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## Gay-friendly online high school believed to be first of its kind

The Maplewood-based program has applications from students across the country and faculty from around the world.

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Brooklyn Suchy was in sixth grade when she wore her Gay Straight Alliance shirt for all to see: "GSA, like it or not, I am what I am."

It was at a restaurant in Newport where her shirt drew the ire of a group of girls. They called her names. They shoved her. And then they locked her in the restaurant's bathroom.

"Others don't accept people who want to be who they want to be," said Brooklyn, now a ninth-grader at Crosswinds East Metro Arts & Science School. The 15-year-old Landfall girl considers herself bisexual.

Those were the kinds of stories that prompted one local educator to begin an online high school catering to students like Brooklyn. Named the GLBTQ Online High School, it is based in Maplewood and believed to be the first of its kind. (GLBTQ represents gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender or questioning.)

Other online schools exist, as do bricks-and-mortar schools that serve gay students. But the Minnesota program is the first to combine the two features, according to the International Association for K-12 Online Learning.

It is the brainchild of David Glick, the first online learning coordinator at the Minnesota Department of Education.

He has received applications from students across the country and from faculty around the world.

"We may not bring people closer physically — but we will in every other way," Glick said. "We want to make them feel more confident about who they are."

The online nature of the school allows it to reach young people wherever they have Internet access — especially in rural areas, whose smaller populations makes a physical version of his school impossible, Glick said.

It also removes gay students from potentially hostile school environments and places them in what he touts as a "safe and welcoming educational community." Instead of facing bullies every day, students would be learning with other students who understand their concerns.

But some fear this arrangement would further alienate teenagers already at risk.

"The danger of the online high school is that kids will stay isolated and feel uncared for," said David Johnson, who teaches social psychology at the University of Minnesota.

"It would be much better to have these kids in a regular high school," he said.

Glick brushed aside such criticisms, countering that "most online teachers get to know their online students better than face-to-face because they interact with more individuals."

Curt Johnson reaffirmed Glick's assertion, saying his findings "overturned the conventional

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suspicions" of the online classroom. He is a managing partner at Education Evolving, a joint venture of the Center for Policy Studies and Hamline University that promotes technological progress in schools.

"The individual transactions of e-mailing and telephoning regularly creates a relationship between students and teachers," said Johnson, who believes online schools will outnumber their physical counterparts by the year 2017.

Brooklyn Suchy is familiar with online schools. Her sister was enrolled at BlueSky Online Charter School in West St. Paul. While she believes her sister became more distant afterward, Brooklyn would still consider enrolling at GLBTQ Online.

"I see my friends quite often, so I wouldn't become anti-social," she said.

Brooklyn liked the idea of Glick's project because it brings together teenagers with common experiences.

"I'd feel comfortable because I'd know people who have gone through the same stuff," she said.

Glick hopes to open the school's virtual doors in January, when it will offer an accredited high school diploma and courses that meet national criteria.

The curriculum will differ from that of traditional schools, he said, in that it will be more "GLBTQ-friendly." That involves abolishing negative messages and highlighting gay, bisexual and transgender people in history.

Teachers will interact with pupils and provide instruction through videos, chats, graphics and other multimedia, as well as occasional phone calls. Some portions of a course will occur in real time,

but for the most part, students work at their own pace, year-round.

While gay, bisexual and transgender high school students are the target audience; people of any age and sexual orientation can enroll.

"There's no other school we can look to as a model," Glick said. "People ask us, what's the research behind this? We are the research."

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## ON THE WEB

For more information on the new the GLBTQ Online High School, check out its Web site at [gltqonlinehighschool.com](http://gltqonlinehighschool.com).

## BY THE NUMBERS

**5,900** - Cost of one year's tuition, in dollars

**520** - Cost per course, in dollars

**50** - Minimum enrollment for school to launch

**24** - Student applications to date

**100** - Staff applications to date

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