a seminar on “Gender in the Early Childhood Classroom” that examined ways of setting “the tone for nontraditional gender role play” for *preschoolers*. To help get the LGBT message across to younger children, teachers can turn to an array of educational products, many of them available from GLSEN. Early readers include *One Dad, Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads; King and King;* and *Asha’s Mums*.

As for teaching aids, a 1999 book, Queering Elementary Education, with a foreword by GLSEN executive director Kevin Jennings, offers essays on “Locating a Place for Gay and Lesbian Themes in Elementary Reading, Writing and Talking” and “How to Make ‘Boys’ and ‘Girls’ in the Classroom”—the scare quotes showing the queer theorist’s ever present belief that categorizing gender is a political act.

For comprehensiveness, nothing beats a GLSEN-recommended resource manual distributed to all K–12 public schools in Saint Paul and Minneapolis. The manual presents an educational universe that filters everything through an LGBT lens. Lesson ideas include “role playing” exercises to “counter harassment,” where students pretend, say, to be bisexual and hear hurtful words cast at them; testing students to see where their attitudes lie toward sexual “difference” (mere tolerance is unacceptable; much better is “admiration” and, best of all, “nurturance”); getting students to take a “Sexual Orientation Quiz”; and having heterosexual students learn 37 ways that heterosexuals are privileged in society. In turn, principals should make an “ongoing PA announcement”—once a week, the manual says—telling students about confidential support programs for LGBT students.

Teachers, the manual suggests, should demand that public school students memorize the approved meanings of important LGBT words and terms, from “bigenderist” to “exotophobia.” Sometimes, these approved meanings require Orwellian redefinitions: “Family: Two or more persons who share resources, share responsibility for decisions, share values and goals, and have commitments to one another over a period of time . . . regardless of blood, or adoption, or marriage.”

Two videos come particularly highly rated by gay activists and educators as tools for making primary school queer-friendly. Both films strive to present homosexuality in a favorable light, without saying what it actually is. *It’s Elementary*, intended for parents, educators, and policymakers, shows how classroom teachers can lead kindergartners through carefully circumscribed discussions of the evils of prejudice, portrayed as visited to an unusual degree on gays and lesbians. In *That’s a Family*, designed for classroom use, children speak directly into the camera, explaining to other kids how having gay and lesbian parents is no different from, for example, having parents of different national backgrounds.

GLSEN even provides lesson plans for the promotion of cross-dressing in elementary school classes. A school resource book containing such lesson plans, *Cootie Shots: Theatrical Inoculations Against Bigotry for Kids, Parents, and Teachers*, has already been used in second-grade classrooms in California. A children’s play in the book features a little boy singing of the exhilaration of striding about “In Mommy’s High Heels,” in angry defiance of the criticism of his intolerant peers:

*They are the swine, I am the pearl. . . .  
They’ll be beheaded when I’m queen!  
When I rule the world! When I rule the world!  
When I rule the world in my mommy’s high heels!*

Some of the LGBT-friendly curricular material aimed at older children is quite sexually explicit. The GLSEN-recommended reading list for grades 7–12 is dominated by such material, depicting the queer sexuality spectrum. *In Your Face: Stories from the Lives of Queer Youth* features a 17-year-old who writes, “I identify as bisexual and have since I was about six or seven. . . . I sort of experimented when I was young.” Another GLSEN recommendation, *Revolutionary Voices: A Multicultural Queer Youth Anthology*, has a 16-year-old contributor who explains, “My sexuality is as fluid, indefinable and ever-changing as the north flowing river.”

Some of the most explicit homosexual material has shown up in classrooms. An Ohio teacher encouraged her freshman students to read *Entries From a Hot Pink Notebook*, a teen coming-out  story that includes a graphic depiction of sex between two 14-year-old boys. In Newton, Massachusetts, a public school teacher assigned his 15-year-old students *The Perks of Being a Wallflower,* a farrago of sexual confusion, featuring an episode of bestiality as one of its highlights. Such books represent a growth industry for publishers, including mainstream firms.

As part of its effort to make the public schools into an arena of homosexual and transgender advocacy, GLSEN works assiduously to build a wide network of student organizers. It looks for recruits as young as 14, who in turn are to bring on board other students to form gay/straight alliances or other homosexual-themed student clubs at their schools. Glancing over the biographies of 2002’s student organizers reveals a uniform faith among them that experimenting with a range of homosexual behaviors serves the cause of civil rights.

The behavior in question involves some practices that the Marquis de Sade would welcome. A GLSEN-sponsored, taxpayer-funded “teach out” for activists, educators, and students to brainstorm ways of creating schools and communities that “are truly inclusive and safe,” held at Tufts University a while back, is a case in point. The daylong conference, with Massachusetts Department of Education and other state employees as workshop leaders and drawing many high school students and teachers (who received professional development credits for attending), featured a “youth only, ages 14–21” session that offered a lesson in “fisting”—the potentially dangerous act, called by some the first new sexual invention in 1,000 years, of inserting one’s fist into a partner’s anus or vagina.

Thanks to two members of the local Parents’ Rights Coalition, who secretly taped the session, we know that the fisting lesson did not arouse universal enthusiasm among the teens present. A boy asks why anyone would want to do such a thing. Other teens reportedly winced. But the self-identified gay and lesbian state employees turned aside doubts. One—a woman—explained that, though fisting “often gets a really bad rap,” it usually isn’t about the pain—“not that we’re putting that down.” Rather, she assured, it is “an experience of letting somebody into your body that you want to be close and intimate with.”

And so the workshop proceeded, marketing the polymorphously perverse to the sexually naive and emotionally immature. The etiquette of swallowing versus spitting after oral sex came up, as did the question of whether a tongue ring makes oral sex more pleasurable. Other topics included: how to use dildos, the mechanics of lesbian sexual gratification, and whether celery makes semen taste sweeter. The workshop leaders were sophisticated, yet breezy and colloquial, using street language and referring quite openly to their own sexual experiences—a Department of Public Health worker making his homosexual promiscuity obvious. The workshop initiated adolescents into a forbidden world that their parents likely knew nothing about.

In the winter of 2001, Tufts hosted another GLSEN-sponsored conference, entitled “Creating Safety—Teaching Respect.” This time, most of the 650 people present were teenagers, rounded up by gay activists or coming on their own to receive instruction in queer sexuality. Planned Parenthood representatives handed out special kits, containing latex gloves and lubricants, for “safe” fisting.

GLSEN and other activist homosexual groups have effectively used “safe school” campaigns to further their agenda. The federal Safe and Drug-Free Schools Program—Title IV of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act—provides millions of dollars to state education departments to combat drugs and violence in the public schools. Using some of these funds, gay activists have helped design and promote public school “tolerance” programs. One of the mildest of such programs, “Healing the Hate,” released in 1997 under Department of Justice sposorship, implicitly likens disapproval of homosexual behavior with the prejudices that in the past have led to lynchings, church burnings, and the Holocaust. Gay groups contend—dubiously—that such programs are necessary because homosexual students must endure bullying and hatred every day in schools across the country.

GLSEN is quite explicit about using the safety issue to silence opponents. As GLSEN chief Kevin Jennings puts it, “We knew that, confronted with the real-life stories of youth who had suffered from homophobia, our opponents would automatically be on the defensive. . . . This allowed us to set the terms of the debate.”

At the urging of gay/straight alliances, schools across the U.S. have also created “safe” rooms for homosexual or sexually confused students, as if they might not be safe from “hate” and “intolerance” elsewhere in the school. In these rooms, identified by inverted pink triangles, students can discuss same-sex attraction or anxiety about sexual orientation with teachers or counselors, who promise a nonjudgmental and sympathetic hearing. Students who drop by for private discussion about their sexual confusion will often be referred—without parental knowledge—to local chapters of gay and lesbian organizations. If queer theorists are correct that homosexuality is a free choice, then parents might be forgiven for thinking such advocacy a kind of recruitment.

Without doubt, most parents would look at the subversive agenda on offer at GLSEN conferences and in LGBT-friendly curricula and find it bizarre and offensive. What sense, they might ask, does it make to “queer” math or science or other classes—whatever that might mean—when so many public schools fail even to produce minimally literate and numerate graduates?

Especially when all the evidence suggests that the incidence of self-labeled homosexuality and bisexuality in the population is in fact minuscule—just 1.4 percent of female subjects and 2.8 percent of male subjects, according to one of the largest and most scientific surveys by the National Opinion Research Center. Even Kinsey, with a very distorted sample population of volunteers, prison inmates (including sex offenders), and deliberately solicited homosexual respondents, only came up with a 4 percent figure for exclusive homosexual behavior, still far below the 10 percent frequently cited by homosexual activists. Should we revolutionize the schools for such a tiny minority?

Even more to the point, how many parents, even those not just tolerant of homosexuality but actively sympathetic toward homosexual rights, would really want their teenage children to be seeking out a “unique expression” of sexuality (let alone with their school’s help) or learning how to “fist”? How many would want their kindergartners—just figuring out their identities and desperately needing clear-cut categories like “boy” and “girl” to make sense of them—to engage in “non-traditional role play,” so that they grow up with warm feelings about transgendered people? Or their elementary school boys and girls exposed to sexual themes that they aren’t old enough to understand and that are likely to fill them with anxiety? Parents might well brush off an old-fashioned word and describe it all as, well . . . perverse.

As for bullying, the real problem is not anti-gay prejudice but the overall breakdown of school discipline. No child should have to put up with verbal or physical intimidation at school. Making schools safer, however, does not require importing a broader LGBT agenda that offends the values of many students and parents.

Nevertheless, though many parents aren’t aware of it yet, the agenda has moved far beyond the wishful thinking of activists. The keynote speaker at GLSEN’s 2000 conference was Robert Chase, president of the 2.7 million-member National Education Association, the nation’s biggest, most powerful teachers’ union. The program booklet for the event featured greetings not only from Chase but from then-president Clinton, Chicago mayor Richard Daley, and the head of the American Federation of Teachers, the second-biggest U.S. teachers’ union. The celebratory notes expressed the kind of praise once reserved for groups like the Boy Scouts. A long list of well-known organizations has backed LGBT programs in the classroom, including the American Psychiatric Association, the American Library Association, and the National Association of Social Workers.

No organization has been more steadfast in its support of GLSEN than the NEA. During the NEA’s annual convention in July 2001, many observers expected the teachers’ union to pass an official resolution incorporating GLSEN’s sweeping educational goals into K–12 curricula nationwide. As it turns out, the NEA, clearly trying to minimize public awareness of an unprecedented infringement on parental prerogatives, tabled the resolution and announced a task force to study how best to approach LGBT issues in the schools. But in February 2002, the NEA board of directors approved the task force’s report—a pure emanation of the GLSEN worldview, as is clear both from its numerous citations of GLSEN documents in the footnotes and from its recommendations.

Following the task force’s lead, the NEA will now struggle to expunge “heterosexism” from the consciousness of children in the classroom. The union has encouraged schools to integrate LGBT themes into curricula, instructional material, and programs; to emphasize the legitimacy of different “family structures,” including domestic partner arrangements; and to offer counseling services for students struggling with their “sexual/gender orientation.” Small wonder that GLSEN greeted the NEA task force’s report, and its endorsement by the union, with hosannas. “These powerful new recommendations signal that help is on the way for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students and staff who experience day-to-day abuse in America’s schools,” enthused GLSEN head Jennings.

The queering of the public schools has perhaps advanced furthest in California, where a new state law requires public schools to teach all K–12 students (and K means *five-year-olds*) “to appreciate various sexual orientations.” What the new law might mean in practice, warned a state assemblyman, was on display at Santa Rosa High School, where invited homosexual activists “talked about using cellophane during group sex and said that ‘clear is best because you can see what you want to lick,’ ” or at Hale Middle School in Los Angeles, where during an AIDS education course, “12-year-olds were subjected to graphic descriptions of anal sex and tips on how to dispose of used condoms so parents don’t find out.” As the assemblyman noted, sex ed courses throughout California public schools, influenced heavily by national sex education advocates SEICUS and Planned Parenthood, have already enthusiastically endorsed the GLSEN worldview.

But California is only the cutting edge: efforts to queer the schools are under way in many other locales, from Massachusetts to Oregon. The co-chair of the Massachusetts Governor’s Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth, for example, informs the *Boston Globe* that teachers across that state are increasingly integrating LGBT themes into lessons—discussing the sexual orientation of authors as an interpretive tool in literature classes, she says, or comparing gay and bisexual with straight student mental health data in order to study percentages. After a ferocious battle, the Broward School Board in Florida recently voted to rely on GLSEN to train teachers in LGBT “sensitivity.” In Gresham, Oregon, in early 2002, school officials at Centennial High School brought in gay and lesbian speakers in English, drama, and health classes during the school’s annual “diversity” week, neither telling students about it beforehand nor letting them opt out of the classes if they wanted. Parental anger forced school officials to issue a public apology.

GLSEN constantly emphasizes the need for tolerance for homosexuality, bisexuality, and transgenderism, but if someone bucks the LGBT party line in a school that follows it, watch out. Consider the experience of Elliott Chambers, formerly a student at Woodbury High School in a suburb of Saint Paul, Minnesota. Woodbury High had posted pink triangles on 48 of its 60-odd classrooms and offices (what made the other rooms “unsafe” isn’t clear). Belonging to a conservative family, Chambers decided one day to express his values and wore to school a sweatshirt with the words STRAIGHT PRIDE emblazoned across the front and an image of a man and woman holding hands on the back.

The school principal found this expression of support for heterosexuality unacceptable. He forbade Chambers from wearing the sweatshirt in school, explaining that another student had found it offensive. Chambers’s parents, increasingly concerned about what they considered Woodbury’s aggressive endorsement of the LGBT agenda, met with the principal, who charged them with being “homophobic”—a frequent accusation made not only against anyone who questions the morality of homosexual acts but also against anyone who doesn’t accept the entire gay activist program, as if such questioning could only grow out of psychological disturbance rather than reasoned judgment. The parents then filed a federal lawsuit, claiming that the school had squelched their son’s First Amendment rights.

When a preliminary judgment came down in Chambers’s favor, the principal announced over the school public address system that the court had actually agreed with school officials that the sentiment of “straight pride” seemed intolerant toward homosexuality, and if circumstances changed so as to create “a reasonable belief that a substantial disruption of, or material interference with, school activities might ensue” from the wearing of the shirt, the school could prohibit it again. Foreseeing further disturbance, Mrs. Chambers decided to home-school her son.

The Chamberses’ experience was far from unique. Objecting when a teacher joins the ranks of the transgendered is out of the question in some school districts, no matter how disturbing it may be to schoolchildren and parents alike. But for those adhering to the queer agenda, the problem is with the kids and parents, not their “evolving” educator. When Principal Donald Reed of the Marie Murphy Middle School in Wilmette, Illinois, announced to school officials a few weeks before the 2001 school year began that he had undergone “gender reassignment”—a sex-change operation—and would henceforth be Principal Deanna Reed, the school superintendent and other administrators, faithful to the GLSEN spirit, didn’t remove him/her, despite parental outrage. Instead, the school district hired a psychologist to advise teachers on how best to counsel children who seemed confused or disturbed by their principal’s strange transformation. Administrators encouraged parents, too, to bring their concerns to “professionals.”

Parents or other concerned citizens who complain about any aspect of the queering of public education can face withering attacks, not just from gay activists but from cultural elites in general. When the two members of the Parents’ Rights Coalition released their tape of the GLSEN-sponsored fisting workshop to the public, to take one typical example, the *Boston Globe* didn’t condemn the use of public funds and state employees to instruct schoolchildren in an arcane and dangerous “sexual” practice; instead, it denounced the whistleblowers as fomenters of “intolerance.”

School districts that refuse to go along with the homosexual agenda now must contend with the American Civil Liberties Union, too. The ACLU’s Lesbian and Gay Rights Project has launched a national effort, called “Every Student, Every School,” that plans to sue on First Amendment grounds any school that refuses gay/straight student clubs on its premises. Already, schools in Kentucky and Texas face legal action.

No compulsory public school system can be justified unless what it teaches is a worldview that the taxpayers who fund it can support. The “common schools” came into existence, after all, to acculturate immigrants to American values. For schools to try to indoctrinate children in a radical, minority worldview like that promoted by GLSEN and its allies—a vision that will form those children’s values and shape their sense of selfhood—is a kind of tyranny, one that, in addition, intentionally drives a wedge between parents and children and, as queer theorist Michael Warner boasts, “opposes society itself.” We must not let an appeal to our belief in tolerance and decency blind us to indecency—and to the individual and social damage that will result from it.

<http://www.city-journal.org/html/queering-schools-12411.html>