

# Teaching Justice



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**A THIRD OF LGBTQ YOUTH DROP OUT OF SCHOOL, MORE THAN THREE TIMES THE AVERAGE NATIONAL RATE.**

**FRIENDS AND FAMILY** throughout the country are making Pride plans—figuring out what to wear, which train or whose car to take, whether to bring the stroller or the dogs, the best vantage point to enjoy the festivities, where to go afterward to continue the celebration. The crowds, the energy and the astonishing diversity and creativity in our community all bring emotional uplift.

As we go to press, our community and allies are absorbing both the highs and lows that come with our broad movement for equality: First came the decision of a majority of North Carolina voters to add a constitutional amendment barring same-sex couples from the rights and responsibilities of marriage, on top of the discriminatory statute already on the state's books. The next morning, came the stunning announcement by President Obama that he believes that "same-sex couples should be able to get married."

We applaud the President for speaking the truth. And we applaud the activists and donors who fought the amendment. The battle for equality, in North Carolina and throughout the country, is far from over. But in the face of sweeping changes in our favor, we have chilling reminders of how numerous and motivated our opponents still are.

Those who would deny LGBT people their dignity and humanity are everywhere—including, sadly, the very institutions where young people should be absorbing lessons about respect, equality, freedom of expression and the importance of open debate.

These values were clearly not top of mind for Waynesville High School principal Randy Gebhardt when he told our client, 16-year-old Maverick Couch, that he could not wear his "Jesus is not a homophobe" T-shirt to school (see "What's Wrong With This Shirt?", page 10). It's painful to envision an adult authority figure, charged with the nurturing and protection of young people, opting instead to threaten a bright, gifted teenager with suspension if he didn't check his identity at the door. In May, the U.S. District Court for the Southern District of Ohio agreed with our argument that Maverick's first amendment rights had been violated, and that he should be allowed to wear the T-shirt any day he chooses.

Thankfully, Maverick stood up and called Lambda Legal. As did Jackie Gill, a college professor

denied the opportunity to interview for a permanent position because, she was told, Tarrant County College, where she taught in Hurst, Texas, "didn't like homosexuals" (see "A Dream Derailed," page 7).

We hope that one day these schools will join the places of learning that have risen to the occasion on such issues—to fight harassment and bullying, to support LGBTQ students outright and to make sure teachers and other school staff get the training they need to encourage fairness and inclusiveness. As the Hetrick-Martin Institute's Lillian Rivera tells Lambda Legal's Hayley Gorenberg in this issue's Dialogue (see "Safe Space," page 12), some of the progress on behalf of LGBTQ youth has been remarkable.

Hetrick-Martin—an essential institution working with at-risk kids since 1985—coaches educators at the City University of New York, for instance, and Rivera reports that New York City's Respect for All program in public schools is showing promise. In Newark, New Jersey, Hetrick-Martin has been collaborating with the City, the public school system and a strong community coalition committed to keeping this vulnerable population *in school*.

Unfortunately, drop-out rates for LGBTQ kids remain sky-high. A third of them leave school, more than three times the average national rate. And many arrive in the juvenile justice system as "punishment" for being harassed or bullied or for being kicked out of their homes; they easily pass from there into the adult jail system or become homeless.

I am reassured that so many LGBT adults are hard at work with young people in the battles to make LGBTQ youth feel safer and more represented at school and beyond. Certainly there are few things as worthy of our attention. What good is all our Pride if it doesn't include investing in the future of our communities and advancing the cause of our basic human rights?

From all of us at Lambda Legal: Happy Pride Season!