

# LGBTQ curriculum is coming to N.J. schools. Here's a glimpse.

By [Adam Clark | NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#) Today 5:32 PM

Late on a Saturday after a night out with her friends, Sakia Gunn was waiting for a bus in Newark when two men pulled up and asked if her group wanted to party.

Gunn, 15, and her friends declined and said they were lesbians. Instead of driving away, the men grew confrontational, hurling homophobic insults. A fight broke out and Gunn was stabbed to death, killed for being a lesbian.

The 2003 murder galvanized Newark's LGBTQ community, but never gained the national attention of similar bias crimes like the death of Matthew Shepard in Colorado. Now, Gunn's story could be told in some New Jersey schools as soon as this month, part of a pilot program to implement [a new state law](#) mandating an LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum beginning next school year.

"Our youth deserve to see themselves reflected in the classroom," said Ashley Chiappano, community education manager for Garden State Equality, an advocacy group that helped create a sample curriculum. "And we know the work we're doing is going to change the lives of LGBTQ students for the better."

The pilot program formally launched Tuesday with a training event at Union County College for 12 schools that will begin incorporating an inclusive interdisciplinary curriculum this school year.

Teachers spent the morning discussing lesson plans that New Jersey's

LGBTQ advocates hope could become a national model.

In science, that might mean talking about Sally Ride, the first lesbian astronaut.

In English, students could read a book such as "Radio Silence," a young adult novel with a bisexual main character.

And in history, a teacher could ask students to discuss how mainstream ideas of feminine beauty affected the war contributions of women, beginning with an examination of why Massachusetts' Deborah Sampson had to disguise herself as man to serve in the Continental Army.

Though no school in New Jersey is forced to use any specific example, the model curriculum gives schools a starting point. The lessons were developed by New Jersey educators who work with Make It Better for Youth, a Monmouth County organization focused on helping LGBTQ children.

"What we we are hoping is that there is a structure of really well crafted lessons that teachers can use as their baseline," said Lori Burns, who is managing the state's pilot program. She is also a principal in the Neptune Township School District.

Moving forward, the hope is that teachers can expand on the suggested curriculum and find ways to make their existing lesson plans more inclusive, Burns said.

Tuesday's training went beyond curriculum. Teachers learned the preferred terminology to use when speaking with students and discussed the difference between sexual orientation, gender identity and gender expression.

Highland Park School District, one of the participants in the pilot program, is hoping the curriculum will prevent bullying and bias incidents, Superintendent Scott Taylor said.

"We want to do whatever we can to educate and be sure that all students recognize and understand what some of their peers might be experiencing," Taylor said.

*Adam Clark may be reached at [adam\\_clark@njadvancemedia.com](mailto:adam_clark@njadvancemedia.com). Follow him on twitter at [@realAdamClark](https://twitter.com/realAdamClark). Find NJ.com on Facebook.*

***Have a tip? Tell us. [nj.com/tips](https://nj.com/tips)***

**Get the latest updates right in your inbox. [Subscribe to NJ.com's newsletters.](#)**