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Schools are finally getting tougher on gay bullying

Bottle-blond bangs swept over one eye ? this, the other boys whispered, was not a man's haircut. One of them ? a popular, handsome specimen ? grew particularly incensed at his classmate's new look. He formed a posse and found a pair of scissors. After locating the blond boy, the gang tackled him. The boy screamed for help, but none came. Lock by lock, his hair was lopped off.Soon after, the boy disappeared from school. Eventually, he returned, his hair clipped short and back to its natural brown color.

There was no disciplinary action, but the incident would forever haunt everyone involved, save for the lead attacker, Mitt Romney. He forgot about it, married a pretty girl, produced five handsome sons and made hundreds of millions of dollars. Now he wants to be president.

Gay kids have long been a target of bullying. Until recently, incidents could be laughed off as "pranks" and no one suffered any consequences, save for the gay kid. But in the last few years, that has begun to change.

Some say it started the night Tyler Clementi leapt from the George Washington Bridge. He'd just discovered that his roommate at Rutgers University had used a Webcam to spy on a kiss he shared with another man. Police found Clementi's body seven days later.

Clementi wasn't the only gay kid to commit suicide that September ? there were 10 in all. Asher Brown, a 13-year-old boy from Cypress, Texas, shot himself in the head with his stepfather's Beretta. Seth Walsh, 13, hung himself in his rural California backyard just a half-hour after his mother had rescued him from a gang of bullies.

"It is a totally unnecessary tragedy for my children," says Wendy Walsh, Seth's mother. "I don't know where all the hate comes from."

Now bullies everywhere are being held to account. Dharun Ravi, the roommate who spied on Clementi, was charged and found guilty of a hate crime ? last week he was sentenced to 30 days in jail. The Department of Justice brought harsh sanctions down on Walsh's school district, and the local Legislature passed "Seth's Law," making it mandatory for schools to formally investigate bullying claims. News of 15-year-old Billy Lucas's suicide inspired the creation of the "It Gets

Better" campaign, a viral video series designed to show gay kids there's a better life after graduation.

"That September woke a lot of older, grown-up LGBT members to the fact that while it had gotten so much better for us out in the world, there had been the inverse effect of upping the temperature for kids in school," says Dan Savage, the alternative-weekly sex columnist who started "It Gets Better." "I really do think it shifted the culture."

The world swooned earlier this month when President Obama gave gay marriage his personal blessing, but his administration's efforts to combat bullying may actually be his more valuable contribution. Under his direction, the Department of Justice has vigorously pursued schools all over the country for failing to protect gay kids. Obama also endorsed the Student Non-Discrimination Act, a bill introduced by Sen. Al Franken to make homosexuality a federally protected class.

"It gives them sort of the same civil rights as racial minorities got from the '64 Civil Rights Act, that women got from Title IX," says Franken. "I think more people are beginning to see this for what it is.... This is a group of people that just overwhelmingly are the victims of bullying and harassment."

When it comes to gay bullying, society seems to be experiencing something of a paradigm shift.

"I compare it to what happened in the South in the Civil Rights Movement," says Jamie Nabozny, the plaintiff in the country's first gay bullying case. "The fall of 2010 will be comparable to what happened in Selma."?
Until recently, the only classroom conversation about homosexuality and kids was how to keep them separate. In the '70s, teachers were routinely fired for coming out of the closet. There was no such thing as a Gay-Straight Alliance club in school.

The arrival of AIDS in the '80s forced sex education programs to acknowledge the existence of homosexuality. That in turn triggered a righteous panic. In 1987, Republican Sen. Jesse Helms took to the Senate floor brandishing a Gay Men's Health Crisis comic as part of his successful bid to ban federal funding for AIDS education materials that "promote or encourage, directly or indirectly, homosexual activities."

Eight states still have language on the law books derived from Helms's "no homo promo" policy. In Texas, sex-ed classes are required to teach that homosexuality is "not an acceptable lifestyle and is a criminal offense." In Arizona, the law forbids schools from portraying homosexuality "as a positive alternative lifestyle."

"There was this fear that if you were talking about gay people, you were having inappropriate conversations with students about sex," says Kim Westheimer, director of the Human Rights Campaign Foundation's Welcoming Schools project.

The gay rights movement began to push back in the '90s. An openly gay teacher in Boston named Kevin Jennings founded the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network to help

educators who wanted to offer counsel to gay kids. In 1999, a judge affirmed that Gay-Straight Alliance clubs had a right to gather on school grounds.

"When Matthew Shepard died, that's when folks really started to really pay attention to what was happening in the lesbian, gay, bisexual community outside of AIDS, and really focusing on youth," says Laura McGinnis, communications director for The Trevor Project, a national suicide prevention group headquartered in West Hollywood, California.

Allies of gay youth compiled research showing gay teens are overwhelmingly more likely than heterosexuals to face harassment at school. The most recent figures from GLSEN reported that 84.6 percent of LGBT students are verbally harassed. A third of gay kids had skipped school within the past month because they were afraid of their classmates.

A Northwestern University researcher just published the first longitudinal study on LGBT youth and suicide. It found that victims of bullying were two and a half times more likely to attempt suicide or hurt themselves. It also showed that even when the kids had supportive figures in their lives, harassment still correlated strongly with suicidal thoughts.

"The vast majority of LGBT youth in our sample had experienced some kind of victimization," says Dr. Brian Mustanski, the lead author and director of the IMPACT LGBT Health and Development Program. "People had spit on them or yelled at them, threatened or physically attacked them."
By the time the suicides of September 2010 arrived, the correlation between gay bullying and self-harm was becoming too obvious to ignore.

"We should no longer accept the idea that bullying is a rite of passage for young people," says Carolyn Laub, the founder and executive director of the Gay-Straight Alliance Network, based in California. "What we know from years of practice on the ground is that anti-LGBT bullying and harassment and name-calling are learned behaviors, and they can be interrupted and stopped."?

What gay students go through isn't bullying as it's conventionally understood.

"Those kids have not been bullied; they've been harassed," says Dr. Susan Strauss, author of Sexual Harassment and Bullying: A Guide to Keeping Kids Safe and Holding Schools Accountable. "It requires the schools to respond differently. It's important for parents to know if the school doesn't respond, they can file charges with the state's Department of Civil Rights."

In one GLSEN survey, a scant 9 percent of school principals believed anti-gay bullying was happening "often" in their schools. Nearly all of the schools had anti-bullying policies in place, but only 46 percent specifically mentioned sexual orientation. Similarly, 49 states have anti-bullying laws on the books, but only 14 of them include protection based specifically on sexual orientation or gender identity.

"You can craft that in such a way that the school has the ability to really step in with any bullying it sees, and at the same time put other schools and students on notice," says Sarah Warbelow, state legislative director with the Human Rights Campaign, headquartered in Washington DC.

"There are certain types of bullying that occur more frequently and are a huge problem, and we won't ignore it."

It's not just a matter of semantics. A growing body of research shows that students who attend schools with "enumerated" gay bullying policies heard fewer slurs and were one-third less likely to skip class. A California Safe Schools Coalition report found that kids felt safer in school when they knew they had access to information about LGBT issues.

"We know that there are things that happen in a school that make it less likely for these kinds of behaviors to be enacted," says Dr. Stacey Horn, a professor of educational psychology at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

That makes laws that attempt to cover up the gay bullying problem all the more insidious. States that have "no homo promo" laws on the books have significantly fewer Gay Straight Alliances. This year, "Don't Say Gay" laws gained traction in Tennessee, Utah and Missouri ? they would make any mention of homosexuality in school impermissible.

And there are troubling new programs schools use to block potentially life-saving information. In Camdenton, Missouri, a school district fought back when the ACLU's Don't Filter Me Campaign asked it to dismantle Web filtering software that prevented access to educational LGBT Web sites like Campus Pride. In the ensuing court case, a federal judge ruled that "Camdenton's Internet-filter system stigmatizes, or at least burdens, Web sites expressing a positive view toward LGBT issues."

Camdenton may not be the worst of it, according to Chris Hampton, of the ACLU's LGBT Project. "We got tons of reports of this going on all over the place," she says. "We even found a few schools that blocked us while 'pray away the gay' Web sites are accessible."

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