

# From Tolerance to Affirmation: One School's Experience with a Gay-Affirmative Program

*A concerned teacher, who wishes to remain anonymous, describes the quiet beginnings of his school's "Project 10" program*

## Background

The high school where I teach is an upper-middle-class suburban school near a major metropolitan area, with parents who are deeply involved in the education of their children. The school hires top-notch teachers, and has been recognized many times for excellence in education.

Although the majority faith among the families is Christian, many other faiths are represented, and the children are trained to appreciate religious differences.

Previously, the school had never been known for gay and lesbian activity, and most teachers seemed to be either indifferent to, or disapproving of, a gay agenda.

## The Beginning: School Safety

Gay agitation began during the 1992-93 school year. A group of teachers, led by a dedicated gay and lesbian promoter, banded together to discuss a problem. The teachers were told that gay students were being discriminated against—harassed, beaten up, and called names within the confines of the school. Although these incidents, whether real or created, would normally be handled by the dean's office, it was resolved that because the target of these incidents was gay students, more intense efforts needed to be made.

The group was officially formed, taking a generic name that would not display its function— even though it resolved specifically to work to fight gay harassment and discrimination.

Note the following pattern:

- 1) The existence of a dedicated activist on school grounds. The leader of the group was gay, and extremely dedicated to bringing the gay agenda to the school.
2. The group charter was created to be as non-threatening and general as possible. No students would be involved. Teachers were simply to be informed about it, and not coerced into joining.
3. The goals of the charter were to focus on "safety" and "sexual harassment" issues, **not** the affirmation of homosexuality. After all, no teacher, administrator, or parent can argue with the idea that schools should be as safe as possible for all children.

## Early development

The group's scope soon began to expand. Sexually confused students were quietly made aware of the group's presence. More teachers were urged to join, and soon over 50 had officially become members. Meeting agendas were usually set by a core group of 10 to 15 teachers. The goals of the group—which had originally focused on "making schools safe for all children," soon shifted to "tolerance." Teachers were made aware that tolerance was an important quality to model; one did not have to agree with gay-activist philosophy, just *tolerate the existence* of gay persons.

Opposition to this group was not organized; rather, individual teachers who made their concerns known were reassured that the group's goals were very limited. The group became more and more public; mailings were sent out to the teachers—and teachers who were not receptive to gay issues were informed that students felt "threatened" by their behavior.

Next, a "home page" was created for the group. Some teachers actively taught "tolerance" from the pulpit of the classroom, and began to incorporate gay and lesbian themes into their lessons. Rainbow signs—the symbol of diversity— appeared in classrooms to let students know that those classrooms were "safe" places to be.

The gay-affirming program proceeds as follows:

- 1) Once the gay and lesbian agenda establishes itself in a district, that agenda starts to expand. It is typically first introduced under the philosophy of "making schools safe."
- 2) Gay and lesbian activists choose words and phrases which make their agenda sound innocuous. Teachers are taught to respect diversity, but this respect is used by the activists to further a larger agenda. Teachers who oppose the group are labeled intolerant and warned of the fear and bigotry they are spreading among their students.
- 3) There is covert spreading of rainbow symbols throughout the school. The symbols are said to stand for the broader issue of respect for diversity.
- 4) Information about the group is quietly passed to students; soon the whole school is aware that a "pro-gay" group exists among the teachers.

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5) Since the group is not recognized by the school, it is impossible for parents to influence it, or ask for its closure. Although not official, the group gains credibility through each successive mailing, meeting, and forum.

Soon, students confused about their sexual identity begin to come out publicly, becoming activists themselves. Gay pride symbols appear on the student TV station. One boy enters the school talent show dressed in drag as Madonna; two young boys, and two girls, make public the fact that they are going to the prom "as a foursome." The idea soon grows that it is "cool," "different," and "chic" to be gay. Because the *students* are perceived as the initiators of these actions, there is no administrative censure.

Activist teachers become more public in their attempts to promote the tenets of gay activism. Students are by now required to read books that have explicit gay and lesbian stories, and they are humiliated in class if they express any reservations about homosexuality.

The administration, sensing that this has become an issue, now decides to include the gay group among the school's official organizations—listing it along with other support groups for issues of divorce, alcoholism and pregnancy. A gay-activist teacher is made the head, aided by a sympathetic social worker from Project 10. The group's social

worker now states that he believes that sexual identity is not an issue that has anything to do with values.

At a meeting of a student's discussion club, the leader of the gay activist group makes several announcements:

a) The rainbow signs that had appeared throughout the school were not just "respect diversity" signs; they were actually gay pride signs. (Every counselor, by that time, already had one in his office.)

b) "Tolerance" was not the goal, after all, because "tolerance" implies that there is something wrong with being gay, and of course there is not.

c) Gay rights are said to be in the same category as civil rights for ethnic minorities; therefore in the future, the school will offer gay-affirmative curricula.

d) The name of the support group is now "Project 10," referring to the "fact" that 10% of the population is gay.

From its quiet beginnings as a non-sanctioned gathering concerned with "safety," the group has now become a fully sanctioned, gay-pride organization.

*Gay is now officially okay*, according to the administration. These same activists are now moving on to other area schools, working to initiate similar programs.