

# In Our Best Interest: Meeting Moral Duties to Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Adolescent Students

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Adolescence is typically a difficult time as youth negotiate the challenges of early adulthood in a complicated and demanding world. Through individual wherewithal and with support from peers, family, and community, most adolescents survive these tumultuous years without major distortions to their self-esteem and sense of place in society. Lesbian, gay and bisexual (LGB) teenagers are not always as fortunate in this regard. Many of them do not have the support of parents, teachers, peers, and community, people whose support others take for granted. All too often they meet with taunting, teasing, violence, and a blind eye from those whose obligation it is to support them. In other words, they face not only the challenges of adolescence, but an additional set of social burdens unique to their sexual identities.

It is unclear that as a matter of well-established practices and policies that schools are doing their part to help adolescents negotiate their emerging sexual LGB identities. By reason of the risks they face to their lives and well-being, LGB adolescents are a public-health failure. The moral interests of these adolescents are also not well served in regard to the way in which schools work to enhance capacity for autonomous choice. It is time to expect from schools not merely a passive tolerance of homosexuality—treating it as a kind of indiscretion to be kept out of public view—but a sense that they have strong responsibilities to protect the well-being of their LGB students through identifiable practices and policies. Much of what we say here applies as well to transgender students, though the status and treatment of transgender students certainly deserves a focused discussion of its own.

In our analysis of these issues, we bring to bear some of the public-health research from social epidemiology to show that discrimination against LGB adolescents carries with it morally significant harms to both adolescents and community. Although the concepts of “trust” and “social capital” are relative newcomers to the area of applied philosophy (Daniels, Kennedy, and Kawachi 2002), equal access to them is essential for full equality of opportunity to other primary social goods. Thus they are crucial for a just society.

## **Rough Beginnings**

Although it is difficult to determine precisely how many young people identify their sexual orientation as gay, lesbian, or bisexual, according to the most recent estimates, 2.8 percent of adult males and 1.4 percent of adult

females identify themselves as homosexual or bisexual (Laumann et al. 1994). Although there may be uncertainty about the estimates of adolescents who identify themselves as LGB, there is more certainty that those who do so are at increased risk for mental-health problems, sexual risk taking, and other health problems compared to their heterosexual counterparts (Lock and Steiner 1999).

The most serious of these health hazards is, of course, suicide. Recent surveys have found that gay and bisexual men are at increased risk of suicide (Remafredi 1998, 1999). Suicide is not, however, the only health-related harm that young LGB people experience. The social environment for LGB students can be downright hostile. The National Gay and Lesbian Task Force found that 45 percent of gay men and 20 percent of lesbians surveyed had experienced verbal and physical assaults while in secondary school (Garofalo et al. 1998). Moreover, students have reported that discussions of homosexuality that took place in classes were often negative (Telljohann and Price 1993). Indeed, in a particularly jarring incident, a sixteen-year-old gay man was "outed" in class by his teacher, who said, "Well we all know what Matthew is, don't we? He's a homosexual" (Rivers 1995, 47). Some of these experiences have been vividly recaptured and recounted by the advocacy organization Human Rights Watch. Although these stories are brutal in many respects, they illustrate the breadth of assaults that LGB teens endure. For example, in 1999, a young gay man—only twelve years old—appeared on a public-television show to discuss the experiences of LGB high school students. When his classmates learned that Dylan was gay, he was regularly taunted by them with terms like "fag," "fairy," and "AIDS whore." At one point, six students surrounded him in a parking lot, threw a lasso around his neck, and yelled, "Let's tie the faggot to the back of the truck" (Bochenek and Brown 2001). When school officials were informed about this incident, they did nothing but arrange to have Dylan moved to another school. Although verbal abuse is common, physical abuse against LGB students is also widespread in schools. Students have reported being struck by beer bottles and ice scrapers and having thumbtacks placed on their chairs (Bochenek and Brown 2001). Others have been spit upon, had food thrown at them, and been kicked and punched.

School counselors claim that students often degrade students whom they identify as homosexual. By the same token, studies show that school counselors are not as helpful as one would hope. Although gay and lesbian students often turn to their school counselors for help, they frequently meet with the same homophobia that drove them to seek help in the first place. Students visit counselors to help with depression, poor self-esteem, social isolation, and elevated suicide risk (Fontaine 1998). Yet school counselors and the school environment are generally hostile to LGB students. In a national survey of 289 secondary school counselors, 20 percent were concerned about their ability to help this group of students (Price and Telljohann 1991). Moreover, a quarter of counselors said that they found that teachers were prejudiced against gay students, and roughly 40 percent said that schools responded inadequately to these students (Price and Telljohann 1991).

Many children who are victimized by school bullies or who find themselves failed by counselors and teachers can at least turn to supportive parents for comfort and guidance. The situation for LGB adolescents is different. When they turn to their families, they sometimes meet with further abuse. Parents are often unable to cope with children who have identified their sexual orientation as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (D'Augelli and Patterson 2001). Pilkington and D'Augelli (1995) found that 36 percent of their subjects had been insulted by an immediate family member because of their sexual orientation. In a study of youth at a social service agency in New York, Nan Hunter (1990) found that 61 percent of the violence young people experienced with respect to their sexual orientation occurred in the family. LGB youths are teased, taunted, and abused by their peers, families, and teachers, and this sometimes leaves only other LGB youth for support or what slender LGB-affirmative resources there might occasionally be.

Although one must be grateful for the support of young people in similar situations and that of allies, it is also important to understand the high price LGB youths pay in our homophobic society and that some of these harms cannot be assuaged in other ways. Moreover, if their social networks are restricted to one group, they lose the benefits and opportunities afforded by wider and more extensive communities. It is all too often the case that it is the heckler's veto—the disruptive objection to homosexuality—that decides social and school policy toward LGB youth.

One salient example of the way in which the interests of LGB students are passed over in silence may be instructive. The federal government now supports several programs designed to teach sexual abstinence to children. One such program is the Section 510 Abstinence Education Program (U.S. Social Security Act, Sec. 510(b)2). This program offers grants to states to develop teaching programs that meet certain criteria in regard to instruction about sexual relationships, marriage, and abstinence. For example, the grant money is provided only to programs that teach "abstinence from sexual activity outside marriage as the expected standard for all school-age children." Furthermore such programs are expected to teach "that a mutually faithful monogamous relationship in the context of marriage is the expected standard of human sexual activity." Or again, such programs are expected to teach that "sexual activity outside the context of marriage is likely to have harmful psychological and physical effects." President George W. Bush requested \$50 million to support grants with this program for the 2003 fiscal year. While the goal of these programs may ostensibly be the reduction in teenage pregnancy, there is some dispute about whether this approach is effective (see [www.agi-usa.org](http://www.agi-usa.org)). For the purposes of the analysis here, however, it is striking to note that the *very premise* of this sexual and moral education program is that there is no (acceptable) sexuality but heterosexuality and that there is no (acceptable) heterosexuality except heterosexuality in marriage. Not only is there no parallel federal interest in identifying or supporting the psychological and physical well-being of LGB students, there is, implicitly, no recognition of the existence of this category of student. Virtually every other mainstream political and educational policy also works to erase the existence of LGB students and, thereby, the responsibility of educators and policymakers toward them.

## **Trust: An Endangered Resource for LGB Teens**

One of the most profound losses that LGB adolescents endure is a loss of their ability to trust and a loss of the considerable benefits that attend trust. Trust can be defined in a number of ways. Russell Hardin (1993) identifies two approaches to the concept of trust. In the first, the “encapsulated interest” account, trust is to be understood in terms of the interest of the trustee (the person in whom trust is invested) in being trustworthy. That is, the entruster—the person who does the trusting—is able to develop confidence in the trustee because he knows that it is in the interest of the trustee to act in ways that are consistent with that trust. For example, the parties may seek a long-term business relationship that ensures that it is in the interest of the trustee to be trustworthy. Thus according to Hardin (1993), trust is possible because trustworthiness is the rational course for the trustee to take and presumably because the entruster knows this. The second approach, an “economic theory” of trust, focuses on individual believers and how they come to believe in the trustworthiness of others (Hardin 1993). Hardin suggests that we look at how people’s childhoods and limited information about the world affect their ability to trust. Here, individual experience determines people’s capacity to trust. People will have higher and lower capacities to trust depending on their experience. Thus, as Hardin (1993) puts it, the capacity to trust is learned and reinforced or disturbed throughout a person’s life. Both of these factors may be at work in any instance of trusting.

These accounts treat trust as contingent largely on the beliefs of entrusters. The wherewithal of LGB adolescents to cultivate both kinds of trust is affected by the abuse they receive within their families, peer groups, schools, and communities. Trust is difficult to come by and fragile (Mechanic 1996). Its acquisition requires repeated trust-producing events; yet, trust that has taken years to build can be dashed with one trust-destroying incident (Slovich 1996). Trust has another important characteristic; it is a significant source of social capital. Moral philosopher Sisella Bok (1978) says that “[t]rust is a social good to be protected just as much as the air we breathe or the water we drink. When it is damaged, the community as a whole suffers and when it is destroyed, societies falter and collapse” (41). A similar theme is developed in some of the literature on social capital. Robert Putnam (1995) defines social capital as “those features of a social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit” (67). Trust is an important ingredient in the creation of social capital. According to Francis Fukuyama (1995), social capital is “a capability that arises from the prevalence of trust in a society” (26). It is facilitated by the shared norms that permit “regular and honest cooperative behavior.” Trust is the most important ingredient for the creation of social capital; it has the potential to transform self-interested and self-seeking actors into collaborators and cooperators. Social capital is important because it facilitates cooperative activity. The presence of social capital has also been associated with increased civic participation, increased charitable donations, and more effective organizations (Putnam 1995).

There are two kinds of trust, "thick" and "thin." Thick trust arises out of strong and frequent personal relations. Thin trust applies to new acquaintances and is generalized. Thin trust is particularly useful in a complex and diverse community, such as ours, because it fosters a willingness to trust people outside of our immediate circle (Putnam 1995).

Two different kinds of social capital have also been identified, "bonding" and "bridging." Bonding social capital reinforces the inward perspective of a group, and it can be found in homogenous groups, such as fraternal organizations (Putnam 1995, 69). This kind of social capital can breed exclusivity. Nonetheless it provides support for less-well-off members of the group. Bridging social capital, on the other hand, is the glue that links people from different groups with each other. It is valued precisely because it builds bridges between diverse groups and facilitates the willingness of people "to give most people—even those whom one does not know from direct experiences—the benefit of the doubt" (Rahn and Transue 1998, 545). Thus bridging social capital is particularly important in the United States, because it promotes tolerance and empathy among diverse groups.

Although there are no studies with which we are familiar that specifically address LGB access to social capital, it is reasonable to speculate that LGB teenagers will suffer from serious deprivations of the most valuable kinds of trust and social capital, namely, thin trust and bridging social capital, and that they will do so by virtue of the status accorded to LGB people. Consider both the economic theory of trust, the capacity to trust that comes with positive childhood experiences, and the encapsulated-interest basis of trust, the view that trust is based on what the entruster can reasonably believe about the trustee's interests.

In view of the discrimination that LGB teenagers experience, the stories they hear depicting discrimination, and hate both from friends and in the media, both of the grounds for trust formation that Hardin identifies will be compromised. As far as the capacity to trust goes, many LGB teenagers will have had enough trust-breaking experiences to severely handicap their ability to trust others. Many will have experienced repeated rejection and ridicule from parents, siblings, relatives, teachers, and other community members. Far from building the capacity to trust, these early experiences teach young people that they cannot even trust those whose love is usually offered non-contingently. Trust based on rational interest can be eroded through similar experiences. One of the basic beliefs that an entruster might have about another person that facilitates trust is that the other "wants to get to know him," "likes her," or has such a positive disposition toward her that she will behave in trustworthy ways in order to further the relationship. That is, most people can proceed with their daily activities, trusting that others will give them the benefit of the doubt. The LGB teenager, however, cannot reasonably make this general assumption about the beliefs of those in the community. Indeed, given a background context of homophobia, the most reasonable belief for the LGB teen to impute to others is that they will not have a positive disposition toward people who identify themselves as LGB. Not only should others not be counted on to extend the benefit of the doubt, but it is just as likely that they will respond to LGB adolescents with hostility and

abuse. From the perspective of LGB teenagers, it is not always rational to assume that others are trustworthy in basic ways.

The situation is similarly bleak with respect to thick and thin trust. Levels of thick trust may be high among LGB teens, especially those who are fortunate enough to live in urban centers with large LGB populations. But many LGB teens will not be in proximity to other LGB teens. This may be one reason why the Internet has proven to be such a valuable resource for LGB teens (McAllester 1997; Egan 2000). Nonetheless the thick trust that LGB teens are able to create among themselves is not the stuff out of which a world of more extensive networks and opportunities will arise. Inward-looking thick trust does not enable bridges to be built between the relatively narrow, though perhaps rich, world of LGB teens and the various communities beyond, to the disadvantage of both.

From the perspective of harvesting the benefits to be had from social relations, LGB teens are poorly situated. Not only are they denied access to the trust and social capital available to others, but that to which they have access, namely, the thick trust and the bonding social capital of the gay community, is devalued and discouraged in any case. It is, however, important to highlight that although diminished trust and social capital cause deep and long-lasting harms to LGB teens, they also harm the community. Because trust and social capital are public goods, failure to cultivate them not only hurts those in whom they are not cultivated but also deprives the community, at large, of the potential benefits to be had from an LGB community that is rich in trust and social capital.

### **Social Relations as a Means of Health Promotion**

The loss of trust and social capital carries with it the loss of many other valued goods. Among these is health itself, a first-order good that bears directly on the opportunities available in life. The studies of social epidemiologists show that the degree to which people are embedded in a web of social relationships that provide intimacy, love, meaning, and the experience of a sense of belonging and “fit” within a larger community will influence their health outcomes over the life course (Berkman 2000, 260). According to these studies people who are integrated into a social web will have improved health: Good social relationships promote good health. The kinds of ties that count in epidemiological studies of social networks are (1) spouse and partner, (2) family, (3) friends, (4) colleagues, (5) voluntary associations, and (6) religious organizations (Berkman 2000, 260).

Simply as a matter of protecting against disease and early death, we should try to craft policy that will facilitate social relations among people and cultivate their ability to develop them. Given this end, Berkman (2000) recommends that policymakers be mindful of four factors:

1. Evidence suggests that both intimate and extended relationships that originate in voluntary and religious affiliations are important and health promoting.

2. Social networks originate in diverse relationships. Today's families come in a variety of shapes and sizes. Policies that respect this panoply of relationships will be health promoting.
3. Social support also comes from a variety of sources. It is important to be open-minded about who provides support.
4. Social networks are ever changing and are influenced by learned ability and social and economic factors. (260)

Although empirical studies need to be done on the implications of this research for LGB teens, it is reasonable to speculate that current policies and widespread tolerance of hatred and discrimination against people who identify themselves as gay, lesbian, and bisexual put the health of these members of our community at risk. Laws that ban same-sex marriage, foster-parenting by same-sex families, or adoption by LGB parents or that tolerate the exclusion of people with LGB orientation from community organizations such as the Boy Scouts (*Boy Scouts of America and Monmouth Council et al. v. James Dale* 2000) promote exclusion and isolation. Not only do these policies literally exclude those with LGB orientation, but they also implicate the law in the expressive harms of exclusion (Sunstein 1996; Anderson and Pildes 2000).

One remark is in order in regard to religiously sponsored schools. Some churches have issued advisories to respect and protect LGB people even if—as some churches maintain—their sexual identities are disordered and their sexual behavior sinful. Many Christian churches, for example, have enunciated elaborate distinctions between the sinner and the sin when it comes to homosexuality. It falls to religiously sponsored schools to explain how these distinctions can be squared with the educational needs of LGB adolescents in regard to self-esteem, trust, and autonomy. In other words, how is it possible for a school to function on the theoretical premise that homosexual adolescents are worthy of love while simultaneously exposing them to insistent messages that homosexuality is a personal and social corruption of the first order? In fact, some religiously affiliated schools complicate the message they are sending about the worth of “the homosexual” by embracing various treatments and cures for homosexuality. It is hard to understand how the adolescent's well-being is not undercut by regnant ideas that homosexuality is evil and/or that it is an illness that is possibly treatable. There is a burden of proof yet to be met by religious educators that they can and do walk this very fine line—exhibiting love for homosexuals while condemning homosexuality—in a way that does not ultimately undercut self-esteem, trust, and health in LGB adolescents. It would be a very odd victory to persuade adolescents of the evil of their homosexuality at the cost of the very traits that make their lives valuable to themselves and to others.

### **Autonomy in LGB Adolescents**

Jeffrey Blustein (1982) has argued that children should have an equal opportunity for self-fulfillment. From the evidence it appears that LGB adolescents do not have the same scope of opportunity as others. Instead, they experience serious disadvantages because of their sexual orientations and

identities. Let us refer to this in brief as the “LGB disadvantage.” This disadvantage has two main components: substandard treatment and limited expectations. The evidence for this disadvantage is overwhelming. LGB adolescents face harassment and victimization; they have increased psychological and physical health risks; they suffer from an absence of LGB adult role models; and—in schools—there is a virtual absence of practices and policies designed to *protect* and to *nurture* these children.

Childhood is not equivocal in regard to its meaning about the responsibilities of adults toward young people. On one view, childhood is a period or state of dependency and vulnerability, and it is the adult’s role to provide protection. On another view, children are self-determining agents whose capacities to exercise choice grows as they get older, and it is the role of adults to foster this capacity. On either view, LGB adolescents are seriously short-changed. It is unclear that there is adequate protection for LGB adolescents overall, and it is certainly far from clear that parents and schools are trying to equip LGB adolescents with the tools they will need to make choices about sexual practices, sexual partners, and social roles. Indeed, the deficit here is of an order so serious that it triggers an obligation on the part of society to intervene and make changes.

At a conceptual level, what seems to be required is this: LGB adolescents can be raised in ways that will help them resist substandard treatment. A further goal would be to enhance the autonomy of these young people in a way that makes them able to compete with others for social goods and to make social contributions. It should be clear that what LGB adolescents need is something *beyond* protection from outright victimization. In other words, if a miracle were to happen and there were no more slurs, no more locker room harassment, no more pranks, that improvement—and it would be no small improvement—would not be all that is owed to LGB adolescents.

The state of LGB adolescents is compromised to such an extent that more ambitious interventions are required. The goal of these interventions should be to prepare LGB adolescents to identify, cope with, and resist substandard treatment. The interventions should also encourage LGB adolescents to stake their claim to social goods and to plan contributions to the social good. To the extent that LGB students do not overcome the LGB disadvantage, they suffer personally and there is a drain on contributions to social capital through the loss of cooperative activity and stunted ambitions. It should also be said that after-the-fact protection is not enough. It is not enough to help LGB adolescents after harassment and victimization, for example. Interventions that wait this long are unlikely to repair the damage done to the victim and to the victim’s capacity to behave cooperatively with others.

Health benefits are not the only advantages to be had from a world rich in trust, social relations, and social capital. One of the most important effects of failure to promote the interests of LGB students is that they may suffer from impaired autonomy. If we understand autonomy as the capacity to distinguish among choices according to their value and implications, LGB adolescents are put at a serious disadvantage by their schooling. Similarly, if we understand autonomy and authenticity as a matter of acting on desires that reflect the person, then LGB adolescents will find that they are punished for



their autonomy. The primary obstacle to promoting choice is a pattern of consistent silence about and hostility toward homosexuality. This hostility is so pervasive—by omission and commission—that it works to force adolescents toward *adverse preferences*, preferences that are the consequence of forced choices, choices these adolescents would rather not make. For example, a young man who is interested in males may feign a romantic life with females in order to avoid the hostility that would come his way with public recognition of his actual desires. Absent any socially acceptable outlet for his interests—other than those subterranean choices that clever teenagers somehow manage to find—this young man ends up making choices he would not make *except for* social pressures to conform to expectations of public heterosexuality (Illingworth 1990).

It is not surprising that for many adolescents there is damage to self-esteem connected to their sexual interests. This is no small problem. According to one study, “[t]he self-esteem and self-worth of lesbian, gay, and bisexual youth are frequently impaired by experiences related to cognitive, emotional and social isolation. . . . As a result, feelings of inadequacy, humiliation, guilt, embarrassment and failure become merged into a general feeling of shame. Shame becomes permanently imbedded in the lesbian and gay individual’s feelings about themselves” (Grossman 1997, 45). Self-esteem and self-respect are fundamental goods to be protected and promoted (Rawls 1971). The self-esteem of children who face hostility toward their existence can be profoundly damaged. Physical and verbal harm are important assaults on psychological integrity. Adolescents typically learn to hide their own thoughts, fantasies, and behaviors in order to protect themselves from these kinds of abuse. They do this even with their own families. This process can lead to fear of abandonment, guilt, shame, and social isolation. Abuse directed toward LGB people can contribute to the sense that some adolescents’ very nature or identity is deservedly worth less than that of others. According to Sartorelli (1994), “[t]his damage to self-esteem is serious and lasting, but it is particularly grievous in its severity and effects during adolescence when the hatred and contempt directed at homosexuality from the peer groups is especially great” (192).

It is simply wrongheaded to assume that LGB adolescents already have or are by themselves alone capable of developing the skills necessary to cope with the kind of systemic devaluation that occurs every day in their lives on both symbolic and psychological levels. Moreover, any skills that adolescents might have or be able to use—verbal defenses or social skills—sometimes have to be restrained precisely because of the social demands that homosexuality remain closeted. In other words, it is hard for adolescents to defend their sexual identities without also opening themselves up to possible denigration. This self-censorship carries collateral costs: missed opportunities for rehearsal of adult relationships via socializing as LGB youths; missed intellectual opportunities to ask questions of interest; and missed opportunities for forming friendships and social relationships that can be useful later on. LGB adolescents may also experience a deadening of life expectations. Philosopher Richard D. Mohr (1988) has argued that too many LGB people end up in low-skill, low-paying jobs because, in part, they are blunted in the

careers and choices they see ahead of them. In other words, it is hard to set one's sights on mastering Mandarin in the hopes of being appointed as U.S. ambassador to China one day if one is constantly harrassed and teased about being a "dyke" or "homo" throughout the school day supposedly given over to the study of literature, language, mathematics, and history. Across the span of the impressionable years of youth, this kind of treatment—whether overt or covert—can undermine ambitions to the point that one aims at occupations perceived as having low levels of conflict or potential for mistreatment even if the trade-off is that these career and job choices are less well paid than others, less socially prominent, or in some other way a step down from expectations that one might otherwise have.

To put the matter in strong language, there is no culture of expectation in schools that adolescents can go forward and do well *as* LGB adults. There are few role models for adolescents in schools. While there are now more "out" teachers than ever, it is certainly easier to be out in some schools than in others. The difficulties of being an out teacher are all the more present in rural and/or religiously sponsored schools.

### **The Best Interests of LGB Children**

If a child advocacy model is the way in which educational work should be guided, then a great deal of appropriate work is not being done. That this work is not being done is not any less objectionable because of the belief that most LGB adolescents will someday be done with school and can live their lives released from the social pressure of that institution. The expectation that a "normal" adulthood later on for a gay man or lesbian will set all harms suffered during childhood and adolescence right is unwarranted because, morally speaking, this expectation does not address harms suffered. A focus on autonomy-enhancing education seems suited to addressing some of the problems we have identified so far. It is too much to ask adolescents to bear alone the social costs of emerging into LGB identities without some kind of visible support.

At a bare minimum, schools have a duty—both from the perspective of public health and from the perspective of morality—to protect students from harm. Over and above this minimal threshold, schools also have a duty to encourage positive models of LGB sexual identities. What this means is that silence should not obscure homosexuality where there is comparable attention to or discussion of heterosexuality. Instruction in these areas should be honest and nonevasive. For example, instruction in regard to families should neither assume nor advance the idea that only opposite-sex partners in married relationships have and raise children. Instruction in this area should point out that gay men and lesbians do have children of their own, that they adopt children, and that they keep children in foster care. It *is* an assault on the integrity of LGB adolescents to suggest to them through the formal and hidden curriculum that their contributions to the world don't matter, that their sexual and romantic interests deserve no public acknowledgment, and that they are better off passed over in silence. There is one national advocacy group—the Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network (GLSEN)—that

works to bring harassment and discrimination of LGB students in all grade levels to an end (see [www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)). This group tries to work with school districts to identify ways in which to improve and protect the environment for LGB children. It is unclear, however, that even this group has had a significant impact on the approximately fifteen thousand school districts in the United States. Some cities have instituted schools for LGB students; the Harvey Milk School in San Francisco is one such example. Despite the value of those schools for students under their protection, it is unclear that even these schools can foster the kind of thin trust and thick social capital that is needed to build bridges in a complex and diverse world (Getlin 1989).

### Conclusions

Many advances have been made with respect to the social standing of adult gay men, lesbians, and bisexuals in the United States and other developed cultures (CESCR 2000). By the same token, much remains to be done to translate that hard-won accommodation across the entire lifespan, especially into the years of minority. It seems especially important to lift the burdens of indifference and hostility toward LGB youngsters in their schools. While there are pockets of exemplary attention to LGB students in some schools, in general LGB students face systemic problems. Most schools have no articulated plan to meet the needs of LGB adolescents even when those needs are dramatically obvious. It is to be remembered that a Wisconsin school district ignored *repeated* complaints from Jamie Nabozny's parents when schoolmates relentlessly teased him about his sexuality (*Nabozny v. Podlesky* [1996]). His parents' worries and reports of harm were dismissed as oversensitive reactions to the way in which children will be children.

In sharp contradistinction to a complacent status quo, there are strong reasons—on the grounds of public health and morality—why all LGB students are entitled to more support with respect to their sexual identities. The social sciences show that there are obstacles to the psychological well-being of LGB students, to their personal development, and to their potential social contributions. These obstacles are not only in the formal curriculum but also—perhaps even more influentially and durably—in school's "hidden moral curriculum," in its day-to-day environment and lessons about what is valuable in human life. As a matter of utilitarian logic, it is incumbent on schools to accept the reality of LGB adolescents in their midst and work to protect them from harm and ensure that they flourish. When one takes issues of trust, self-esteem, and autonomy into account, a more morally demanding requirement emerges. Insofar as schools have public-health duties to promote trust, self-esteem, and autonomy, they have duties toward their LGB students that they have not even begun to identify and implement.

There is no evidence from across the breadth of U.S. schools that either the trust or autonomy of LGB students figures very largely in the goals of those schools. On the contrary, efforts to reform school curricula in exactly these ways have met with effective political resistance. In the early 1990s, controversy about a curriculum, "Children of the Rainbow," centered, in part, on

the inclusion of gay and lesbian materials in bibliographies prepared for teachers. That controversy forced the resignation of Joseph Fernandez, Chancellor of the New York City Board of Education, who had supported the curriculum. It seems that, so far, schools have been willing to trade off the lives and interests of LGB students for political equilibrium. Gay, lesbian, and bisexual students deserve more than is offered them; they deserve the same opportunities as other students to explore pathways of happiness, to protect their health, and to enlarge their powers of autonomy. The prevailing “don’t ask, don’t tell” approach in adolescent education stifles individual flourishing, imbues LGB adolescents with a servility of temperament, and stifles the social contributions LGB students could make were their life trajectories not crippled by adverse preferences (Sartorelli 1994).

Working to protect and promote the interests of LGB adolescents in schools would also provide a clear benefit to other adolescents as well. As things stand, a great deal of time and effort goes into the public rituals, words, and demonstrations of many adolescents that they are *assuredly not* homosexual. Some adolescents try to disprove their homosexuality through harsh antigay behavior. Many homophobic acts are self-protective acts: They have their root in a desperate wish to be protected from entrenched homophobia (Card 1995). Denial of homosexuality is a way of saying that one does not deserve the social mistreatment that attaches to homosexuality as a matter of social course. To the extent that all students are more comfortable with homosexuality—theirs and others’—they will expend less effort on repelling being labeled as homosexual. Bringing LGB students, faculty, and staff into the open—and valuing their sexual identities as such—would work to dissolve a major source of hostility toward homosexuality, that of an ironically self-protective hatred and violence.

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