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Gay rights groups, parents and public school students are keeping a close eye on two new anti-harassment and anti-bullying laws going into effect this year. The laws provide for training of staff and teachers, requirements for reporting incidents, and consequences for bullying and harassing behavior.

Gay community leaders support the new anti-harassment (Safe Schools) and anti-bullying laws, while expressing concern that more needs to be done to make school safe for all students.

Christopher Kaufman, director of the R.U.1.2? Community Center, says the laws are largely reactionary rather than preventive. When the Safe Schools law was first drawn up, mandatory anti-harassment training for teachers and staff was included – then withdrawn.

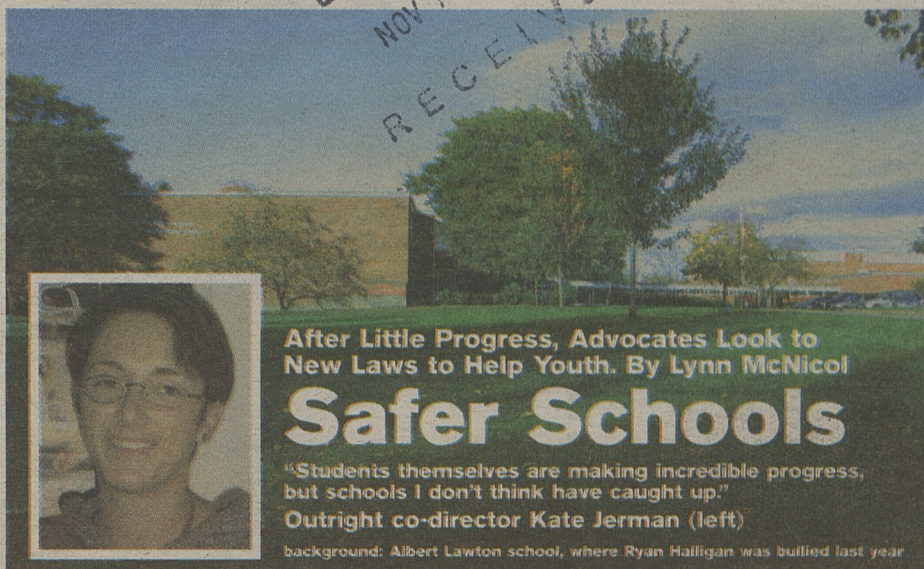
While Kaufman supports the Safe Schools law, “In some ways it’s accountable after the fact ... At some point we have to take a stand and say this [behavior] will go no further.”

The Safe Harbors Committee, patterned after a Massachusetts effort to protect LGBT students, was started here four years ago following a conference on HIV prevention in schools. Kate Jerman, co-executive director of Outright, a local support organization for gay youth, helped organize Vermont’s Safe Harbors.

The participants quickly realized that more issues needed to be addressed than HIV prevention, such as the harassment that affects a youth’s self-esteem and might lead to risky behaviors: smoking, drug use, unsafe sex.

But the opposition to Vermont’s civil unions soon took its toll on gay advocacy groups. Lacking funding or other support from the state Department of Education, Safe Harbors struggled for awhile, but now counts only two members: Jerman and Gillian Piper, a member of the Vermont School Board Insurance Trust.

“The backlash from the civil unions debate crippled any work going on,” Jerman said. “We could have made more progress if we had more support from the



After Little Progress, Advocates Look to New Laws to Help Youth. By Lynn McNicol

Safer Schools

“Students themselves are making incredible progress, but schools I don’t think have caught up.”

Outright co-director Kate Jerman (left)

background: Albert Lawton school, where Ryan Halligan was bullied last year

Department of Education ... There hasn’t been any leadership from the administration ... or from the commissioner.”

Phone calls at press time to Department of Education officials were not returned in time for this article. Charles Johnson, hired by the state as an education consultant for hazing and harassment and discrimination issues for the DoE, also did not return phone calls from *OITM*.

“Students themselves are making incredible progress, but schools I don’t think have caught up,” Jerman said. “For Lluvvia [Mulvaney-Stanak, Outright’s other Co-executive Director] and I, we’re still addressing the same issues as when we were in high school.” The co-directors graduated in 1997.

Most schools have harassment policies, but kids don’t know how to use them or who to go to, or are not guaranteed they will be listened to, Jerman said. “All the time we hear kids say ‘yeah, I reported it, but nothing happens.’”

These issues came to a tragic culmination for 13-year-old Ryan Halligan last year when years of bullying made his life unbearable. After refusing his father’s offer to go to the principal at Albert D. Lawton School because it would make the bullying “worse,” Halligan, an Essex student, com-

mitted suicide. “I didn’t stop and think why is the system so broken,” said his father, John Halligan.

When Ryan died, “a lot of stuff started happening,” Jerman said. One was a forum attended by 350 people where students testified about the bullying and harassment that occurs in their schools on a daily basis. Halligan said parents seemed “shocked” at the severity of the problem.

Ryan’s parents became a moving force to help students be safe in their schools, Jerman said. John Halligan pushed for passage of his bill, H.629, the anti-bullying law. He was unaware at the time there was a school anti-harassment bill, H.113, already being considered.

“When I talked about what happened to my son, [H.113] didn’t cover it,” he said. The Anti-Harassment Bill (H.113) was signed into law as Act 91 last April; the Anti-Bullying Bill (H.629) was signed into law as Act 117 in May.

Halligan said the Essex district has recently “done a fabulous job” of responding to the need to help students in unsafe situations. “They are taking it very seriously now,” he said. Ryan’s school has a weekly after-school program called “Respect,” which includes role-playing and other ways to raise students’ consciousness about bully-

ing. Halligan said the program has been well attended.

George Cross, a Winooski legislator and former superintendent of Winooski schools, is upbeat about progress in the schools. Prior to this year, safe school environment laws primarily addressed drugs, alcohol and weapons, he said. The anti-harassment law targets harmful behaviors toward classes of students, including racial, gender and sexual orientation groups, Cross said. And the anti-bullying law provides protection for students being harmed outside a situation where class distinctions are being made, for example, “boy-on-boy” bullying.

Cross said he felt the “collaborative” rather than punitive approach to drawing up the new laws would be more beneficial to students. “There’s always recourse if schools don’t do what they’re supposed to do,” Cross said, such as approaching school boards or the commissioner’s office.

Jerman feels the new laws are strong enough to make the schools take action – before action is taken against them. “I think they are [liable] to lawsuits now,” she said.

Jerman recently wrote Department of Education Commissioner Richard Cate requesting a meeting, which was scheduled to take place at press time in late October. Jerman hopes that the meeting of state education officials and advocates will bring progress in the fight for safe schools – and “make the institution more queer-friendly.” ▼

For more information, see www.state.vt.us/educ; www.state.vt.us/legcon; and www.ryanpatrickhalligan.com. Kate Jerman can be reached at Outright Vermont at 865-9677 or www.OutrightVT.org. Christopher Kaufman can be reached at R.U.1.2? Community Center at 860-7812 or at www.RU12.org.

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