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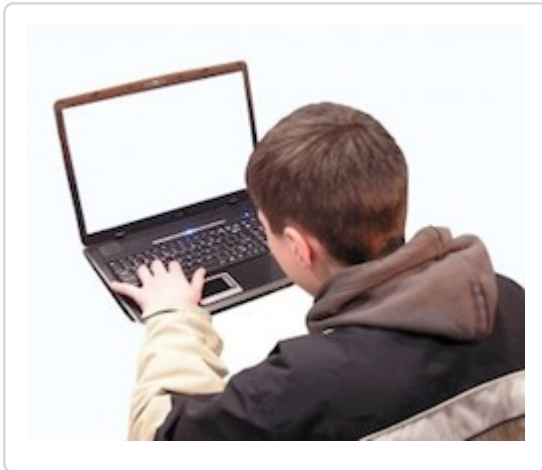
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Online High School Planned for LGBT Students

by Steve Weinstein

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Imagine a school where gay, lesbian and trans high school students are free to be open about who they are. Imagine a school where their friends share similar experiences and similar questions; one where you could get a high-quality secondary education while receiving support -- not scorn -- from adults and peers; one where all staff members genuinely want to work with gay kids or those who may be still "questioning."

Welcome to GLBTQ Online High School, the world's first online high school specifically for GLBTQ youth.

Founder and Executive Director David Glick invented such a school as a safe and welcoming educational community that provides a high quality, comprehensive college-preparatory online high school experience for students who are GLBT

youth, or those questioning their sexuality or gender, as well as any others -- no matter where they might live.

"The school is the result of my long-term involvement in education and virtual schools, and my even-longer term interest in issues of diversity, civil rights, power struggles and similar issues," Glick told EDGE. "My own personal experience with harassment in schools as a teacher showed me firsthand how awful kids can be to people who are different, as well as the disparities in education that students receive based on their location. Put it all together, and a virtual school specifically for GLBTQ kids makes perfect sense."

Another important piece of the story was what happened in Chicago when they tried to start a school for GLBTQ youth.

When now-U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan was the leader of Chicago's schools, he and others tried to provide a separate school for some GLBTQ students who needed it. "The school never got started

due to the politics of the situation, and those students who wanted a safe and separate place to learn never got it," Glick recalled. "If Chicago can't pull it off, then not many cities would be able to." In fact, there are only a handful of such schools in the country."

Andrew Miller, an educational consultant and educator with expertise in culturally responsive teaching, online education, and engaging teaching and learning, has been tapped to teach some courses at the GLBTQ Online High School. Miller travels nationally training and coaching schools, teachers and administrators.

"There is nothing out there in the world of online learning that offers this type of material," said Miller, an expert in the field of online education "It is so important because it legitimizes GLBTQ issues, people and history in the education system. It is progress towards systemic change, and I feel privileged to be able to push that change along while helping adults and children learn in a new and innovative way."

Bricks & Mortar: NYC's Milk School

While the new GLBTQ Online High School can boast it is the first one of its kind in cyberspace, the reality is, a GLBTQ school beat them to the punch some 26-years-ago. The Harvey Milk High School was established in 1985 and named after the iconic Harvey Milk, the first openly gay man to be elected to public office. The public high school is located in an office building in the East Village of New York City. It is the only "bricks-and-mortar" school of its kind in the country (if not the world) -- designed specifically for (although strictly not limited to) GLBTQ young people.

Originally, the Hetrick-Martin Institute, an organization that provides social support to at-risk youth, ran the school. It became fully accredited as a public school in 2002 and is now administered by the New York City Department of Education, the same as any other public school in the sprawling city system.

According to school officials, students must apply to transfer to the high school, like other transfer schools in New York City. The school's nurturing environment has provided a final outlet to many youth who transferred to the school because they found it difficult or impossible to attend their home schools due to threats, violence, or harassment.

The school is considered to be often the place of last resort before such students drop out. The program has been a huge success, with a 92 percent graduation rate, far above the state average. Fully 60 percent of students go on to attend institutions of higher education. Although the school has come in for criticism from the right (including the "God hates fags" Phelps clan, who picketed one year), most educators have praised the school.

The Milk School's creed to "envision a school where all students are challenged to question the world around them, to develop healthy, personal identities, to participate in meaningful civic and social experiences that will allow them to formulate and realize their educational and career goals. We seek to cultivate an inclusive, academic program emphasizing literacy, technology infusion, and life-long learning skills."

The school, the mission statement goes on, "provides students a unique, small learning community in a safe, nurturing setting designed to support educational, social, and emotional development to prepare them for adulthood, college, and the world of work. The school offers students a rigorous academic experience aligned with New York State learning standards and expectations. HMHS uses critical thinking to incorporate our history, our life experiences, and the lessons from the world around us."

Not 'Separatist'

Still, even as data shows that some GLBTQ students fair better once they are separated from their heterosexual peers, Glick says he doesn't want the GLBTQ Online High School to be viewed as separatist.

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It's important for people to understand that the goal of the school is not to segregate students from one another, he added: "Segregation, particularly in its negative connotations, generally refers to the government forcing separation between various populations. Nobody is forcing anybody to choose this school, and I'd be the first and loudest to object to any such requirement," he said. "People often choose to

be with others who share similar experiences, in education and in other parts of our lives. There are boys' schools, girls' schools, parochial schools, deaf/hard-of-hearing schools, subject-area focused schools; schools with all sorts of different focus populations."

In some cases, local schools effectively have become "heterosexual-only" schools. "All of these schools have a similar goal: to allow people to get an education with peers who share one aspect of their identities," Glick noted. "This school falls into that same category. We provide GLBTQ students with the opportunity to get an education with other GLBTQ students, allowing that particular aspect of their identity to form a common bond."

The online school differs from Milk because is unique in that even kids in rural areas or conservative towns or anywhere else can attend, whereas Milk is limited to students within the five boroughs of New York City. "That's pretty cool, and only an online school such as ours can do that," he said.

Although Glick maintains there is a need for the GLBTQ Online High School to exist, he understands that the school is not for everyone. "We're not claiming this school is right for all kids, and many GLBTQ youth have happy and successful high school experiences," he said. "We aren't trying to take that away from anybody. However, we do believe that having this option available for kids who want it is incredibly important."

Too often, however, schools aren't meeting the special needs of GLBTQ youth. "We all know the stories of bullying and harassment and tragically, suicide, but there's more to it than that. GLBTQ kids deserve to see people like them represented throughout the curriculum," according to Glick.

"They deserve teacher role models who themselves are successful GLBTQ adults. They deserve to have GLBTQ friends, along with their straight friends. They deserve to be able to act, dress and express themselves in healthy ways. Sadly, some schools can't deal with that. Some schools gag their teachers through policies that prevent them from discussing or supporting GLBTQ issues. Some deny kids the opportunity to go to prom or to express their gender. Others simply don't acknowledge the non-conforming identities of important historical figures."

"Schools can and must change, but that is a long, slow process," he continued. "We provide an immediate opportunity for kids to begin attending a school that doesn't make them feel like a second class citizen or that they can't express themselves in appropriate ways."

A Safe (Online) Space

David is confident that his school is a positive way to combat GLBTQ-bullying. "We provide a safe school free from bullying, allowing bullying victims to escape the harassment and return to a focus on education," he said. "We have various security and monitoring systems in place to ensure that bullying doesn't happen in our own environment."

David says the GLBTQ Online High School will have an important impact on other schools. "By providing students with an alternative, we also provide pressure on the traditional school system to address the needs of GLBTQ youth," he said. "Many schools still function under the assumption that they run a monopoly and that students have no choice. That makes it easy for schools to ignore the needs of some students. It's not always deliberate; schools are overwhelmed with all they have to do. However, if a few GLBTQ students leave a school, thereby reducing the funding that the school receives from the state, the school is bound to notice. If that happens, maybe they'll work a little harder to meet the needs of these kids."

The school's GLBTQ Studies course is also an important tool. Research shows that if students understand more about minority populations in general and the GLBTQ population in particular, they are less likely to engage in harassing behaviors.

"Our GLBTQ Studies course is available to all schools and students nationwide," David told EDGE. "Literally, every high school in the country could now say they can offer GLBTQ Studies. Only a virtual school such as

ours can make that happen."

All that said, David says the school has three goals; stated concisely, they are to take away the negatives, add the positives, and provide high quality education to GLBTQ students.


"We're very excited about the GLBTQ Studies course that is starting next month. This is the first known high school level GLBTQ Studies course being offered online," said David. "Schools, teachers and students nationwide now have access to a high quality course in the topic, and we're looking forward to reaching lots of people. To start with, we're running both student and adult sections of the course since we believe many teachers, counselors, parents and others may be interested as well."

"I'd also like to point out that we are a private, tuition-based school," he said. "That means we can't serve everyone that we want to because we don't receive any state or federal funding. We welcome donations, large and small, to help provide scholarships to those who couldn't otherwise attend."

EDGE Editor-in-Chief Steve Weinstein has been a regular correspondent for the International Herald Tribune, the Advocate, the Village Voice and Out. He has been covering the AIDS crisis since the early '80s, when he began his career. He is the author of "The Q Guide to Fire Island" (Alyson, 2007).

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