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Gay Youth?s Slaying Spurs Call for Tolerance

LOS ANGELES -- With his school uniform, eighth-grader Lawrence "Larry" King wore purple eye shadow, nail polish and pink lipstick. In the weeks before he died, he added purple boots with three-inch heels.
Classmates at E.O. Green Junior High School in Oxnard, Calif., mocked his makeup and slung anti-gay slurs at him in the halls. Sometimes, the words transformed the expressive teenager into a wallflower.

Still, rumor spread that King, openly gay, was trying to find the courage to ask another student, Brandon McInerney, to be his valentine. On Feb. 12, McInerney allegedly approached King in a computer lab and shot him in the head. King, 15, died two days later.

The crime -- for which McInerney, 14, has been charged as an adult -- horrified parents, educators and students in the community and across the nation. But according to gay rights groups and experts on adolescent sexuality, it is the extreme consequence of a growing but often-ignored phenomenon.

Reassured by changing pop culture and easy access to information on the Internet, the age of sexual identification has dropped over the last few decades to the early teens and as young as 10, experts say.
"For years, representations of homosexuals were deviant, bleak, living outside the margins of society. There were no happy endings. Now, we have Ellen DeGeneres hosting the Academy Awards and RuPaul on the Home Shopping Network," said Caitlin Ryan, a San Francisco State University clinical social worker and director of the Family Acceptance Project there.

"So, it's no surprise that young people would realize who they are at earlier ages," Ryan said.

But many schools do not have programs that promote tolerance among students, provide training for educators, or include policies that specifically prohibit harassment and bullying based on sexual orientation, activists say.
There is disagreement on whether even discussing homosexuality in schools is appropriate.

"The vast majority of parents believe it's their role and their responsibility to teach their kids about

sexuality," said Bill Maier, vice president and resident psychologist for Focus on the Family, a conservative Christian organization. "The way you handle the problem is that you crack down on any sort of bullying or aggression on any child. You don't single out sexual orientation as this somehow special status."
Clubs for gay, lesbian, transgender and bisexual students, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, are widespread in high schools and colleges. In California, for instance, about 650 high schools support GSAs, compared with 14 middle schools.

But in the weeks since King's death, interest among middle schools in these organizations has spiked, according to Carolyn Laub, executive director of the San Francisco-based Gay-Straight Alliance Network.
"We're looking at that right now," said Jerry Dannenberg, superintendent of Hueneme School District, which oversees the school King attended. "Junior high schools are a little bit different than high schools," he added. "We've never had anyone expressing that type of desire before."

Harassment is not limited to gay students, either, according to Beth Reis, co-chair of the Seattle-based Safe Schools Coalition, a gay rights organization and author of a five-year statewide study documenting abuse from kindergarten through 12th grade. Those perceived as gay and those who have gay parents endure the same torment.

But harassment policies vary from district to district, with some explicitly prohibiting sexual orientation harassment, others only general harassment.
Proponents of education in schools about homosexuality and gender variance say they are sensitive topics, given that sex education is unwelcome by some parents. But they point out that such education is about teaching tolerance, not values. And pop culture -- in the form of television and the Internet -- is bringing the issue into many homes.

A minority of states have passed anti-bullying laws that specifically mention sexual orientation. Others are considering it. Some cities have confronted the problem, too. In New York, about 1,000 educators are training with the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network to address bullying and harassment.

Many hope the increased attention will translate to help for students such as King who, friends say, was picked on by most of his peers. Erin Mings, 12, one of King's few friends, said of him, "He was the very, very outcast of our school."

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