In every class in every school throughout our country there are students who are not being given an equal education. I am not talking about blacks or Hispanics or other ethnic minorities that we hear so much about. I am referring to a hidden minority: the boys and girls who are gay or lesbian. We do little - in most cases nothing - to prepare them for a world that reviles them or to support them in a school environment in which they are called faggots and dykes.

In the two high schools where I teach, posters offering information about smoking, drug use, AIDS, teen pregnancy, and date rape are prominently displayed. You name it, and we have a poster and a program for it. But nowhere, not even in a guidance office, have I ever seen a poster that says simply, "You may be gay, and that's okay."

A conspiracy of silence shrouds the issue of sexual orientation. Twenty years ago, the American Psychiatric Association recognized that being gay is okay. The American Medical Association, The American Psychological Association, The American Nurses' Association, the National Education Association, and the American Federation of Teachers all say that being gay is okay. But we educators say nothing in our schools. What's wrong with this picture?

Homophobia comes in many flavors. Some people are simply hateful, but most are not. The conspiracy of silence is not based on malice. There are too many good people in education for that to be true.

Ignorance is part of the problem. Many educators still think that people are gay and lesbian by choice. What a joke! Who would choose to be gay or lesbian in this society? Some say that gays and lesbians are sexual aggressors, but there is absolutely no evidence for this claim. Finally, gays are accused of molesting children. Yet statistics clearly show that at least 90% of child molesters are heterosexual married men.

Another part of the problem is religion. Some people pick and choose their way through the Bible, selecting the passages that condemn homosexual activity. However, these same people overlook the condemnation of adulterers and magicians (both punished by death) and the appropriation of slavery and harems in the same book. But I am primarily concerned about students in public schools, not in religious institutions.

By our continuing silence we condemn our gay and lesbian students to years as psychosocial cripples. Our schools foster the furtiveness of their hidden lives. They are deprived of the opportunities to develop self-esteem and the social skills that become second nature for our heterosexual students. Fear of discovery can be paralyzing and destructive to their sense of self. Because of the hiding and the fear and the lack of role models, gay and lesbian adolescents have a suicide rate two to three times higher than that of heterosexual youths.

Back in 1991, out of curiosity, I attended the Sunday service at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Bridgeport, in Stafford, Connecticut. The topic of the sermon, "Homophobia," had been announced in a notice in the local paper earlier in the week. In the church hall after the
service, I introduced myself to the minister, told him I was gay, and congratulated him on a superb talk. It had included everything that I hoped to hear about love and tolerance. He said that it was his aim to provide a church community that was supportive environment for all people, including lesbians, and gays. But, he added, we gays and lesbians would have to gain acceptance on an individual basis. This struck me as an important observation.

In many ways and in many places a supportive environment already exists. Twenty-five years of hard work by countless people have yielded the best environment for lesbians and gays in our country's history. For the first time, an American President has publicly said the "g word" and has even appointed an open lesbian, Roberta Achtenberg, to be assistant secretary of Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Gay and lesbian people today have a galaxy of role models: Martina Natrilova, world-class tennis player; Bruce Hayes, 1984 Summer Olympics gold medalist; Janis Ian, lyricist and former pop singer; k.d. lang, lyricist and pop star; May Sarton, novelist and poet; Adrienne Rich, poet; and more than a hundred elected government officials, including U.S. Rep. Barney Frank (d-Mass.) and the president of the Minnesota State Senate.

Our schools are either unaware of the changes in our society or unwilling to reveal them to students. Moreover, teaching about prominent gays and lesbians in our society does not necessarily require making the schools a battleground, as happened with the Rainbow Curriculum in New York City.

Studies have shown that homophobia is worse among people who have never knowingly met a homosexual. The simplest solution to discrimination against gay and lesbian people seems to be for more and more gays and lesbians to come out of the closet.

There are 250 million Americans. Estimates of the number of people who have had any homosexual experience range as high as 10% of the population. That's 25 million people. If every one of them told both of his or her parents, that's 50 million more people. If everyone of them told one sibling, that's another 25 million. Finally, if everyone of them told one friend, that's another 25 million. Adding all these people together, roughly half of the U.S. population is related to or is a good friend of someone who has engaged in homosexual practices. Now if each of these people told just one more person, there might not be anyone left to discriminate against gays and lesbians.

But fear and the realities of life cause most gay and lesbian people to keep their sexual identities hidden. Gays and lesbians have been taught from childhood - by their families, friends, schools, churches, synagogues, and the media - that homosexuality is evil. When a young man begins to realize that he is gay, he is hampered in accepting himself by the same hurtful mental images of homosexuality that plague heterosexuals. It usually takes years of hidden anguish, fear, and guilt before a person comes to terms with being gay or lesbian.

So what's the answer? And what can schools do to become part of the solution?

Right now our schools are very much part of the problem. A Harris poll released in June 1993
reported that 86% of high school students said that they would be very upset if classmates called them gay or lesbian. Other kinds of offensive language are challenged and corrected, but faggot is so much a part of student culture that it often goes unnoticed - or at least unchallenged. When I was addressing the high school Student Assistant Team in Stratford, Connecticut, on this subject in 1991, one administrator said that I must have better ears than he because he has never heard the word in his school building.

Early in 1992 I met with some school officials in Woodbridge, Connecticut, the town where I live, to discuss homophobia. I usually describe the superintendent's reactions at the meeting in this way: I was asking him to free the slaves, and he denied that there were any. He told me that our high school had all its programs in place to deal with the needs of gay and lesbian students and homophobia. Yet some months later, when the student editor of the high school paper, the Trident, asked me to write an article on homosexuality, I received two phoned death threats from Woodbridge students.

Our schools are in denial, and our administrative staff is in the deepest depths of denial. In 1992 Anthony Costa, a professor at Fairfield University in Connecticut, sent out a questionnaire to teachers and administrators throughout the state asking about their school's responses to the needs of gay and lesbian students and staff members. The teacher respondents said that their schools were not promoting a climate of tolerance and acceptance. The administrator respondents were confident that their schools were doing just fine.

**How Schools Can Help: Five Approaches**

At least two states, Connecticut and Massachusetts, have suggested specific ways in which homophobia can be addressed in the schools. In the winter of 1991 the Connecticut State Board of Education published in its Equity Newsletter a list of nine suggestions for bettering the school environment for gay and lesbian people. It urged school people to pay attention to inclusive language; to challenge antigay epithets; to designate resource people in the schools for gay, lesbian, and bisexual students; to make resources and materials on homosexuality visible and accessible; to educate staff members on homophobia; to support gay and lesbian colleagues; to use those colleagues as role models; to refer self-identified gay and lesbian students to appropriate services (e.g., support groups, counseling agencies, hot lines); and to refer parents of gay children to such organizations as Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (PFLAG).

Massachusetts has made an even more thorough response to gay and lesbian issues in the schools. Gov. William Weld appointed a group of people to the Governor's commission on Gay and Lesbian Youth. On 25 February 1993 this group published a report titled Making Schools Safe for Gay and Lesbian Youth: Breaking the Silence in Schools and in Families. This 60 page report recommends several areas of concentration:

- the establishment of school policies protecting gay and lesbian students from harassment, violence, and discrimination;
- training for teachers, counselors, and school staff members in crisis intervention and violence prevention;
• school-based support groups for gay and straight students
• information in school libraries for gay and lesbian adolescents; and
• curriculum that includes gay and lesbian issues.

Following up on these recommendations, in July of 1993 Gov. Weld announced a statewide effort to train teachers to help homosexual students.

Drawing on the approach taken in Connecticut and Massachusetts, I see five areas in the life of the school community where homophobia can be addressed by professional educators. And it is homophobia that is the problem - not the gay and lesbian students and staff members. The climate of hate perpetuated through ignorance is crippling all of us. Our gay and lesbian students and staff members remain hidden because of fear. Our heterosexual students and staff members are powerless to get beyond the myths taught them by society.

Remember, one of the functions of public education is to prepare students for the workplace. When we do not educate our students about the evils of bigotry and homophobia, we fail to prepare them for the world of work, which will surely bring them into contact with gay and lesbian colleagues.

1. Professional Development: I have spoken to many well-meaning people who want to form support groups for gay and lesbian students in the schools. Over and over I praise their desire to help, but I point out that the process must begin with the staff. We teachers, guidance counselors, nurses, psychologists, and administrators need to educate ourselves about this newly emerging minority. Professional development workshops go a long way toward accomplishing this goal. Beliefs and attitudes cause us to say certain things and act in certain ways. If we still believe the myths - homosexuality and pedophilia are the same, being gay is a choice, gays actively recruit, gays are sick, and so on - we won't be able to help an adolescent succeed as he grapples with integrating his sense of self with a growing awareness of his being gay.

Planned Parenthood, SIECUS (Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States), and PFLAG are three of the best sources for up-to-date information on homosexuality. in Connecticut the state education association has been providing free workshops on homophobia for several years.

Two other excellent sources for information and materials are Project 10 in Los Angeles and the Hetrick-Martin Institute in New York City. In 1984 a teacher, Virginia Uribe, started Project 10, a dropout prevention program targeting gay and lesbian students at Fairfax High School in Los Angeles. It has grown to include contact people in all 50 Los Angeles high schools and serves as a national model for combating homophobia. Materials and a video ("Who's Afraid of Project 10?") are available.
The Hetrick-Martin Institute, founded in 1979, offers a broad range of social services to gay and lesbian adolescents and their families. In addition to disseminating materials, posters, and other information, the institute runs Harvey Milk High School, now over nine years old, which provides an alternative for students who were previously unable to complete their high school education.

Both Project 10 and Harvey Milk High School are praiseworthy attempts to salvage the lives of gay and lesbian students who have been bashed and damaged in our school systems. They stand as a condemnation of the families, churches, and schools of the children involved. The young people served by Project 10 and Harvey Milk High School have been thrown out, beaten up, and abused. That's what brings them there. Neither of these programs should exist in a country that purports to provide equal educational opportunities to all its children.

2. Support Staff and Services: The training of staff members to deal with gay and lesbian students and with issues of homophobia must be a primary consideration. Training as a nurse, guidance counselor, or even a psychologist or social worker has not necessarily educated people out of their prejudices. Those responsible for the mental health of students in the school community must have current professional knowledge about handling homosexuality.

Schools should be aware of the rich resources of the gay and lesbian community in many locales. They need to be familiar with gay and lesbian youth groups, gay community centers, telephone hot-lines, and especially organizations (e.g., PFLAG) for parents whose children have come out. Another superb group is the Metropolitan Community Church, which provides a setting for worship and fellowship and now has nearly 200 congregations throughout the country. It is an especially good source of support for Christians who are troubled by the putative condemnations of homosexuals found in the Bible.

The guidance office, the office of the social worker, the nurse's office, and the school psychologist's office are all good places to display a poster acknowledging that gay and lesbian people exist and that they are okay. All are places where books whose titles speak of inclusion for and affirmation of gay students should be visible. Sometimes just seeing such a book title will precipitate a conversation.

3. Sexuality in the Health Curriculum: In some health textbooks homosexuality is merely mentioned in a brief paragraph between rape and masturbation. But homosexuality should be included in every discussion of sexuality, from dating to relationships to parenting. It is time for the gay and lesbian student to be included. The social, psychological, and emotional development of gay and lesbian adolescents can be addressed right along with that of their heterosexual classmates. Traditionally, the entire discussion of sexuality has been heterosexual,
and this leaves a lot of us out. Finally, homosexuality is not something to be addressed only in the context of AIDS. Such an approach is inadequate and dishonest, and it can easily lead heterosexual students to view this horrible disease as simply a problem for gay people.

4. Library: Central to every high school is its library or media center. Unfortunately, here too the invisibility of homosexuality is often perpetuated. How many card catalogs even include headings for homosexuality, gays, lesbians, or gay rights? By sweeping homosexuality under the rug, we cheat our gay and lesbian students of their identity, and we deprive our heterosexual students of an awareness of the diversity of the world in which they live.

The American Library Association maintains a very active Gay and Lesbian Caucus. This group can be a source of information, booklists, and support for building a library collection on inclusion. Fiction and nonfiction alike need to reflect the presence of gay and lesbian people.

Cal Gough and Ellen Greenblatt published an excellent article titled "Services to Gay and Lesbian Patrons: Examining the Myths" in the January 1992 issue of the *The Library Journal*. It's a good place for any school librarian to start.

Library exhibits are a wonderful way to create awareness of the contributions of gay and lesbian people. Every February there are displays for Black History Month. How about a display for Gay and Lesbian Month in June? June marks the anniversary of the Stonewall Riots in New York City in 1969, which is viewed as the symbolic beginning of the gay rights movement. A less controversial way to handle the issue would be to create a display of diversity that includes African-Americans, Native Americans, gay and lesbian Americans, and so on. We did this at Stratford High School last year with no apparent negative reaction.

5. Curriculum: Affording a place to gay and lesbian people in the curriculum does not require lengthy curriculum committee meetings, new curriculum guides, or the expenditure of funds. It demands only the education, honesty, and courage of the teaching staff. The education can be accomplished in a number of ways. One method is through professional development workshops that provide information to teachers so that they can start dealing with the issues of homophobia and the invisibility of gays and lesbians in our educational institutions.

The critical word is *inclusion*. The presence of gay and lesbian persons in every walk of life can provide a teacher in any curricular area with names to mention in class. The Latin teacher could mention that Emperor Hadrian was gay. The music teacher can choose from Tchaikovsky, Benjamin Britten, Cole Porter, and so on. Coaches need to begin valuing gay and lesbian athletes. In addition to Martina Navratilova and Bruce Hayes, coaches can mention Dave Kopay and David Pallone. Our social studies teachers should include the gay rights movement of this century. And no English teacher passes the year without mentioning Walt Whitman, Langston
Hughes, May Sarton, Adrienne Rich, Countee Cullen, Willa Cather, Amy Lowell, W.H. Auden, Thornton Wilder, or Edna St. Vincent Millay. They were all gay.

To make any plan work—be it the Connecticut plan, the Massachusetts plan, or the one I envision—there is a critical need for leadership. I mean leadership from the school systems, both superintendents and principals, but also from gay and lesbian staff members. The administrators can provide an environment in which diversity is valued, nurtured, and celebrated; gay and lesbian staff members can provide the visible role models that all our students need.

Until both of these elements are in place, no effort to afford equal education to our gay and lesbian students can succeed. Teachers need leadership to set a tone, much as President Clinton has done in his brief term of office. The President lost the battle to lift the ban on gays in the military. Nevertheless, just by that effort, he has altered the playing field on the issue of sexual orientation.

We in education need to be empowered and given direction by those who lead us and evaluate us. Students, both heterosexual and homosexual, need to be able to see gay and lesbian people in the school community, or they will reject efforts to persuade them that being gay is really okay. The strengths of this approach, as I see it, is its reliance not on money, but on the honesty, integrity, and courage of those who value education.