GAY PRIDE MONTH

WHEN WILL THEY LEARN

Teaching LGBTQ history benefits all students, educators say

Matt Alderton Special to USA TODAY

By definition, schools exist to teach. And most of the time, they do. In some states and school districts, however, classrooms whose mission should be conveying knowledge are instead being encouraged, empowered and even required to withhold it. ● Florida comes to mind. In March, Gov. Ron DeSantis, a Republican, signed that state's controversial "Parental Rights in Education" law. Nicknamed "Don't Say Gay" by opponents, the law forbids "classroom instruction by school personnel or third parties on sexual orientation or gender identity" through third grade, or in any grade when it's taught "in a manner that is not age-appropriate or developmentally appropriate for students." It allows parents to sue school districts if they think the law has been violated.

Proponents say the bill is necessary to prevent "indoctrination" of students by teachers who — as the Republican sponsors of a similar bill in Tennessee put it — "promote, normalize, support or address lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender issues or lifestyle." Opponents, on the other hand, say the law will chill speech about LGBTQ subjects in schools entirely, creating classrooms that are prejudicial instead of inclusive.

In many cases, parents, educators and lawmakers on both sides of the debate have never experienced life in a classroom that erases them. Seventeen-year-old Jordyn Pruitt has.

Pruitt, who identifies as nonbinary, panromantic and asexual, recently graduated from high school in Atlanta, and previously went to school in Alabama. The Black child of lesbian parents, they spent their entire education feeling absent from — and therefore erased by — their teachers' lesson plans.

"When I got to middle school, I immediately began to notice that when I was learning about history, it was mainly white-centered, mainly straight-centered and mainly middle class or upper-class," says Pruitt, who serves LGBTQ nonprofit GLSEN as part of its National Student Council, members of which advise the organization as it works to create LGBTQ-inclusive K-12 schools. "I didn't see myself represented in any of that. ... When you're represented, you feel seen and valued as a person. When you aren't, you feel insignificant and not important, which is such a horrible thing to feel."

From a lack of representation in the curriculum came a lack of respect, esteem and dignity in the classroom. "When I

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Katie Leung Allen, a kindergarten teacher from Alachua County, Florida, protests the legislation that opponents dubbed "Don't Say Gay" at the state capitol in Tallahassee during the debate. ANA GOÑI-LESSAN/LAKELAND LEDGER-USA TODAY NETWORK

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came out as nonbinary during my freshman and sophomore year, a lot of people were confused or even disgusted. They stigmatized my identity," Pruitt continues. "I've experienced a lot of hatred, and I think that's because people aren't educated about LGBTQ individuals and LGBTQ history."

In states like Florida, LGBTQ students like Pruitt feel misunderstood and marginalized. In other states, however, efforts to fashion LGBTQ-inclusive curriculums have created learning environments in which all students can feel safe, successful and supported — regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity.

Author Darnell L. Moore signs copies of his book, "No Ashes in the Fire," at Forsyth Satellite Academy in New York City in 2019. The book is Moore's story of growing up Black and queer and in poverty in New Jersey. KEN STEIN PHOTOGRAPHY

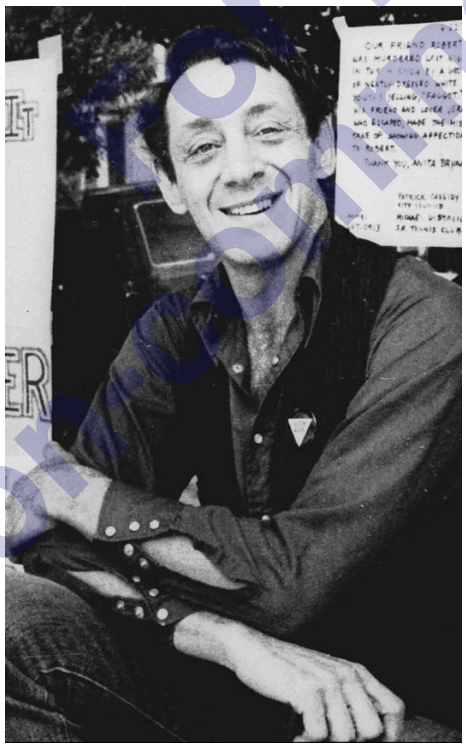
'It's not about sex'

While seven states (Alabama, Arizona, Florida, Idaho, Iowa, New Hampshire and Tennessee) have passed "curriculum censorship laws" that prohibit honest teaching about race, gender and/or LGBTQ communities, seven others have passed laws intended to have the opposite effect, according to GLSEN: California, Colorado, Connecticut, Illinois, Nevada, New Jersey and Oregon. In those states, K-12 curriculums are required to be inclusive of LGBTQ people and identities.

But there's a lot of confusion about what constitutes LGBTQ-inclusive education, and that confusion exists both in states where it has been targeted and in states where it is encouraged, says former teacher Deb Fowler, co-founder and executive director of History UnErased, a nonprofit that provides K-12 schools with curriculum materials and training to teach LGBTQ-inclusive history.

"LGBTQ history ... is about the Constitution and the courts. It's about Jamestown and the Progressive Era and World War II. It's not scary, and it's not about sex," explains Fowler, whose curriculum is based entirely on primary sources curated by credible institutions like the Library of Congress, the National Archives, the Smithsonian Institution, the National Park Service and the New York Public Library, to name a few. "We're not making this stuff up. This is history. It happened. It's facts."

Mostly, LGBTQ-inclusive education is about LGBTQ people, according to Fowler, who says students who learn LGBTQ history learn about figures like Harvey Milk, a civil rights leader who was one of the first openly gay men to be elected to public office in the United States; Pauli Murray, a gender-nonconforming priest and human rights activist who might have identified as nonbinary if they had lived in modern times; Sarah "Lyons" Wakeman, a young woman who disguised herself as male so she could fight with the Union Army during the Civil War; lesbian astronaut Sally Ride, who was the first American woman in space; and civil rights leader Bayard Rustin, a gay advisor to Martin Luther King Jr.



Harvey Milk won a seat on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors in 1977, making him the first openly gay person elected to public office in California. AP

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"These are all LGBTQ heroes who can be talked about in a variety of contexts in the elementary-grade classroom," explains educational consultant Rob Darrow, a former history teacher who now serves as director of research and professional learning with the Safe Schools Project of Santa Cruz County, which facilitates LGBTQ-inclusive education in that California county.

According to Darrow, there are opportunities for inclusion at all grade levels. In California, for example, most second-grade classrooms do a unit about family composition during which teachers can explain that some families have same-sex parents, and a unit about symbols and flags during which teachers can introduce

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students to the pride flag. High schoolers, meanwhile, are mature enough to learn about the persecution of LGBTQ people during the "lavender scare" of the 1950s, the Stonewall uprising that started the modern gay rights movement in 1969 and the Native American concept of two-spirit individuals.

"As educators, we should not be teaching history only from the white, male, European perspective that many of us grew up with," Darrow says. "We should be teaching all histories equally — and that includes LGBTQ history."

What's true in history is also true in other subjects, such as language arts, says Monica Carter, program manager for LGBTQ Writers in Schools, created by Lambda Literary and the New York City Department of Education to bring LGBTQ writers and books into New York City schools.

"We bring talented and diverse writers and their works into K-12 classrooms to talk about LGBTQ characters, and to do so with nuance and depth and positivity," Carter says. "We bring literature to life, which is important because it helps cisgender and straight allies empathize with the LGBTQ experience, and because it validates and affirms LGBTQ students' experience."

Kacen Calendar, author of "Hurricane Child," visits Irwin Altman Middle School 172 in Queens, New York, in 2019. The novel tells the story of a girl living in the Virgin Islands who discovers she is attracted to another girl. LAMBDA LITERARY

Learning equity and empathy

According to GLSEN's most recent "National School Climate Survey," which captures the school experiences of LGBTQ youth in schools, 59.1% of LGBTQ students say they feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation, 42.5% because of their gender expression and 37.4% because of their gender. What's more, nearly all LGBTQ students (98.8%) say they have heard anti-LGBTQ remarks at school, most (86.3%) have experienced harassment or assault because of personal characteristics like sexual orientation or gender expression, and many (59.1%) have experienced discriminatory policies or practices at school.

The effects are troubling. GLSEN says LGBTQ students who experience victimization or discrimination because of their sexual orientation or gender expression are more likely to miss school and avoid extracurricular activities, more likely to have a low GPA, less likely to pursue postsecondary education, and more likely to experience low self-esteem and depression, as well as suicidal thoughts.

"The numbers are not good for LGBTQ students," Carter says.

Proponents of teaching LGBTQ history say the benefits of learning it are as salient as the consequences of ignoring it.

"Legislation that's fear-based reduces LGBTQ people to being objects or 'others,' " says Grecia Magdaleno, policy and advocacy manager at the Public Health Institute of Metropolitan Chicago, whose Illinois Safe Schools Alliance helped write and pass a law that requires LGBTQ-inclusive education in that state. "When you include in curriculums [LGBTQ] human beings who contributed to society and who were living authentically, it promotes the idea of humanity."

Also, the idea of love. "Although it might sound froufrou or fluffy, that's what it comes down to," Magdaleno says. "When you have inclusive curriculum, it creates a sort of respect in the classroom, which you then apply in your personal life. For instance, I don't identify as Black, but learning about Black history very much instilled in me a level of respect for the Black community. It helped me appreciate that my experience isn't the only experience."

In that way, what's good for LGBTQ students is good for all students, according to Magdaleno. "When we include LGBTQ identities in curriculums, we hold up mirrors so that LGBTQ students can see themselves reflected in the classroom. But we also create windows into the LGBTQ experience for students who don't identify as such so they can learn from folks who do in a way that builds empathy."

That kind of empathy is contagious, so it serves not only individual students, but also the broader communities in which they live, where a happy, healthy and educated citizenry drives positive outcomes like increased public safety, better quality of life and economic prosperity.

"Once you start changing the culture in schools, it leaps out into the community," Carter says.

Teaching teachers

Communities can't realize the benefits of LGBTQ-inclusive education without support from parents and teachers, Magdaleno says. To get it, they say, those who support inclusion must acknowledge, understand and then confront the fears of people who oppose it.

"We have really wonderful conversations with parents on both sides, including those who are really supportive, those who are ambivalent about it and those who are scared or maybe even antagonistic," Magdaleno says. "And when we're successful, we turn parents into advocates who will talk to other parents and school-based community members on our behalf."

Often, educators are a bigger obstacle than parents. Because most of them weren't taught LGBTQ history, they're unfamiliar with it. And if they aren't LGBTQ themselves, they may feel unqualified or ill-suited to teach LGBTQ subject matter. Inclusive curriculums therefore address an extra roadblock in the form of teacher training and education.

Along with lesson plans and curriculum resources, groups like the Safe Schools Project of Santa Cruz County, History UnErased, Lambda Literary and the Illinois Safe Schools Alliance are providing training to help educators anticipate and respond to opposition.

And despite the howls of resistance in states like Florida, their efforts are working.

"Their voices may be loud, but in reality it's a tiny number of people who are authoring these egregious bills," concludes Fowler, who says enthusiasm for LGBTQ-inclusive curriculums is palpable among students, parents and educators nationwide. "Our goal is to reach every student in every school with our curriculum, because we know it's saving lives. That's not going to happen in my lifetime, but the needle is definitely moving."