



THE LIBRARY SHOP

November 15, 2006 Edition > Section: [New York](#) > Printer-Friendly Version

## What Makes a Private School 'Gay Friendly'

BY GABRIELLE BIRKNER - Staff Reporter of the Sun

November 15, 2006

URL: <http://www.nysun.com/article/43538>

When Philip Kassen teaches a middle-school course about human sexuality, he frequently invokes anecdotes about adolescent romances — not only between young men and women, but also between same-sex couples.

ADVERTISEMENT

This helps create a comfortable atmosphere for teenagers with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender parents as well as students questioning their own sexuality, Mr. Kassen, the director of New York's Little Red School House & Elisabeth Irwin High School, said.

The Greenwich Village academy, which serves pre-school through 12th grade, also invites students, parents, and faculty to march with the school's banner in the city's annual Gay Pride parade. It is one of 19 New York independent schools recently identified as "gay friendly" — welcoming to children with gay family members — by Gay Parent magazine.

City & Country School in the West Village, Friends Seminary on East 16th Street, and Morningside Montessori on West 100th Street are among the other schools named in the magazine's eighth annual listing.

The city runs a public high school for gay students, but what makes for a "gay friendly" private school?

ADVERTISEMENT

"The most important thing is that the faculty is trained to be sensitive to the needs and the lives of all students — and the curriculum materials should reflect that," Mr. Kassen said.

Parent-faculty organizations open to gay and lesbian participation, and a zero-tolerance policy for discrimination and bullying, are also essential, the editor and publisher of Gay Parent, Angeline Acain, said.

A mission statement touting a commitment to diversity, an active gay-straight alliance, and the extension of health care benefits to the domestic partners of faculty members are other signs of gay-friendly schools, some parents said.

Gay parents should read admissions applications with a critical eye, the program director of Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere, Meredith Fenton, said. An institution that asks for the contact information of "Parent 1" and "Parent 2" — rather than for "Mother" and "Father" — may be a more welcoming environment for children of homosexuals, bisexuals, and transgender parents, she said.

At Little Red School House & Elisabeth Irwin High School, for example, the application takes the "Parent 1" and "Parent 2" approach, and does not ask guardians to specify their gender. Teachers and administrators are encouraged to use inclusive language in the classroom, and to address all letters home "Dear Families" — not "Dear Moms and Dads."

The school, together with Center Kids — a division of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual & Transgender Community Center in the West Village — recently hosted a panel discussion, "Once You're In: Life in Independent Schools for LGBT Families," which was attended by some 40 same-sex parents throughout the city.

At the next conference of the National Association of Independent Schools, administrators from LREI and the Community Center will lead a workshop called "The 'New' Constituency: Welcoming LGBT Families into Your School." The Berkeley Carroll School, a pre-school to 12th-grade school, was also named "gay friendly" by Gay Parent. At the Park Slope school, students participate in biannual "Diversity Day" celebration. For older students, lectures, workshops, and presentations are scheduled on topics ranging from the formation of gender identity to nontraditional families. "We're committed to making this a welcoming community for all different types of families," a diversity coordinator at

the school, Mauricio Albrizzio, said. "In the classroom, we make a big issue that not all families are structured in the same way — that's an overarching theme in our lower school classes."

An ounce of consideration on the part of educators can go a long way, Park Slope resident Martha Walker, who has two children with her partner of 25 years, said. She recalled how one public school teacher refused to let her daughter make two Mother's Day cards. "Our kids feel different enough," Ms. Walker, who has since enrolled her 13-year-old daughter in Berkeley Carroll, said. "Teachers need to make more of an effort to be inclusive."

November 15, 2006 Edition > Section: [New York](#) > Printer-Friendly Version

A D V E R T I S E M E N T