



## Teachers

by Victoria Shannon

Encyclopedia Copyright © 2015, glbtq, Inc.  
Entry Copyright © 2008 glbtq, Inc.  
Reprinted from <http://www.glbtq.com>

For obvious reasons, no official data has been compiled as to the number of gay and lesbian teachers in the United States, but in 1997 Karen Harbeck estimated that there were approximately 278,000 educators then employed in public schools in the United States. A profession dominated by women, teaching has especially attracted single women and nontraditional men, among whom have been a disproportionate number of gay men and lesbians.

From the beginning of public education in the United States, however, the presence of gay and lesbian teachers has been a volatile issue. Homosexual teachers have faced all manner of social pressures, from expectations that they hide their sexuality to open hostility and persecution.

Although society's understanding of homosexuality has broadened in the years since the Stonewall Rebellion in 1969, homosexual teachers are still battling homophobic characterizations of gay and lesbian teachers as "recruiters" and child molesters. Consequently, even today few homosexual teachers elect to disclose their sexual orientation in the workplace.

### **Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Teaching**

In American society, teachers have traditionally played a crucial role in educating the young and transmitting culture, but the profession has all too frequently been accorded little respect. Not only have teachers received poor compensation, but they have also had to endure constant interference from community members and school authorities, who have not only monitored their professional activities but also their private lives.

Traditionally, American education has emphasized religious and moral development. In Colonial times, communities hired the most orthodox members of society to teach, including ministers. This practice soon met with objection. In 1701, a law was passed in the Massachusetts Bay Colony prohibiting the employment of ministers as teachers. However, ministers were assigned supervisory positions, and teachers were expected to follow strict religious and moral codes.

Because teachers were poorly paid, it was difficult to attract the highly religious people the ministers and the communities desired; hence, it became necessary to regulate new teachers to ensure that they were qualified to teach and also adhered to the moral code. African Americans, new immigrants, and others who were different from the majority were usually not allowed to teach.

Throughout the eighteenth century, men performed the vast majority of teaching work. But by the early nineteenth century, teaching had become a predominantly female occupation. Women teachers, having few occupational opportunities, were more willing to accept the low wages teachers were paid than were men.

They were also more willing to follow the complicated rules of conduct developed by local authorities to police the private lives of school teachers. They were expected to remain unmarried as long as they were

teaching, and they were terminated when they did marry.

By the mid-nineteenth century, with the advent of urbanization and industrialization, the regulation of teacher behavior by communities began to break down. Teachers were still expected to sign contracts with morality clauses, but they enjoyed much more freedom in their classrooms.

By 1900, women accounted for two-thirds of all teachers. As more and more women entered the teaching profession, teaching became feminized, and a new class of personnel evolved, administrators. Administrators were males who supervised all aspects of the educational institution, and the educational system became a mirror of the patriarchal model of the American family.

The administrators' work was considered manly, while the work of female teachers mirrored the mother's role in the family. These male administrators earned much larger salaries than did teachers, allowing them to support their families and removing the feminine stigma for males in the educational system.

However, male teachers (as opposed to administrators) began to be regarded as "effete" and therefore suspect, because nurturing and working with children was regarded as women's work. Moreover, as guardians of culture, male teachers--especially of subjects such as literature, history, art, and music--began to fit a newly emergent stereotype of the homosexual as an aesthete, more concerned with art and beauty than with everyday life.

### **1900-1950**

By 1920, women accounted for 86% of all teachers. Of these, 91% were single, divorced, or widowed. However, soon the feminized profession experienced a backlash as critics began complaining that female teachers feminized boys and that "spinster" women were hardly good role models for girls.

Also, during the early twentieth century, sexologists' theories of sexuality began making their way into the American consciousness, and suspicions about single people's sexual behavior became prevalent. Older, single female teachers were sometimes suspected of being mannish women who corrupted children, and the celibacy of women who lived together in "Boston marriages"--formerly regarded as innocent--came under question.

Women who stepped out of gender-appropriate roles also became suspect. Although society became more and more uncomfortable with unmarried female teachers, they continued to employ them because they were available and cheap to hire. Indeed, during the Great Depression, many school districts formally barred married women from the classroom on the basis that they were taking jobs away from men and needy single women.

With the advent of World War II, most school districts eased the restrictions on hiring married women, but by that time women were finding employment elsewhere and began to leave the teaching profession. After the war, men began to re-enter the profession as schools began to recruit male veterans.

From the late 1940s and early 1950s, when the topic of homosexuality made headlines through the Kinsey reports on male and female sexual behavior, school boards attempted to hire teachers considered appropriate gender role models--in other words, married heterosexuals. For women and especially men desiring to enter the teaching profession, to be unmarried became a liability. After World War II, married women quickly surpassed single women in the teaching profession.

After World War II, homosexuality also became more visible in American society, as more men and women began to identify themselves as homosexuals, both individually and collectively. Social and legal conflicts

over homosexuality began to occur as gay men and women moved into urban centers and established homosexual subcultures.

### **The McCarthy Era**

During the 1950s, fueled by Senator Joseph McCarthy's homosexual witch hunts, school officials began to conduct investigations aimed at removing teachers thought to be homosexual from the classrooms.

During this period, homosexuals became the chief scapegoats of the Cold War hysteria that seized the country. Thousands of individuals were arrested and imprisoned on homosexual charges. The popular consensus that homosexuals were immoral, emotionally unstable, and untrustworthy justified their punishment and stigmatization.

Homosexuals were believed to recruit young people into a "homosexual lifestyle" and, even baser, to abuse young children sexually. In 1950, in an article in *Coronet*, Ralph Major, for example, claimed that "homosexuality is rapidly increasing throughout America today," and he warned that parents had a moral responsibility to protect their children from homosexual teachers.

In addition, during the 1950s a series of sex-crime panics occurred in the United States. In Sioux City, Iowa, for example, after the rape and murder of two children, police rounded up twenty men, mostly homosexual, and incarcerated them in a mental hospital. The term "sexual psychopath" became synonymous with homosexual.

In 1955, *Time* magazine claimed there was a homosexual network in Boise, Idaho that had supposedly corrupted many young men in the area. Hundreds of homosexuals, many of them teachers, immediately left the area when the story broke.

Teachers and others who were caught up in vice stings and raids of gay bars and cruising areas often found themselves not only with a criminal record but also without a job, as it was routine practice to notify employers of those arrested for "morals" infractions.

At the same time, however, progressives became aware that the punishments of victimless crimes were excessive. In 1955, for example, the American Law Institute's Model Penal Code recommended that all forms of sexual activity between consenting adults be legalized.

Although none of the states adopted the reforms at the time, the recommendations indicate an increasing concern for the procedural rights of persons charged with crime and a growing sympathy for persons accused of victimless crimes. Karen Harbeck argues that "this heightened social conflict very quickly entered the educational realm, and that for the first time in American history the judiciary broke with educational policy concerning immorality, criminal conduct, and the extent to which someone should be punished for consenting sexual activity outside of marriage."

The state most actively engaged in terminating gay and lesbian educators was California. In the wake of the Model Penal Code recommendations, California passed two pieces of legislation to crack down on teachers. Penal Code Section 291 required police to notify local boards of education when a teacher was detained or arrested in a criminal matter. Education Code Section 12756 permitted the immediate suspension of teaching credentials if an educator was convicted of statutes pertaining to sex and morality.

Local police officials in California used these two pieces of legislation to persecute "immoral" educators. However, for the first time in history it became possible for teachers accused of criminal homosexual activity to keep their jobs if they were able to demonstrate some unconstitutional infringement on their procedural rights even though homosexual acts remained criminal.

In 1956, the Florida legislature established a committee to investigate "subversive activities." Spurred by McCarthy's witch hunts for communists in government and rumors that large numbers of homosexuals had moved to Gainesville after the war and were teaching in its high schools, the Johns Committee (named after the representative who led its work) was charged with pursuing homosexual teachers and pressuring them to name other names or face public exposure.

Although the Johns Committee lacked the legal authority to subpoena individuals, its members nevertheless used that threat to force teachers to give up their homosexual colleagues' names.

When the local interrogations were over, the Committee presented the information to the State Superintendent of Schools, who then petitioned the State Board of Education to revoke the lifetime teaching credentials of all educators under investigation. Although some teachers hired attorneys, the State Board of Education refused to hear from anyone, including attorneys, and each educator's lifetime teaching credentials were revoked.

Many homosexual teachers resigned immediately to avoid license revocation because being called before the interrogators signaled the end of one's teaching career, but at least three people--William Neal, Mary Frances Bradshaw, and Anne Louise Poston--sued the State Board of Education; their cases were consolidated and heard by the Florida State Supreme Court in 1962.

The Court ordered the reinstatement of the lifetime teaching credentials of the educators because the due process procedures in the Education Code had not been followed by the State Board of Education.

After its dissolution in 1964, the Johns Committee files were sealed for thirty years. Only in 1995 did the details of the Florida legislature's crackdown on gay and lesbian educators become available.

Despite some isolated successes in resisting the purges of homosexuals from American classrooms in the McCarthy era, most individuals lacked the resources to challenge the consensus that homosexuals were unfit as teachers. Many homosexuals left the profession entirely; others retreated into the closet and lived lives clouded by the need to keep secret a vital part of themselves.

### **The 1960s and 1970s: Landmark Legal Cases**

In the 1960s and 1970s, glbtq educators began to fight back against the discrimination they suffered. A grass roots gay liberation movement emerged that highlighted the injustices faced by gay men and lesbians and inspired many to undertake legal battles that gradually began to secure more rights for gay and lesbian educators.

In 1964, Mark Morrison, a California teacher, was fired for engaging in sexual relations with a married male teacher at his school. Within two years he also lost his lifetime teaching credentials on the grounds of immoral behavior. Morrison initiated a lengthy legal battle to regain his teaching credentials, claiming that his private behavior did not affect his ability to teach.

In 1969, the California Supreme Court ruled that Morrison's behavior did not directly affect his ability to teach, and that being a homosexual was insufficient grounds in and of itself for dismissal. However, the ruling also said that a school board might justifiably keep a known homosexual away from "impressionable children." Because Morrison's "immoral behavior" had become public knowledge, the school board's dismissal was justified, but not the loss of his teaching credentials.

The Morrison case inspired many others to resist discriminatory treatment. Rather than meekly resign after being exposed as homosexuals, some gay and lesbian teachers began to challenge school boards' right to

terminate them solely on the basis of being homosexuals. They began to appeal to state and federal courts, and they began to receive the support of professional organizations and unions.

Another crucial legal case in the early 1970s was *Joseph Acanfora v. Board of Education of Montgomery, Maryland, et al.* (1972).

Acanfora was removed from his classroom and assigned to an administrative job after the Montgomery, Maryland school district discovered his membership in a glbtq student organization at Pennsylvania State University while he was a student there. He sued for reinstatement. In the subsequent trial, medical and psychological experts were allowed to testify about the effects a homosexual teacher might have on his students; the witnesses for Acanfora argued that a child's sexual orientation is probably determined by the age of five or six, hence a teacher's orientation would have no effect on his students' orientations.

In the Acanfora decision, the Court recognized that certain homosexual rights are protected under the constitutional right to privacy. The judge noted that homosexuality was no longer regarded as an emotional problem, a genetic defect, or a character disorder, and he dismissed the idea that homosexuality was a threat to society.

However, he did not order the reinstatement of Acanfora. Rather, he accepted the school board's argument that Acanfora was terminated not because of his homosexuality but because he had not included his membership in the gay organization on his employment application. Moreover, while he found the school board's policy of not knowingly employing any homosexuals objectionable, he found that the publicity about Acanfora's homosexuality, including his vigorous self-defense, was "likely to produce imminent effects deleterious to the educational process" and thus justified the school board's dismissal.

The judge concluded that "Mere knowledge that a teacher is homosexual is not sufficient to justify transfer or dismissal. In addition, the homosexual teacher need not become a recluse, nor need he lie about himself. Like any other teacher, he may attend public gatherings and associate with whomever he chooses. But a sense of discretion and selfrestraint must guide him to avoid speech or activity likely to spark the added public controversy which detracts from the educational process. The point is that to some extent every teacher has to go out of his way to hide his private life, and that a homosexual teacher is not at liberty to ignore or hold in contempt the sensitivity of the subject to the school community."

Acanfora appealed to the United States Supreme Court, but the court refused to hear his case, thereby leaving the Fourth Circuit Court's decision upholding the firing to stand.

Despite the United States Supreme Court's failure to hear Acanfora's appeal, the case represents several important firsts in the struggle to protect the rights of glbtq teachers. For the first time, members of a school community lobbied the administration to reinstate an openly gay teacher. Seventy-five percent of the faculty and every single student Acanfora taught signed a petition supporting him.

Second, the Acanfora case was the first time an individual defendant was supported by the newly formed glbtq organizations. The Gay Activists Alliance of Washington, D. C., for example, worked on Acanfora's behalf. In addition, Acanfora had the support of the National Education Association.

Finally, the Acanfora case generated an unprecedented amount of publicity. The Educational Broadcasting Corporation syndicated nationwide a television documentary featuring his battle for the right to teach. Acanfora also appeared on the CBS television program *60 Minutes*. Moreover, throughout the ordeal, Acanfora's parents fully supported him publicly.

While the publicity may ultimately have weighed against him in the judge's tortured ruling, which seemed

to say that the controversy itself justified his dismissal, Acanfora effectively made the case that his firing was an act of injustice and thereby served notice that other homosexuals would fight against such treatment.

Two other cases in the early 1970s are important. Although both teachers lost in court, their cases also brought the plight of gay teachers to the fore.

John Gish, a Paramus, New Jersey high school English teacher organized the Gay Teachers Caucus of the National Education Association in 1972. He was also active in the Gay Activists Alliance, staging public events to increase awareness of discrimination against gay men and lesbians. When it learned about his affiliations, his school board ordered Gish to undergo a psychiatric examination. When he refused, the school board removed him from his teaching duties and banned him from having any contact with students or graduates.

Gish staged a hunger strike in protest, and he addressed the New Jersey Education Association to describe his situation. The Association's Delegate Assembly directed the Association to work for anti-discrimination legislation that included sexual orientation. Meanwhile, Gish sued the school district.

In 1976, the Superior Court of New Jersey upheld the school district's order that Gish undergo a psychiatric examination, ruling that the teacher's "actions in support of 'gay' rights displayed evidence of deviation from normal mental health."

Gish's appeal to the United States Supreme Court was denied. After seven years of legal battles, Gish submitted to a psychiatric examination, but he continued to battle for reinstatement. In the end, Gish was fired on another pretext. Even though he could not return to teaching, his activism inspired glbtq teachers all over the country to engage in legal battles to preserve their right to teach.

In the same year that Acanfora and Gish were barred from teaching, James Gaylord, a high school teacher in Tacoma, Washington, lost his job because of his "immoral sexual orientation." School officials fired Gaylord when they learned of his sexual orientation from a student. Although the Supreme Court of Washington upheld the board's decision, saying that public knowledge of Gaylord's sexuality impaired his ability to teach, he received strong support from the Tacoma Federation of Teachers, which paid his legal fees and later hired him.

As with Acanfora and Gish, when Gaylord appealed to the United States Supreme Court, the court refused to hear the case.

### **Save Our Children**

In January 1977, former Miss America finalist and Florida Orange Juice spokeswoman Anita Bryant attended a church service at the North Miami, Florida, Northwest Baptist Church to hear Reverend William "Brother Bill" Chapman focus on a proposed Dade County ordinance that included protections for homosexuals against discrimination in housing, employment, and public accommodation. According to Bryant, she felt that "God put a flame in my heart," so when Chapman urged Bryant to use her celebrity to help defeat the ordinance, Bryant threw herself into the controversy, expecting to persuade the County Commissioners to shelve the proposal.

When the County Commissioners passed the ordinance anyway, Bryant, with the help of her husband, Bob Green, and Chapman, formed the "Save Our Children" organization to overturn the ordinance by referendum. Financial support poured in from all over the country, and Dade County became the setting for the first confrontation between the fundamentalist religious movement and the emerging glbtq movement

for equality.

The Save Our Children campaign portrayed gay men and lesbians as being involved in a national conspiracy that was anti-God, anti-country, and anti-decency. As the title of the organization indicated, the presumption was that homosexuals--including especially teachers--posed a serious threat to the nation's children.

After a five-month campaign, on June 7, 1977, the Dade County Gay Rights Ordinance was repealed by a large majority. Bryant announced that Save Our Children would conduct a national campaign against homosexuality.

### **The Briggs Initiative**

During 1977 and 1978, the Save Our Children campaign successfully lobbied to repeal homosexual rights ordinances in Dade County, Florida; Eugene, Oregon; St. Paul, Minnesota; and Wichita, Kansas. These successful campaigns inspired right-wing state senators in California and Oklahoma to introduce state-wide laws targeted at gay and lesbian teachers.

John Briggs, as part of his plan to run for the governorship of California, introduced Proposition Six (also known as the Briggs Initiative) in California. The Briggs Initiative called for the firing of any school employee who was found to be "advocating, soliciting, imposing, encouraging, or promoting private or public homosexual activity directed at, or likely to come to the attention of schoolchildren and/or other employees."

Although originally introduced for the November 1977 ballot, the Briggs Initiative came before the voters in November 1978. At first, it seemed that the Initiative would be easily approved. However, by late September support for the initiative began to wane.

The National Education Association, the American Federation of Teachers, and the California Teachers Association all opposed Proposition Six. Moreover, newly elected San Francisco Supervisor Harvey Milk put together an effective coalition of unions and other progressive organizations and individuals to oppose the Initiative, and effectively debated Briggs throughout the state. Larry Berner, a well-liked second-grade teacher from Healdsburg, also debated Briggs.

But probably the most significant opposition to the measure came from former Governor Ronald Reagan, who declared that it had "the potential for real mischief," and that California's laws were already sufficient to punish any teacher who flaunted his or her sexuality or harmed children.

On November 7, 1978, California voters defeated Proposition Six by a two to one margin.

However, Oklahoma state senator Mary Helm introduced a bill with the same wording as the Briggs Initiative in the Oklahoma legislature, where it overwhelmingly passed and quickly became law.

Oklahoma judges succeeding in delaying direct challenges to the Helm Bill until 1984, when the United States Court of Appeals, Tenth Circuit, finally ruled that the law was unconstitutional. The State of Oklahoma appealed to the United States Supreme Court, which, in January 1985, on a 4-4 vote, failed to reach a decision. Because of the tie vote, the ruling of the Tenth Circuit was upheld.

In 1978, in the midst of the debate about the Briggs Initiative, conservative activist William Bennett wrote an article entitled "The Homosexual Teacher" for *The American Educator*. Bennett argued that gay and lesbian school workers should remain in the closet and that communities should decide what values are conveyed in schools. He argued that teachers who were "overt" should not be teaching in public schools.

The Gay Teachers Association of New York responded to Bennett's article, rebutting each of his remarks, but when Bennett became Ronald Reagan's Secretary of Education, he exerted tremendous influence over national education policy.

### **Current Laws**

Although a majority of states do not prohibit discrimination in employment on the basis of sexual orientation or gender identity, many cities and local governments have enacted ordinances to protect citizens from discrimination. Many school boards now also have specific regulations prohibiting discrimination against teachers on the basis of sexual orientation, and many union contracts also prohibit such discrimination. Moreover, even in areas where there are no policies specifically protecting gay and lesbian teachers from discrimination, it would now be difficult to dismiss tenured teachers simply on the basis of their homosexuality.

Still, in some areas of the country, particularly in socially conservative states or in areas where the religious right predominates, glbtq teachers suffer from acute anxieties about their job security.

Even in states where employment rights are protected, glbtq teachers often feel constrained to "pass" as heterosexuals. Not only do they fail to reveal their sexual orientation, they also in effect retreat to the closet at work, fearful of being accused of "flaunting" their homosexuality.

While courts have generally given wide latitude to local school boards in determining the "moral fitness" of prospective teachers, they have recently been more likely to protect the due process rights of individuals, especially those of tenured teachers, from arbitrary employment decisions. (Of course, it needs to be emphasized that employment rights of teachers in private or parochial schools are much more limited than they are in public schools.)

Crucial to the improved working conditions of glbtq teachers has been the support of the large teachers' unions, educational organizations, and other lobbying groups.

### **Unions, Teacher Organizations, and Lobbying Groups**

As early as the Morrison case in 1964, lobbying groups such as the American Civil Liberties Union, the National Education Association, Gay Rights Advocates, and the National Gay Task Force joined with individual teachers to fight employment discrimination.

The first gay and lesbian educators' protest against discrimination occurred in New York City, where demonstrators picketed the Board of Education in 1971.

In 1970, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) became the first major union to denounce discrimination against gay men and lesbians, and its California affiliate, the California Federation of Teachers, was one of the first unions to support glbtq teachers, actively participating in the campaign against the Briggs Initiative.

In 1974, the AFT's national rival, the National Education Association (NEA) included sexual orientation in its anti-discrimination policy.

Established in 1857, the NEA is the largest teachers union in the United States with 3.2 million members. Despite its early inclusion of sexual orientation in its anti-discrimination policies, its support for gay and lesbian teachers was initially ambivalent at best. In 1981, then-president William H. McGuire claimed that the NEA was determined to challenge discrimination against teachers, but that it would not characterize its

perspective as "pro-gay."

No formal structure within the NEA existed for assisting gay and lesbian teachers until 1987 when the newly formed Gay and Lesbian Caucus (GLC; now the Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Caucus) brought a motion to the floor of the annual convention supporting the national march on Washington. In 1988 the GLC sponsored resolutions supporting equal opportunity for every man, woman, and child involved in public education regardless of sexual orientation. The full membership supported the resolutions at the annual convention that year.

By 1991, the GLC had developed a two-and-a-half day training workshop called "Affording Equal Opportunity to Gay and Lesbian Students through Teaching and Counseling." These workshops, now entitled "safe schools for all students and employees," are now offered in Washington to interested participants from across the nation. Carol Watchler, GLC's first chairperson, says the workshops draw thirty to sixty teachers who want to make their schools positive places for everyone.

The AFT was established in 1916 and currently has 1.4 million members. The AFT also has a national Gay and Lesbian Caucus founded by Dr. Paul Thomas. Like the NEA, the AFT focuses on traditional teacher concerns (contracts, benefits, disciplinary hearings) and on the larger school community (making buildings safe and comfortable).

Unlike the NEA, however, the AFT, according to Dr. Thomas, shies away from dealing with issues of discrimination. Nevertheless, the AFT has sent Dr. Thomas and three other caucus members around the country to conduct conferences and workshops on glbtq issues.

The Gay Teachers Association formed in 1974. After approaching the representative to the local AFT unit for New York City and the president of the national AFT, and being told that neither wanted their organizations to take a public position on the rights of gay and lesbian teachers, the GTA placed an ad in the *Village Voice* announcing a meeting of gay and lesbian teachers in New York City. Over fifty people showed up.

To address the educational and social needs of its members, the GTA held a variety of workshops, some social, some educational, some geared towards political action. It also engaged in political efforts to end discrimination against gay and lesbian teachers. Its officers worked with the Executive Director of the New York City Board of Education to ensure that sexual orientation was not a bar to employment in New York schools.

The GTA also battled *The New York Teacher*, the union's newspaper, which refused to print GTA's ads announcing meetings, eventually winning the right to print those ads. In January 1978, the GTA published its first *Gay Teachers Association Newsletter*, a publication that chronicles association activities.

### **Activist Teachers**

Some teachers have gone beyond the question of equal employment opportunity for gay and lesbian teachers to activism on behalf of gay and lesbian students. These teachers, often in the face of stiff opposition, attempt to make schools safe for everyone, but especially for at-risk glbtq students.

For example, Virginia Uribe, a science teacher in Los Angeles, established the first school program for glbtq youth, Project 10, in 1984. She began the innovative counseling program when she observed an effeminate male student being taunted by other students.

With the support of the Los Angeles Unified School District and her principal, Uribe took the program to high schools throughout the district. By 1991, Project 10 expanded to school districts across the country.

Conservative backlash to the program quickly came from the Reverend Lou Sheldon, leader of the Traditional Values Coalition, a conservative Christian organization. Sheldon argued that Uribe, an "avowed lesbian," was using the project to recruit students to homosexuality, and he attempted to get a state assembly member to introduce a bill to prohibit schools from implementing a program that "by design or effect encourages homosexuality as a viable life alternative." The bill failed, but Sheldon continued to torment Uribe for years.

On November 10, 1988, Kevin Jennings, a teacher at Concord Academy in Massachusetts, came out to the entire campus in a Chapel Talk. Soon after his public coming out, one of his students, a heterosexual girl whose mother was a lesbian, asked Jennings to help her start what she called a "Gay-Straight Alliance" at Concord. He and his student thus founded the country's first Gay-Straight Alliance.

Almost immediately other schools sought him out to speak on their campuses, and he became increasingly convinced that what was needed was a national organization to address the problems of glbtq teachers and students.

In 1990, Jennings, with three other people, founded GLISTeN, the Gay and Lesbian Independent School Teacher Network. The organization's name was later changed to GLSTN, Gay and Lesbian School Teachers Network, and then to GLSEN--the Gay, Lesbian, Straight, Educational Network--whose mission is to combat homophobia in schools.

Now a national organization dedicated to creating safe K-12 school environments for glbtq students and teachers, GLSEN works to reform the American educational system in order to ensure that children accept and respect one another, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

The organization helps establish Gay-Straight Alliances. Although these school clubs are run by and for students, they often receive resources and advice from GLSEN.

In 1992, Massachusetts Governor Bill Weld asked Jennings to serve on the Governor's Commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth. The Commission's report, released in 1993, was called "Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth."

The state board of education voted unanimously to make the Commission's recommendations the official policy of the State of Massachusetts; the program, called Safe Schools for Gay and Lesbian Students, was the first of its kind in the nation, and it remains the model for all other programs that attempt to ensure the safety of glbtq youth in schools.

### **Transgender Teachers**

Transgender teachers, especially those who transition while already employed as teachers, face particular problems in the classroom. In many places, gender identity is not a characteristic protected by anti-discrimination ordinances and regulations, though transgender individuals have sometimes prevailed by arguing that laws against sex discrimination protect gender identity as well.

In any case, many parents object to their children being taught by a person who has changed their gender identity on the grounds that it may confuse them or may convey the impression that it is acceptable to change one's gender. In addition, crises over which rest room a transgender individual should use frequently arise.

Until recently, the dismissal or transfer of transgender teachers who transitioned was the rule rather than

the exception, but that is no longer necessarily the case.

William McBeth's sex change operation in 2005 initially caused quite a stir in Eagleswood Township, New Jersey. Parents crowded into a school board meeting, both to support and denounce her hiring, but by the time McBeth obtained another job in a different district seven months later, the community had gotten used to her and to the idea of a transgender teacher in the classroom.

David Nielson, a librarian at Southwest High School in Minneapolis, started living as a woman in 1998 and showed up at school one day as Debra Davis. She was sued by a co-worker who objected to Davis using the women's restroom, but the claim was eventually rejected by an appeals court.

Davis says the suddenness of her transformation startled many people into behaving badly, but she says the students were wonderful and supportive.

In some cases, restrictions are placed on individuals who transition. In Illinois, for example, Deanna Reed, a principal who transitioned from a man to a woman, kept her job, but the school board required her to devise a plan for informing all members of the school community.

The problems of transgender teachers stem from the fact that most school officials lack an adequate understanding of transgender issues.

But the employment issues actually are not difficult. As Jillian Todd Weiss, an assistant professor of law and society at Ramapo College in New Jersey, who transitioned in 1998, five years before she began teaching, says, "This is about how we treat people in the workplace in a civil society. It's not about acceptance although that would be nice. It's about law and policy, which states that it's illegal to discriminate against someone on the basis of gender."

## **Conclusion**

In the new century, glbtq teacher activism has increased. Teachers' unions and organizations such as GLSEN, as well as many individual educators, are working to improve the climate for glbtq teachers in the nation's classrooms.

However, many parents and boards of education still resist the hiring of openly gay and lesbian teachers and attempt to keep any mention of homosexuality out of the curriculum. Many school libraries fail to house resources that glbtq students need, and in many schools gender nonconformity is seen as deviant behavior.

In short, much remains to be done. Given the obstacles faced by glbtq teachers, their persistence in the profession bespeaks their dedication to improving the lives of their students through education and the joy they find in teaching.

## **Bibliography**

Blount, Jackie M. *Fit to Teach: Same-Sex Desire, Gender, and School Work in the Twentieth Century*. Albany, N. Y.: State University of New York Press, 2005.

Bonauto, Mary L. *Overview of the Rights of Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual Teachers*. New York: GLSEN, 1994.

Garber, Linda. *Tilting the Tower: Lesbians Teaching Queer Subjects*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Harbeck, Karen M. *Coming Out of the Classroom Closet: Gay and Lesbian Students, Teachers and Curricula*. New York: Harrington Park Press, 1992.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Gay and Lesbian Educators: Personal Freedoms, Public Constraints*. Malden, Mass.: Amethyst Press, 1997.

Jackson, Janna M. *Unmasking Identities: An Exploration of the Lives of Gay and Lesbian Teachers*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.

Jennings, Kevin, ed. *One Teacher in 10: Gay and Lesbian Educators Tell Their Stories*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1994.

Khayatt, Madiha Did. *Lesbian Teachers: An Invisible Presence*. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1992.

Kissen, Rita M. *The Last Closet: The Real Lives of Lesbian and Gay Teachers*. Portsmouth, N. Y.: Heinemann, 1996.

Mintz, Beth, and Esther D. Rothblum. *Lesbians in Academia: Degrees of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Sanlo, Ronni L. *Unheard Voices: The Effects of Silence on Lesbian and Gay Educators*. Westport, Conn.: Bergin & Garvey, 1999.

*Strengthening the Learning Environment: A School Employee's Guide to Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender Issues*. 2nd. ed. New York: National Education Association, 2006.

Woog, Dan. *School's Out: The Impact of Gay and Lesbian Issues on America's Schools*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1995.

### **About the Author**

**Victoria Shannon** is an adjunct faculty member at DePaul University and Columbia College Chicago. At Columbia, she develops glbtq-related courses and teaches "Gay & Lesbian Studies," a course she created several years ago.