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Making History: The LGBTQ+ Movement's Evolving Struggle for Acknowledgment and Inclusivity

The idea of people coming together to defend rights is one that is long held in the United States, dating back centuries and, some might say, at the core of the nation's founding. Groups advocating for LGBTQ+ rights, then, join a long history of those who struggled to attain recognition, equality, and rights long denied to them. Similar to other movements, LGBTQ+ rights advocates have different priorities and tactics among them, and the proliferation of advocacy groups over time attests to this diversity of intent and agenda.

The Society for Human Rights was founded in 1924 and sought to educate legal authorities and legislators about gay rights.¹ Though it was short-lived, by the middle of the twentieth century other organizations were established with similar goals—to educate the public and change attitudes about the gay community and the people who comprised it.² For these groups and others that followed, education pertained more to raising awareness and changing public perception than to schooling. As the modern gay rights movement gained momentum after Stonewall, accumulating successes and appealing to Americans to open their minds, political and social change that would make history emerged as the movement's intention; teaching this history in classrooms was not a priority.

The Stonewall riots were motivated in large part by LGBTQ+ individuals' desire to be safe in the spaces that they created for themselves.³ After years of harassment and arrests, LGBTQ+ people fought back against authority figures whose discriminatory practices derived from their targets' sexuality. The gay rights movement did not start with Stonewall, but it changed and became more prominent in the post-Stonewall era as new organizations, determined to secure political and civil rights for the LGBTQ+ community, were born. In 1972,

Jeanne Manford started Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG) after other young LGBTQ+ individuals asked her to speak to their parents when she marched with her son in New York's Christopher Street Liberation Day march.⁴ After similar support groups began in other parts of the country, they united as a national organization dedicated to seeking equality and promoting legislation benefitting the LGBTQ+ community.⁵ Within a decade, Lambda Legal Defense and Education Fund, the National Gay and Lesbian Task Force, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, and Human Rights Campaign (HRC) were founded with the goals of pursuing change through legislatures and courts, supporting pro-LGBTQ+ candidates, providing legal assistance to the LGBTQ+ population and ending discrimination.⁶ These organizations sought, and continue to seek, equality, freedom, and justice; their efforts are in many ways responsible for ending discriminatory laws and increasing recognition and civil rights for the LGBTQ+ population.

Through these and other organizations' efforts, legislation and public opinion changed at a faster pace than other movements for social reform including the African American Civil Rights Movement.⁷ In 1983, for example, Lambda Legal "won the nation's first HIV/AIDS discrimination case (*People v. West 12 Tenants Corp.*), helping establish that under disability laws it's illegal to discriminate against people who have HIV."⁸ Working through the court system, Lambda Legal also secured Supreme Court decisions supporting government protection against discrimination for the LGBTQ+ population in *Romer v. Evans* (1996) and overturning previously upheld anti-sodomy laws in the landmark case *Lawrence v. Texas* (2003); moreover, Lambda Legal served as cocounsel on "one of the cases collectively known as *Obergefell v. Hodges*" (2015) affirming the right to same-sex marriage.⁹ The National LGBTQ Task Force, an advocacy organization, "campaign[ed] to eliminate the sickness classification of homosexuality ... worked to lift the prohibition on federal civil service employment for gays and lesbians ... took the lead in the 1980s in national organizing against homophobic violence ... [and] shaped the first serious efforts in Washington to address the [AIDS] epidemic," among other initiatives.¹⁰ Furthermore, ACT UP was established in the late 1980s to advocate for government recognition of the AIDS epidemic and access to affordable HIV and AIDS medications; their work raised national awareness of the disease.¹¹ The gay rights movement and the organizations that encompass it, then, have experienced significant legislative and judicial success in the fifty years since the Stonewall riots. Unlike the accomplishments of other reform movements, whose advocates pushed for curricular inclusion,¹² incorporating these successes remains elusive.

The History of Education in the LGBTQ+ Rights Movement

LGBTQ+ rights organizations have and continue to emphasize education; their idea of education, though, historically applied more to raising societal awareness and acceptance of the LGBTQ+ community than school-based initiatives. The Gay Liberation Front (GLF), an organization founded in the wake of the Stonewall riots, encouraged gay and lesbian individuals to embrace their identity. The GLF's Manifesto declared, "The starting point of our liberation must be to rid ourselves of the oppression which lies in the head of every one of us. This means freeing our heads from self oppression ... The aim is to step outside the experience permitted by straight society, and to learn to love and trust one another."¹³ The National LGBTQ Task Force, meanwhile, trains activists to work around the country to educate populations about and advocate for issues important to the LGBTQ+ community,¹⁴ and the HRC Foundation works to "improve the lives of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) people by working to increase understanding and encourage the adoption of LGBTQ-inclusive policies and practices."¹⁵ It was and is undoubtedly important to address societal conceptions of LGBTQ+ individuals and lifestyles and, where possible, eradicate stereotypes and negative perceptions. Educating the public is also significantly less fraught than navigating state-monitored educational institutions responsible for minors. In thinking about the gay rights movement's relationship to education, then, it is imperative to distinguish between public education and schooling.

Statements and campaigns equating homosexual men, in particular, and the LGBTQ+ community, in general, with pedophilia made the connection between the gay rights movement and schooling especially contentious. The tension between the two garnered national attention in 1977 when Anita Bryant, a beauty queen and singer, launched the Save Our Children campaign in response to a Miami-Dade County law that prohibited discrimination in public accommodations and employment based on sexual preference. Though the scope of the law was broad, Bryant focused specifically on "homosexual teachers" whom she said "would 'sexually molest children,' serve as 'dangerous role models,' and 'encourage more homosexuality by inducing pupils into looking upon it as an acceptable life-style.'"¹⁶ Ruth Shack, the commissioner who introduced the bill, called Bryant's charges "specious."¹⁷ As the *Washington Post* reported at the time, "Save Our Children contends that passage of the law will enable homosexuals to 'recruit' youths."¹⁸ Bryant declared, "What these people

really want, hidden behind obscure legal phrases, is the legal right to propose to our children that theirs is an acceptable alternate life ... I will lead a crusade to stop it as this country has not seen before.”¹⁹ Bryant’s emphasis on homosexual recruitment, coupled with her fame and national image, led directly to the Miami law’s repeal and, according to law professor Clifford Rosky, indirectly to the rise of anti-gay curriculum laws in several states.²⁰ Save Our Children, born from opposition to a local law, had national reach.

Bryant’s campaign, which began in Florida, captured the attention of like-minded individuals throughout the country including John Briggs, a California state senator who submitted Proposition 6, a ballot initiative—later known as the Briggs Initiative—that would have “allowed school districts to suspend, dismiss, and deny employment to ‘any person who has engaged in public homosexual activity or public homosexual conduct’”; the latter included any statement or action that could be construed as supporting “homosexual activity.”²¹ Briggs, who proposed his initiative under the California Save Our Children initiative banner, closely aligned himself with and supported Bryant, echoing her pronouncements about the danger posed by homosexual teachers’ influence over impressionable children. The Briggs Initiative aimed to eradicate that influence. As Rosky asserted,

because the initiative prohibited “advocating,” “encouraging,” or “promoting” homosexual behavior it could be applied to heterosexual teachers, as well as gay teachers. And because the initiative prohibited speech that was “likely to come to the attention of schoolchildren and/or other employees,” it could be applied to speech that occurred outside of the classroom, or even outside of school.²²

The potential impact of the Briggs Initiative and the way in which it could be used against all teachers ultimately led to its failure in California, as even Ronald Reagan voiced opposition to it in the weeks leading up to the 1978 election.

Briggs was part of a larger push for anti-gay curriculum laws; his initiative was defeated, but similar laws, including one in Oklahoma, succeeded. Oklahoma’s anti-gay curriculum law, adopted on April 6, 1978, passed the state legislature 42-0 and withstood judicial challenge two years later. Though it was “introduced by Mary Helm and John Monk, two of the state’s most prominent conservative legislators ... in the popular press it was recognized as the work of Anita Bryant and John Briggs.”²³ By the late 1980s, nine more states followed suit. Though the gay rights movement accumulated successes in other forums, the pervasiveness of Save Our Children made schooling a complicated arena to enter.

Adolescents were not well represented in the gay rights movement as it grew and became more prominent in the post-Stonewall era.²⁴ Activists in the mid to late twentieth century were more concerned, therefore, with issues important to gay and lesbian adults who suffered years of discrimination and lack of access to public life. The movement expanded, though, and young people in the twenty-first century are important advocates for LGBTQ+ equality. It was natural, then, for adolescents' plight to become more important to the movement as a whole. The way in which different organizations—founded for different purposes but united by a common philosophy—have addressed those struggles and worked to improve LGBTQ+ students' lives, as well as the obstacles they face, are thus relevant to schooling.

Where organizations do focus on schooling in the twenty-first century, their goals are similar to that of the Stonewall activists fifty years ago: creating and securing safe spaces for students who identify as LGBTQ+. The National Center for Lesbian Rights, for example, listed "Making Schools Safer" among its accomplishments for 2016–17, citing its work toward repealing a Utah law censoring LGBTQ+ content in schools.²⁵ PFLAG, as well, references "Safe and Welcoming Schools" as an organizational goal and maintains a program entitled "Cultivating Respect: Safe Schools for All" which "work[s] directly with schools and stakeholders in their communities, providing support, resources, training, creative programs, and even model policy to create an environment of respect."²⁶ HRC's Welcoming Schools program, established in 2006, "provid[es] training and resources to elementary school educators to welcome diverse families, create LGBTQ+ and gender inclusive schools, prevent bias-based bullying, and support transgender and non-binary students."²⁷ While these programs are designed to meet important needs and promote learning and tolerance for all students, they are merely one aspect of organizations' much larger agendas. Additionally, many school-based programs within these organizations were created years after they began accumulating political victories. It was essential, then, for organizations that were singularly focused on the school-based experience to emerge to fill that void.

The Movement Expands: Turning Toward Schools

In 1990, according to GLSEN founder Kevin Jennings, "there was simply no one" working to support LGBTQ+ educators and their allies; this was, after all, only thirteen years removed from Bryant founding Save Our Children and the wave

of anti-gay curriculum proposals and laws that followed. Jennings, who started the first Gay Straight Alliance (GSA) at Concord Academy in Massachusetts, therefore adopted that mission.²⁸ Jennings stated, “The idea was to bring together people so that they can learn from one another and build from there. There was no vision at that point certainly of becoming this big national organization. It was more the idea that we would be stronger and more effective if we organized ourselves better and we’re supporting each other and sharing ideas.”²⁹ Over time, the network that Jennings started to assist and support LGBTQ+ and allied educators grew to encompass educators nationwide and evolved into an organization that supports and promotes improved school climates for both teachers and students. Eight years later, Carolyn Laub established GSA Network to unite and support the Gay Straight Alliances (now Gender Sexuality Alliances) that began to emerge in San Francisco schools; this organization, too, went national. GLSEN and GSA Network are therefore distinct from other LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations. Unlike those aiming to improve political and social conditions for the population as a whole, from their start GLSEN and GSA Network focused specifically on schools.

GLSEN, like other LGBTQ+ rights organizations, arose to fill an unmet need. In its original iteration, GLSEN, then the Gay and Lesbian Independent School Teachers Network (GLISTN), existed to personally and professionally support LGBTQ+ teachers and provide the resources they might need to present themselves authentically in the schools where they worked. As word of this work spread, the network grew to include public schools and people outside of education who supported the organization’s cause; Jennings called GLSEN’s growth “an opportunistic responding to people’s expressed desire to get involved.”³⁰ Moreover, as society changed GLSEN did, too. Though few high school students were “out” when GLSEN was established in 1990, many more were by the time Jennings left the organization in 2008; an organization whose programming was originally intended for teachers was, by that time, largely aimed at improving students’ experiences. According to Jennings, regardless of this change, “the overall mission never evolved.”³¹

As GLSEN grew, so did the number of schools with GSAs.³² In 1998, Carolyn Laub began working with GSAs in the San Francisco area to encourage and support students attempting to establish these clubs at their schools. Within three years GSA Network, the organization she founded, went statewide, and by 2005 GSA Network went national.³³ Though GLSEN and GSA Network shared similar goals—creating safer, more welcoming environments for LGBTQ+ individuals—GSA Network began by focusing on the student experience, and

GLSEN, in its original incarnation, was a professional organization. Beginning with forty GSAs in San Francisco, Laub and her network trained and supported students hoping to start Gay Straight Alliances at their schools and worked with existing GSAs to strengthen students' leadership skills and help them grow their organizations. Moreover, in creating an interconnected network, Laub established a support system for all GSA members from which their activism could expand.³⁴ By the time GSA Network became a national organization in 2005, then, both organizations were positioned to improve the school experience for LGBTQ+ students and their teachers.

GLSEN and GSA Network employ multiple strategies to change school climate and make schools safer as a whole and for the LGBTQ+ population. Furthermore, in keeping with its original intention to support teachers, GLSEN offers an ever-changing array of resources, lesson plans, and professional development opportunities designed to “develop the knowledge and skills needed to create and sustain a safe, inclusive, respectful and healthful environment for all ... students.”³⁵ While GLSEN provides schools with structured programs that students, teachers, and administrators can modify to meet their needs, GSA Network works more at the grassroots, “empower[ing students] to educate their schools and communities, advocat[ing] for just policies that protect LGBTQ+ youth from harassment and violence, and organiz[ing] in coalition with other youth groups across identity lines to address broader issues of oppression.”³⁶ Together, GLSEN and GSA Network's strategies attempt to accomplish three goals: making schools safe for LGBTQ+ teachers; creating a welcoming, tolerant school environment for LGBTQ+ students; and amending curriculum to be more inclusive of the LGBTQ+ population and its issues. Fulfilling these goals would change culture and climate at a school-wide level and, in particular, help those who identify as LGBTQ+ whose school experience might be most adversely affected by a hostile environment.

GLSEN and GSA Network's larger goal—ensuring safe spaces for LGBTQ+ individuals—echoes that of the larger gay rights movement. That movement's focus on larger political goals rather than school-based concerns, however, both necessitated the emergence of organizations specifically focused on this demographic and contributed to early doubts about their ability to succeed. According to Kevin Jennings, the lack of attention to young LGBTQ+ people's situations and experiences was twofold. He recalled,

There was the political sensitivity of it. I think secondly people tend to address things that affect them directly. Young people were not really represented in the

movement in significant numbers so their needs were not prioritized. ... Then there was a lot of nervousness among the adults about addressing these issues because of the fear of accusations that we were after kids.³⁷

Young people who either identified as LGBTQ+ or struggled with their sexuality were therefore left closeted and/or in inhospitable situations. The gay rights movement, according to Jennings and others, shied away from addressing young people's issues for fear of being tainted with the pedophilia accusations long directed at gay men, as exemplified by Bryant's crusade. GLSEN, then, was much needed and, in its own way, a radical step within this movement for social justice. It opened the door to other organizations devoted to improving school climate; its approach and focus, which set a precedent for the organizations that followed, are the thing that differentiate it from the organizations that preceded it.

As Jennings posited, and the organizations' websites demonstrate, GLSEN and GSA Network are not presently alone in advocating for safe schools.³⁸ In the years since GLSEN's founding, significant societal changes have propelled the movement forward and revealed truths that were unacknowledged and unaccepted in 1990. GLSEN and GSA's work, as well as evolving public opinion and media depictions of LGBTQ+ people and lifestyles, put a spotlight on school-age LGBTQ+ individuals and their plight.

In the twenty-first century, organizations, especially those that concentrate on family life, devote efforts and resources to school-based content in addition to legal advocacy. PFLAG, along with other organizations like the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), Our Family Coalition, and HRC, develops and offers programs and resources for schools, teachers, and students aimed at making schools at every level safer and more inclusive for all. PFLAG's "Cultivating Respect: Safe Schools for All" offers a guide and training toolkit for adults in positions to change the school experience for LGBTQ+ youth and a scholarship program for high school seniors who self-identify as LGBTQ+ or as an ally. As part of its Welcoming and Inclusive Schools Program, Our Family Coalition "supports K-12 educators to implement lessons that include LGBTQ+ history, family diversity, challenging gender stereotypes, supporting transgender and gender non-binary identities, and anti-bullying strategies."³⁹ Meanwhile, HRC touts its Time to Thrive conference for educators and youth counselors as "the premier, national convening to build awareness and cultural competency, learn current and emerging best practices, and gather resources from leading experts and national organizations in the field."⁴⁰ It is imperative that teachers and school personnel understand the ramifications of a climate hostile to LGBTQ+ students

and are able to effectively conduct lessons and workshops to reverse this behavior; professional development training, seminars, and guides to inclusivity are meant to build these skills. These programs are, in their own way, top-down; their attempts to create change are directed from those in positions of authority, similar to Lambda Legal, the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), and National Center for Lesbian Rights' legal efforts. They differ from legal advocacy meaningfully, though, because they focus primarily on the circumstances, atmosphere, and learning that happen inside the school building. They therefore have a more direct impact on students and their daily experiences.

Initiatives within larger organizations pursue similar goals. HRC's Welcoming Schools program and Southern Poverty Law Center's Learning for Justice,⁴¹ for example, exist to develop and share school-based programs and resources in ways that their parent organizations do not and, in doing so, augment the extent to which they are able to help school populations at various levels. Welcoming Schools provides trainings to schools and districts around the country and "developed partnerships with national, regional and local education and safe school organizations and created a website to make resources accessible to elementary schools, educators and parents across the country."⁴²

Learning for Justice, meanwhile, offers lessons and resources on a range of topics including African American civil rights, women's rights, immigration, and class in addition to its sixty-seven⁴³ lessons on gender and sexual identity. Many of these lessons examine gender and women's roles, with particular attention paid to gender stereotypes. Others explore LGBT rights and the intersection of the gay rights and civil rights movements.⁴⁴ Learning for Justice's lessons and resources require students at different grade levels of education to explore the social justice implications of the subject matter they learn.

Welcoming Schools and Learning for Justice illustrate the possibilities that exist when organizations prioritize schooling and education. The entire focus of both organizations is developing programs and materials that can be easily accessed and used in classrooms to improve students' learning and change the way they interact within their environment. This intentionality exists in both of these organizations because of their singular purpose. Thus, these organizations, subsidiaries of larger ones working for social justice, offer clear evidence of the need for LGBTQ+ rights organizations like GLSEN and GSA that are oriented entirely around schooling. They also indicate both the potential reach of organizations and initiatives that possess institutional support. Discussing the necessity of an organization like Welcoming Schools, former director of education and community engagement Kisha Webster contended that "schools

... homes ... churches ... are closed systems” that teachers need assistance in order to open effectively.⁴⁵ This significant change in the LGBTQ+ rights movement and the founding of more organizations dedicated to improving the school experience represent progress beyond what legally oriented organizations are equipped to pursue.

The History of Inclusivity: Attempts to Bring LGBTQ+ Topics into the Classroom

GLSEN’s founding and the proliferation of GSAs did not happen in a vacuum. They occurred as the LGBTQ+ community and individuals gained more attention and media coverage and at a time when coming out was still a political statement with potentially significant life consequences. In some parts of the country, the idea that LGBTQ+ content might enter classroom discussions thus began to germinate among educators, specifically as it related to students’ lives and communities; not everyone, though, was ready for this change. By the early 1990s, schools, and their students and faculty, became part of the struggle to live openly; in schools, as in society, such initiatives met a wide range of reactions and acceptance.

Developed a year after GLSEN’s founding, New York City’s Children of the Rainbow curriculum was created as a guide to teaching tolerance and acceptance of different cultures and family structures for first grade; it became a case study in the diverse reactions to and mobilization of forces for and against an attempt to include LGBT content in educational materials. The Rainbow Curriculum, as it came to be known, was released in 1992 as a 443-page guide, three of which “urge[d] teachers to include references to gay men and lesbians.”⁴⁶ Efforts to make schooling more inclusive were in a nascent stage—GLSEN was founded two years earlier and had not yet achieved the national prominence it later would—and Children of the Rainbow was, at its foundation, an attempt to further the cause of multicultural, rather than LGBTQ+-inclusive, education. After struggling to have the LGBTQ+ community represented at all, Elissa Weindling, a gay teacher, joined the project and authored those sections. According to the *New York Times*,

most of the curriculum offers such unexceptional lessons as pinning cutouts of exotic fruits and vegetables on a world map. While it includes no lessons about homosexuality, the curriculum’s critics have focused on the few short passages

that urge teachers to tell their students that some people are gay and should be respected like anyone else.⁴⁷

Those who opposed the curriculum also took umbrage with two books recommended in the bibliography: *Heather Has Two Mommies* and *Daddy's Roommate*. Opponents, led by District 24 leader Mary A. Cummins, labeled the Rainbow Curriculum “gay and lesbian propaganda” and refused to implement it in their schools;⁴⁸ Cummins, who claimed she had no personal bias against gays, declared, “5- and 6-year-olds don’t know what homosexuality is. When a child is old enough to ask a question, you answer it, but that doesn’t mean teaching that homosexuality is a morally valid alternative lifestyle.”⁴⁹ This resistance touched off a battle between districts and schools chancellor Joseph Fernandez, and between the city’s liberal and conservative blocs; the battle over Children of the Rainbow, and the media coverage that followed, blurred the lines between education and politics. While opponents on the right “denounced the curriculum as promoting sodomy,”⁵⁰ Richard Burns, the executive director of Manhattan’s Lesbian and Gay Community Center, contended, “The basic lesson of this curriculum is to teach children to love thy neighbor—at the earliest possible age.”⁵¹ As Fernandez related in his memoir, “my supporting opinion was that if we’re ever going to get this country together, we have to deal with such biases early, even in the first grade.”⁵² The fallout from the controversy led to school board defections and counterproductive division among those controlling education in New York City.

Ultimately, the curriculum guide was revised, substituting the potentially less offensive “same gender parents” for “lesbian and gay families”⁵³ and the chancellor was ousted, but the impact of the Rainbow Curriculum debacle was far more profound in city politics than it was in the classroom, where its implementation stalled. The controversy touched off a national conversation about morality in the classroom and the role of schools in imparting lifestyle information to young pupils at the same time as the 1992 presidential election juxtaposed Democrat Bill Clinton’s support for gay rights against conservatives Patrick Buchanan and Pat Robertson’s anti-gay stances. In December 1992 a nationally published article by *Washington Post* writer George Will commented, “I wonder: Are New York’s sixth-graders as well-informed about history and geography and poetry as they are about it being (this from their AIDS curriculum) ‘wise to use latex condoms with a contraceptive foam or cream containing a chemical, nonoxynol-9’?”⁵⁴ Politically, according to *Education Week*, “observers here say the Rainbow Curriculum is the central issue in about one-fifth of the local board races and

a major issue in more than half of them.”⁵⁵ Educationally, controversy over the Rainbow Curriculum—coupled with a concurrent battle over a proposed AIDS prevention curriculum—and its media coverage had a chilling effect on efforts to include LGBT individuals or experiences in the classroom.⁵⁶ Children of the Rainbow became a cautionary tale, rather than a groundbreaking effort to promote acceptance. Official attempts to create LGBT-inclusive curriculum, at a time when, as Kevin Jennings stated, there was little recognition that the LGBT population extended to adolescents,⁵⁷ were rendered dormant.

Children of the Rainbow was developed by the New York City Board of Education. It was, therefore, an officially sanctioned mandate rather than a matter of school, teacher, or district choice. Among the myriad reasons for the controversy surrounding this curriculum, then, was that it was delivered from on high, and schools, regardless of administrators’ ideas or student population, were given no option other than to implement it. Moreover, Children of the Rainbow’s target audience—elementary school children—contributed to the backlash against it. A 1993 *New York Times* article entitled “Schools Across U.S. Cautiously Adding Lessons on Gay Life” asserted that in other parts of the country lessons on homosexuality and family structure were integrated in middle and high schools and that, unlike in New York, districts worked in cooperation with parents, clergy, and community members on creating this material.⁵⁸ Thus, the factors that led to the demise of Children of the Rainbow did not apply to all attempts to integrate LGBTQ+ content. Programs established by outside organizations, though, which schools have the power to accept or refuse, offer a different set of opportunities and obstacles. LGBT History Month, created in 1994 by Rodney Wilson, followed the precedent set by Black History Month, established in 1976, and Women’s History Month, which began in 1987. Like its predecessors, LGBT History Month carved out time in the academic year for students to focus on events, trends, and individuals often omitted from schools’ history curricula. Though it was established in the same era as the Children of the Rainbow curriculum, its trajectory and staying power proved much different.

Rodney Wilson, a St. Louis teacher and graduate student at University of Missouri-St. Louis, founded LGBT History Month in 1994. He identified as gay but was not yet “out” and delved into this topic for himself through his graduate work in history. Wilson came out to his class while conducting a lesson on the Holocaust, stating that he likely would have been imprisoned in that era because of his sexuality; a “broader mission to teach young people about gay history” followed, culminating in his idea for a month commemorating LGBT history.⁵⁹

In a 2015 article for *The Advocate* describing the inception of LGBT History Month, Wilson wrote, "LGBT history gave me self-confidence as a gay person and strengthened my resolve to live, as best I could, an honest, open, and integrated life. It gave me a deeper sense of place and potential. Could it do the same for others? I wondered."⁶⁰ Given the model established by other groups' "annual reminders that not all history is made by straight white men," Wilson posited, "I wanted the same for our community and in January 1994 proposed that October 1994 be recognized as the first annual LGBT History Month."⁶¹ The way in which other groups like women and African Americans asserted their place in the canon of American history, then, was instructive for Wilson at a time when LGBTQ+ history was not often publicly discussed. Unlike Children of the Rainbow, which met with resistance within the community where it was launched, LGBT History Month was embraced within its community and the organizations that comprised it; Children of the Rainbow, after all, was aimed at elementary school children and introduced to an entire city while LGBT History Month, at its outset, existed within LGBTQ+ advocacy and liberal educational circles predisposed to support it.

According to Kevin Jennings, Wilson devised and began to seek support for LGBT History Month at the same time as GLSEN emerged as a national organization. A third party, therefore, connected these two men with aligned goals. Jennings and Kevin Boyer at Chicago's Gerber/Hart Library and Archive reacted favorably to Wilson's proposal and joined the first national coordinating committee; their participation gave LGBT History Month the institutional support it needed to gain scholarly and political attention.⁶² Moreover, the governors of Connecticut, Massachusetts, and Oregon as well as historians Jonathan Ned Katz, William A. Percy, George Chauncey, and Martin Duberman officially endorsed Wilson's endeavor.⁶³ In October 1994 GLSEN hosted a national conference for historians and educators to launch LGBT History Month;⁶⁴ in 1995, according to the Library of Congress, "a resolution passed by the General Assembly of the National Education Association (NEA) included LGBT History Month within a list of commemorative months."⁶⁵ LGBT History did not immediately become a fixture in public education and many schools refused to participate,⁶⁶ but establishing LGBT History Month introduced the concept that this history had a place in schools and classrooms.

LGBT History Month was accepted and, in some cases, celebrated within scholarly and educational circles; like the Rainbow Curriculum, it also met with resistance in some schools, among parents, and from conservative groups like the Eagle Forum and Concerned Women for America. In an op-ed they

wrote for *The Advocate*, Rodney Wilson, Kevin Boyer, Johnda Boyce, and Kevin Jennings recalled that these two organizations “bought full-page ads in newspapers condemning the NEA and scaring parents: ‘It [LGBT History Month] may be celebrated at your school before the month is over. Please call now. This must be stopped.’”⁶⁷ The NEA, too, encountered backlash that led to it advocating for all of the commemorative months it supported in a more generic way; it did not falter, however, in its support for LGBT History Month.⁶⁸ LGBT History Month was not a product of a government agency, and its advent did not have the same political weight or mandate attached to it as the Rainbow Curriculum. It was able to exist and grow, then, despite this opposition as the schools and universities that adopted it at the outset continued to do so and acknowledgment and observation of this month spread.

Despite losing momentum in the early 2000s, in the second decade of the twenty-first century LGBT History Month has regained traction and receives support from major educational and advocacy organizations. HRC, Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), GLSEN, and the NEA offer resources to schools and teachers looking to share this history with their students every October. Moreover, Equality Forum each year compiles a list of thirty-one LGBTQ+ icons about whom it recommends students learn as they commemorate this community’s history and contributions. Leaders within the movement speak favorably of LGBT History Month and the opportunities it provides; Rodney Wilson wrote in 2015 that he was proud of the way his endeavor endured.⁶⁹ It established that space existed in schools in which this history could be conveyed and that there were educators willing and excited to disseminate it, but it also has its limitations. As Eliza Byard, GLSEN’s then executive director, contended in 2015,

as LGBT History Month begins today, it is astounding to see how much progress has been made. In recent years, individuals like Bayard Rustin and Harvey Milk have been celebrated officially as American heroes, and stories of LGBT lives and movements of the past are becoming more common in our culture.

Very little of this has yet made it into the classroom, where it will have the most important impact on students’ understanding of our shared past. ... Educators everywhere can take an important step forward by continuing this exploration of the reality of our past in their classrooms, this month and throughout the year.⁷⁰

Byard made two salient points: first, that societal recognition of LGBTQ+ figures has not trickled down to classrooms, and second, LGBT History Month is not

yet pervasive enough nor does it provide adequate time for students to learn this history in depth. The founding and continued existence of LGBT History Month is a positive step in the effort to teach LGBTQ+-inclusive history in K–12 schools, but also one upon which scholars and educators need to build for instruction to be truly inclusive.

Overcoming Obstacles?

The fallout from the Rainbow Curriculum is one of the most infamous examples of the risks inherent in incorporating LGBTQ+ content, or anything controversial, in classroom teaching. The political and parental reactions and pervasive public discussion of the curriculum and its implications proved to be significant obstacles to its implementation and affected the way the New York City school board designed curriculum around any topic related to the LGBT community for the immediate future.⁷¹ This specific example, however, is not the only hindrance.

Conservative and religious groups object to LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum in any subject on the grounds that homosexuality is a sin and a topic best discussed in the home. Laurie Higgins of the Illinois Family Institute, for example, an organization that “works ... to initiate, promote, encourage and coordinate activity designed to safeguard and advance public morality consistent with Biblical Christianity,”⁷² declared in 2013,

Email all your children's teachers now, telling them that under no circumstance is your child to be exposed to any resources or activities that address homosexuality or gender confusion. ... Tell them that you will be addressing those topics at home in a way that honors your beliefs and respects the dignity of all persons—which public school resources do not.⁷³

Similarly, Barbara Anderson, the head of the Parents Action League—an organization the Southern Poverty Law Center designated as an anti-gay hate group—argued against the Safe and Supportive Minnesota Schools Act in 2014, stating, “The greatest threat to our freedom and the health and well-being of our children is from this radical homosexual agenda that is just so pervasive.”⁷⁴ Focus on the Family, meanwhile, “provide[s] help and resources ... for parents to raise their children according to morals and values grounded in biblical principles.”⁷⁵ Candi Cushman, the organization's Director of Education Issues, created True

Tolerance, an online resource that poses the following questions to parents concerned with their local schools' representations of LGBTQ+ lifestyles:

Can we really afford to teach the next generation that there is nothing distinctive or particularly beneficial about having a mother and a father? That a family is nothing more than a group of individuals—no more unique than a herd of elephants in the jungle? Haven't we already reaped enough of the consequences of cheapening the value of the traditional family and of man-woman marriage in this society?⁷⁶

These organizations and others with similar philosophies like the Family Research Council, which published a pamphlet entitled "Homosexuality in Your Child's School" advising parents on the ways in which schools endanger students by "promot[ing] the celebration of homosexual behavior and the silencing of any opposition,"⁷⁷ invoked religious beliefs to justify their opposition to LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum. In doing so, they appealed to and garnered the support of the religious right in their attempts to prevent any mention of LGBTQ+ rights or history in school settings. As groups advocating for LGBTQ+-inclusive education accumulate successes, these organizations have, over time, increased the vehemence of their opposition.

From an instructional standpoint, scholars and educators argue that there are several more general reasons why LGBTQ+ content, particularly LGBTQ+ history, is not more widely included in the curriculum. Kevin Jennings, in fact, asserted that there are multiple impediments to integrating LGBTQ+ history. First, he stated, "history as a subject is less taught and less valued than it used to be" and, for that reason, "real estate in the history curriculum is very, very valuable." Jennings also posited, "The growth of the standards movement and the growth of more standardized curriculum has really put a damper on curricular innovation and curricular inclusion."⁷⁸ Historian John D'Emilio, echoing the arguments that surrounded the Children of the Rainbow curriculum, stated,

Almost all adults in the U.S. had extremely unsatisfying and in some cases even horrifying experiences with sex education. Even though LGBT curriculum inclusion is not primarily about sexuality or sexual behavior, it brings up those worries and concerns—how do we talk about such things, how do we deal with questions that will make us uncomfortable ... It's very much a "too hot to handle" subject and so it is easier to stay away from it, rather than figure out constructive courses of action.⁷⁹

Furthermore, Kisha Webster argued that in order for any LGBTQ+-inclusive curriculum to succeed, historical or otherwise, schools and communities need proper training for teachers, excellent resources, and professional and financial investment in support of this endeavor. She said, "That's why it's so important that if school districts decide to do this, they have to have funds associated with it. To me, that's what community leaders, our voters, that's what they need to focus on ... we need those who are really advocates for this to be the trailblazers and getting the necessary funds."⁸⁰ As Jennings, D'Emilio, and Webster elucidated, among those who promote LGBTQ+-inclusive education and advocate for incorporating LGBTQ+ history there is distinct awareness of the profound obstacles that have thus far prevented it from happening on a widespread basis; these obstacles, though, also point to opportunities. The reasons they discussed, combined with others—especially the fact that so many teachers are unfamiliar with this material⁸¹—illuminate why including LGBTQ+ history remains so difficult despite political and societal changes and the growing prominence of the LGBTQ+ community in the United States in the twenty-first century. Increased support for inclusive history curriculum within Departments of Education and LGBTQ+ advocacy organizations, though, could create the meaningful change necessary to make this goal a reality through increased awareness and revised standards.

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The LGBTQ+ rights movement is more inclusive of adolescents and school communities in the twenty-first century than it was decades ago when Anita Bryant and her allies attempted to convince Americans that gay teachers posed a threat to children's safety. There is more conversation among activists and in society in general about the struggles that LGBTQ+ students face and ways in which to remedy these problems and transform the school experience for all students. This evolution resulted from growth and change in the larger movement as well as the intent and focus of individuals and organizations that saw schools as sites where the same struggles persisted. It also happened despite opposition and backlash that previously posed obstacles. In terms of schools, then, the LGBTQ+ rights movement, like others seeking social justice, expanded its mission over time and as organizations arose to meet the needs of additional members of the community.

Organizations specifically focused on schooling and promoting safe, inclusive educational environments for LGBTQ+ youth are powerful within the movement and visible within society. This is the result of grassroots efforts

that gained enough support and attention to become a national movement. Greater attention and visibility, though, has not always translated to success. Attempts to integrate LGBTQ+ content met with resistance in the early 1990s and continue to encounter challenges in the twenty-first century, as evidenced by the controversy over Children of the Rainbow and the wavering fortunes of LGBT History Month; the latter faces an environment in which the emphasis remains on changing climate over teaching history. The movement has made meaningful strides in including young people in its purview since the days of Briggs and Bryant. Focusing on academic content is the next frontier.