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Bridging the Gay-Straight Divide

By [Ariel Tirosh](#)

From the [March 20, 2009](#) issue | Posted in [Local](#) | [Email this article](#)

When a boy in Joleen Hanlon's second-grade class announced to his friends that he did not like girls, a classmate told him that someday he would marry one.

Hanlon, an assistant teacher at a charter school in Astoria, intervened, noting that sometimes two men get married and sometimes people don't marry at all. She was later reprimanded for her actions.

"I don't think I did anything wrong," Hanlon said, acknowledging that school officials are sensitive to what parents may think about teachers openly discussing homosexuality.

In contrast, Nila Marrone, of [Parents for Lesbians and Gays \(PFLAG\)](#), related a story about a child being asked if he knew what a gay man was, and the child responded that of course he did, his friend had two daddies.

Still, Marrone acknowledged that parents are wary. She spoke of parents who have told her that their children's schools were teaching them to be gay because of [Gay Straight Alliances \(GSAs\)](#).

Marrone blamed this on parents not understanding the programs at their child's school. "Parents need to come to meetings like PTA and become involved in the student's lives," she said.

GSAs are student clubs in middle schools, high schools and colleges that promote tolerance and the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ) youth. The first U.S.-based GSAs began in Massachusetts in the late 1980s. There are currently more than 3,500 nationwide.

Marrone and Hanlon are part of a group of gay-rights activists involved in planning Beyond Tolerance 3, a March 28 event devoted to the creation and maintenance of GSAs city-wide. The event is sponsored by [NYQueer](#), a working group with the [New York Collective of Radical Educators \(NYCoRE\)](#).

Founded in 2002, NYCoRE fights for social justice in public schools through workshops and public activism. Its mission is to reform the education system by re-appropriating funds, getting rid of zero-tolerance policies and transforming a teacher's role in the school.

Alanna P. Howe is an elementary-school teacher who worried about homophobic tendencies in her students. Some teachers talk to their students about gay lifestyles, but she has not heard of many.

"So when these little kids get up into middle and high school where there often isn't any kind of GSA or anti-homo/ [transgender]phobia work being done either, the continued constant exposure from such a young age just reinforces those tendencies as acceptable norms," Howe said.



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Beyond Tolerance 3 will be aimed primarily at giving teachers the resources they need to promote GSAs at their schools, but will also be providing tools to students so that they can feel empowered to be active and participate in causes they believe in. The event will include workshops and forums for educators and students to voice their concerns, both to themselves and to each other.

NYQueer is also involved in lobbying for an amendment to the 2004 Dignity for All Students Act, which addresses hate-based bullying in schools. The bill prevents school administrators from discriminating against student clubs, including GSAs. This bill goes beyond gay rights and protects students from racial, gender, sexual, religious and other discrimination. The proposed amendment (A03661/S01987) is currently being debated in the State legislature.

NYQueer is working together with representatives from the [Gay, Lesbian, Straight Education Network](#), [Connect to Protect](#), [PFLAG](#) and other organizations to organize [Beyond Tolerance 3](#).

UPCOMING EVENTS:

Beyond Tolerance 3

Saturday, March 28, 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. 230 West 13th Street, Manhattan
[nycore.org/nyqueer](#)

National Day of Silence

Students across the country will take a vow of silence April 17 to bring attention to anti-LGBTQ behavior in schools. [dayofsilence.org](#)

Equality and Justice Day

Hundreds of gay-rights activists will go to Albany for a day to lobby elected officials April 28. Register at [Beyond Tolerance 3](#), March 28.
[prideagenda.org](#)

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