

One Town's War on Gay Teens

By Sabrina Rubin Erdely, Rolling Stone

04 February 12

In Michele Bachmann's home district, evangelicals have created an extreme anti-gay climate. After a rash of suicides, the kids are fighting back.

Every morning, Brittany Geldert stepped off the bus and bolted through the double doors of Fred Moore Middle School, her nerves already on high alert, bracing for the inevitable. "Dyke."

Pretending not to hear, Brittany would walk briskly to her locker, past the sixth-, seventh- and eighth-graders who loitered in menacing packs.

"Whore."

Like many 13-year-olds, Brittany knew seventh grade was a living hell. But what she didn't know was that she was caught in the crossfire of a culture war being waged by local evangelicals inspired by their high-profile congressional representative Michele Bachmann, who graduated from Anoka High School and, until recently, was a member of one of the most conservative churches in the area. When Christian activists who considered gays an abomination forced a measure through the school board forbidding the discussion of homosexuality in the district's public schools, kids like Brittany were unknowingly thrust into the heart of a clash that was about to become intertwined with tragedy.

[Michele Bachmann's Holy War](#)

Brittany didn't look like most girls in blue-collar Anoka, Minnesota, a former logging town on the Rum River, a conventional place that takes pride in its annual Halloween parade - it bills itself the "Halloween Capital of the World." Brittany was a low-voiced, stocky girl who dressed in baggy jeans and her dad's Marine Corps sweatshirts. By age 13, she'd been taunted as a "cunt" and "cock muncher" long before such words had made much sense. When she told administrators about the abuse, they were strangely unresponsive, even though bullying was a subject often discussed in school-board meetings. The district maintained a comprehensive five-page anti-bullying policy, and held diversity trainings on racial and gender sensitivity. Yet when it came to Brittany's harassment, school officials usually told her to ignore it, always glossing over the sexually charged insults. Like the time Brittany had complained about being called a "fat dyke": The school's principal, looking pained, had suggested Brittany prepare herself for the next round of teasing with snappy comebacks - "I can lose the weight, but you're stuck with your ugly face" - never acknowledging she had been called a "dyke." As though that part was OK. As though the fact that Brittany was bisexual made her fair game.

So maybe she was a fat dyke, Brittany thought morosely; maybe she deserved the teasing. She would have been shocked to know the truth behind the adults' inaction: No one would come to her aid for fear of violating the districtwide policy requiring school personnel to stay "neutral" on issues of homosexuality. All Brittany knew was that she was on her own, vulnerable and ashamed, and needed to find her best friend, Samantha, fast.

Like Brittany, eighth-grader Samantha Johnson was a husky tomboy too, outgoing with a big smile and a silly streak to match Brittany's own. Sam was also bullied for her look - short hair, dark clothing, lack of girly affect - but she merrily shrugged off the abuse. When Sam's volleyball teammates' taunting got rough - barring her from the girls' locker room, yelling, "You're a guy!" - she simply stopped going to practice. After school, Sam would encourage

Brittany to join her in privately mocking their tormentors, and the girls would parade around Brittany's house speaking in Valley Girl squeals, wearing bras over their shirts, collapsing in laughter. They'd become as close as sisters in the year since Sam had moved from North Dakota following her parents' divorce, and Sam had quickly become Brittany's beacon. Sam was even helping to start a Gay Straight Alliance club, as a safe haven for misfits like them, although the club's progress was stalled by the school district that, among other things, was queasy about the club's flagrant use of the word "gay." Religious conservatives have called GSAs "sex clubs," and sure enough, the local religious right loudly objected to them. "This is an assault on moral standards," read one recent letter to the community paper. "Let's stop this dangerous nonsense before it's too late and more young boys and girls are encouraged to 'come out' and practice their 'gayness' right in their own school's homosexual club."

Brittany admired Sam's courage, and tried to mimic her insouciance and stoicism. So Brittany was bewildered when one day in November 2009, on the school bus home, a sixth-grade boy slid in next to her and asked quaveringly, "Did you hear Sam said she's going to kill herself?"

Brittany considered the question. No way. How many times had she seen Sam roll her eyes and announce, "Ugh, I'm gonna kill myself" over some insignificant thing? "Don't worry, you'll see Sam tomorrow," Brittany reassured her friend as they got off the bus. But as she trudged toward her house, she couldn't stop turning it over in her mind. A boy in the district had already committed suicide just days into the school year - TJ Hayes, a 16-year-old at Blaine High School - so she knew such things were possible. But Sam Johnson? Brittany tried to keep the thought at bay. Finally, she confided in her mother.

"This isn't something you kid about, Brittany," her mom scolded, snatching the kitchen cordless and taking it down the hall to call the Johnsons. A minute later she returned, her face a mask of shock and terror. "Honey, I'm so sorry. We're too late," she said tonelessly as Brittany's knees buckled; 13-year-old Sam had climbed into the bathtub after school and shot herself in the mouth with her own hunting rifle. No one at school had seen her suicide coming.

No one saw the rest of them coming, either.

Sam's death lit the fuse of a suicide epidemic that would take the lives of nine local students in under two years, a rate so high that child psychologist Dan Reidenberg, executive director of the Minnesota-based Suicide Awareness Voices of Education, declared the Anoka-Hennepin school district the site of a "suicide cluster," adding that the crisis might hold an element of contagion; suicidal thoughts had become catchy, like a lethal virus. "Here you had a large number of suicides that are really closely connected, all within one school district, in a small amount of time," explains Reidenberg. "Kids started to feel that the normal response to stress was to take your life."

There was another common thread: Four of the nine dead were either gay or perceived as such by other kids, and were reportedly bullied. The tragedies come at a national moment when bullying is on everyone's lips, and a devastating number of gay teens across the country are in the news for killing themselves. Suicide rates among gay and lesbian kids are frighteningly high, with attempt rates four times that of their straight counterparts; studies show that one-third of all gay youth have attempted suicide at some point (versus 13 percent of hetero kids), and that internalized homophobia contributes to suicide risk.

Against this supercharged backdrop, the Anoka-Hennepin school district finds itself in the spotlight not only for the sheer number of suicides but because it is accused of having contributed to the death toll by cultivating an extreme anti-gay climate. "LGBTQ students don't feel safe at school," says Anoka Middle School for the Arts teacher Jefferson Fietek, using the

acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Questioning. "They're made to feel ashamed of who they are. They're bullied. And there's no one to stand up for them, because teachers are afraid of being fired."

The Southern Poverty Law Center and the National Center for Lesbian Rights have filed a lawsuit on behalf of five students, alleging the school district's policies on gays are not only discriminatory, but also foster an environment of unchecked anti-gay bullying. The Department of Justice has begun a civil rights investigation as well. The Anoka-Hennepin school district declined to comment on any specific incidences but denies any discrimination, maintaining that its broad anti-bullying policy is meant to protect all students. "We are not a homophobic district, and to be vilified for this is very frustrating," says superintendent Dennis Carlson, who blames right-wingers and gay activists for choosing the area as a battleground, describing the district as the victim in this fracas. "People are using kids as pawns in this political debate," he says. "I find that abhorrent."

Ironically, that's exactly the charge that students, teachers and grieving parents are hurling at the school district. "Samantha got caught up in a political battle that I didn't know about," says Sam Johnson's mother, Michele. "And you know whose fault it is? The people who make their living off of saying they're going to take care of our kids."

Located a half-hour north of Minneapolis, the 13 sprawling towns that make up the Anoka-Hennepin school district - Minnesota's largest, with 39,000 kids - seems an unlikely place for such a battle. It's a soothingly flat, 172-square-mile expanse sliced by the Mississippi River, where woodlands abruptly give way to strip malls and then fall back to → placid woodlands again, and the landscape is dotted with churches. The district, which spans two counties, is so geographically huge as to be a sort of cross section of America itself, with its small minority population clustered at its southern tip, white suburban sprawl in its center and sparsely populated farmland in the north. It also offers a snapshot of America in economic crisis: In an area where just 20 percent of adults have college educations, the recession hit hard, and foreclosures and unemployment have become the norm.

For years, the area has also bred a deep strain of religious conservatism. At churches like First Baptist Church of Anoka, parishioners believe that homosexuality is a form of mental illness caused by family dysfunction, childhood trauma and exposure to pornography - a perversion curable through intensive therapy. It's a point of view shared by their congresswoman Michele Bachmann, who has called homosexuality a form of "sexual dysfunction" that amounts to "personal enslavement." In 1993, Bachmann, a proponent of school prayer and creationism, co-founded the New Heights charter school in the town of Stillwater, only to flee the board amid an outcry that the school was promoting a religious curriculum. Bachmann also is affiliated with the ultraright Minnesota Family Council, headlining a fundraiser for them last spring alongside Newt Gingrich.

Though Bachmann doesn't live within Anoka-Hennepin's boundaries anymore, she has a dowdier doppelgänger there in the form of anti-gay crusader Barb Anderson. A bespectacled grandmother with lemony-blond hair she curls in severely toward her face, Anderson is a former district Spanish teacher and a longtime researcher for the MFC who's been fighting gay influence in local schools for two decades, ever since she discovered that her nephew's health class was teaching homosexuality as normal. "That really got me on a journey," she said in a radio interview. When the Anoka-Hennepin district's sex-ed curriculum came up for re-evaluation in 1994, Anderson and four like-minded parents managed to get on the review committee. They argued that any form of gay tolerance in school is actually an insidious means of promoting

homosexuality - that openly discussing the matter would encourage kids to try it, turning straight kids gay.

"Open your eyes, people," Anderson recently wrote to the local newspaper. "What if a 15-year-old is seduced into homosexual behavior and then contracts AIDS?" Her agenda mimics that of Focus on the Family, the national evangelical Christian organization founded by James Dobson; Family Councils, though technically independent of Focus on the Family, work on the state level to accomplish Focus' core goals, including promoting prayer in public spaces, "defending marriage" by lobbying for anti-gay legislation, and fighting gay tolerance in public schools under the guise of preserving parental authority - reasoning that government-mandated acceptance of gays undermines the traditional values taught in Christian homes.

At the close of the seven-month-long sex-ed review, Anderson and her colleagues wrote a memo to the Anoka-Hennepin school board, concluding, "The majority of parents do not wish to have there [sic] children taught that the gay lifestyle is a normal acceptable alternative." Surprisingly, the six-member board voted to adopt the measure by a four-to-two majority, even borrowing the memo's language to fashion the resulting districtwide policy, which pronounced that within the health curriculum, "homosexuality not be taught/addressed as a normal, valid lifestyle."

The policy became unofficially known as "No Homo Promo" and passed unannounced to parents and unpublished in the policy handbooks; most teachers were told about it by their principals.

Teachers say it had a chilling effect and they became concerned about mentioning gays in any context. Discussion of homosexuality gradually disappeared from classes. "If you can't talk about it in any context, which is how teachers interpret district policies, kids internalize that to mean that being gay must be so shameful and wrong," says Anoka High School teacher Mary Jo Merrick-Lockett. "And that has created a climate of fear and repression and harassment."

Suicide is a complex phenomenon; there's never any one pat reason to explain why anyone kills themselves. Michele Johnson acknowledges that her daughter, Sam, likely had many issues that combined to push her over the edge, but feels strongly that bullying was one of those factors.

"I'm sure that Samantha's decision to take her life had a lot to do with what was going on in school," Johnson says tearfully. "I'm sure things weren't perfect in other areas, but nothing was as bad as what was going on in that school."

The summer before Justin Aaberg started at Anoka High School, his mother asked, "So, are you sure you're gay?"

Justin, a slim, shy 14-year-old who carefully swept his blond bangs to the side like his namesake, Bieber, studied his mom's face. "I'm pretty sure I'm gay," he answered softly, then abruptly changed his mind. "Whoa, whoa, whoa, wait!" he shouted - out of character for the quiet boy - "I'm positive. I am gay," Justin proclaimed.

"OK." Tammy Aaberg nodded. "So. Just because you can't get him pregnant doesn't mean you don't use protection." She proceeded to lecture her son about safe sex while Justin turned bright red and beamed. Embarrassing as it was to get a sex talk from his mom, her easy affirmation of Justin's orientation seemed like a promising sign as he stood on the brink of high school. Justin was more than ready to turn the corner on the horrors of middle school - especially on his just-finished eighth-grade year, when Justin had come out as gay to a few friends, yet word had instantly spread, making him a pariah. In the hall one day, a popular jock had grabbed Justin by the balls and squeezed, sneering, "You like that, don't you?" That assault had so humiliated and frightened Justin that he'd burst out crying, but he never reported any of his harassment. The last thing he wanted to do was draw more attention to his sexuality. Plus, he didn't want his parents worrying. Justin's folks were already overwhelmed with stresses of their own: Swamped with

debt, they'd declared bankruptcy and lost their home to foreclosure. So Justin had kept his problems to himself; he felt hopeful things would get better in high school, where kids were bound to be more mature.

"There'll always be bullies," he reasoned to a friend. "But we'll be older, so maybe they'll be better about it."

But Justin's start of ninth grade in 2009 began as a disappointment. In the halls of Anoka High School, he was bullied, called a "faggot" and shoved into lockers. Then, a couple of months into the school year, he was stunned to hear about Sam Johnson's suicide. Though Justin hadn't known her personally, he'd known of her, and of the way she'd been taunted for being butch. Justin tried to keep smiling. In his room at home, Justin made a brightly colored paper banner and taped it to his wall: "Love the life you live, live the life you love."

Brittany couldn't stop thinking about Sam, a reel that looped endlessly in her head. Sam dancing to one of their favorite metal bands, Drowning Pool. Sam dead in the tub with the back of her head blown off. Sam's ashes in an urn, her coffin empty at her wake.

She couldn't sleep. Her grades fell. Her daily harassment at school continued, but now without her best friend to help her cope. At home, Brittany played the good daughter, cleaning the house and performing her brother's chores unasked, all in a valiant attempt to maintain some family peace after the bank took their house, and both parents lost their jobs in quick succession. Then Brittany started cutting herself.

Just 11 days after Sam's death, on November 22nd, 2009, came yet another suicide: a Blaine High School student, 15-year-old Aaron Jurek - the district's third suicide in just three months. After Christmas break, an Andover High School senior, Nick Lockwood, became the district's fourth casualty: a boy who had never publicly identified as gay, but had nonetheless been teased as such. Suicide number five followed, that of recent Blaine High School grad Kevin Buchman, who had no apparent LGBT connection. Before the end of the school year there would be a sixth suicide, 15-year-old July Barrick of Champlin Park High School, who was also bullied for being perceived as gay, and who'd complained to her mother that classmates had started an "I Hate July Barrick" Facebook page. As mental-health counselors were hurriedly dispatched to each affected school, the district was blanketed by a sense of mourning and frightened shock.

"It has taken a collective toll," says Northdale Middle School psychologist Colleen Cashen.

"Everyone has just been reeling - students, teachers. There's been just a profound sadness."

In the wake of Sam's suicide, Brittany couldn't seem to stop crying. She'd disappear for hours with her cellphone turned off, taking long walks by Elk Creek or hiding in a nearby cemetery.

"Promise me you won't take your life," her father begged. "Promise you'll come to me before anything." Brittany couldn't promise. In March 2010, she was hospitalized for a week.

In April, Justin came home from school and found his mother at the top of the stairs, tending to the saltwater fish tank. "Mom," he said tentatively, "a kid told me at school today I'm gonna go to hell because I'm gay."

"That's not true. God loves everybody," his mom replied. "That kid needs to go home and read his Bible."

Justin shrugged and smiled, then retreated to his room. It had been a hard day: the annual "Day of Truth" had been held at school, an evangelical event then-sponsored by the anti-gay ministry Exodus International, whose mission is to usher gays back to wholeness and "victory in Christ" by converting them to heterosexuality. Day of Truth has been a font of controversy that has bounced in and out of the courts; its legality was affirmed last March, when a federal appeals court ruled that two Naperville, Illinois, high school students' Day of Truth T-shirts reading BE

HAPPY, NOT GAY were protected by their First Amendment rights. (However, the event, now sponsored by Focus on the Family, has been renamed "Day of Dialogue.") Local churches had been touting the program, and students had obediently shown up at Anoka High School wearing day of truth T-shirts, preaching in the halls about the sin of homosexuality. Justin wanted to brush them off, but was troubled by their proselytizing. Secretly, he had begun to worry that maybe he was an abomination, like the Bible said.

Justin was trying not to care what anyone else thought and be true to himself. He surrounded himself with a bevy of girlfriends who cherished him for his sweet, sunny disposition. He played cello in the orchestra, practicing for hours up in his room, where he'd covered one wall with mementos of good times: taped-up movie-ticket stubs, gum wrappers, Christmas cards. Justin had even briefly dated a boy, a 17-year-old he'd met online who attended a nearby high school. The relationship didn't end well: The boyfriend had cheated on him, and compounding Justin's hurt, his coming out had earned Justin hateful Facebook messages from other teens - some from those he didn't even know - telling him he was a fag who didn't deserve to live. At least his freshman year of high school was nearly done. Only three more years to go. He wondered how he would ever make it.

Though some members of the Anoka-Hennepin school board had been appalled by "No Homo Promo" since its passage 14 years earlier, it wasn't until 2009 that the board brought the policy up for review, after a student named Alex Merritt filed a complaint with the state Department of Human Rights claiming he'd been gay-bashed by two of his teachers during high school; according to the complaint, the teachers had announced in front of students that Merritt, who is straight, "swings both ways," speculated that he wore women's clothing, and compared him to a Wisconsin man who had sex with a dead deer. The teachers denied the charges, but the school district paid \$25,000 to settle the complaint. Soon representatives from the gay-rights group Outfront Minnesota began making inquiries at board meetings. "No Homo Promo" was starting to look like a risky policy.

"The lawyers said, 'You'd have a hard time defending it,'" remembers Scott Wenzel, a board member who for years had pushed colleagues to abolish the policy. "It was clear that it might risk a lawsuit." But while board members agreed that such an overtly anti-gay policy needed to be scrapped, they also agreed that some guideline was needed to not only help teachers navigate a topic as inflammatory as homosexuality but to appease the area's evangelical activists. So the legal department wrote a broad new course of action with language intended to give a respectful nod to the topic - but also an equal measure of respect to the anti-gay contingent. The new policy was circulated to staff without a word of introduction. (Parents were not alerted at all, unless they happened to be diligent online readers of board-meeting minutes.) And while "No Homo Promo" had at least been clear, the new Sexual Orientation Curriculum Policy mostly just puzzled the teachers who'd be responsible for enforcing it. It read:

Anoka-Hennepin staff, in the course of their professional duties, shall remain neutral on matters regarding sexual orientation including but not limited to student-led discussions.

It quickly became known as the "neutrality" policy. No one could figure out what it meant.

"What is 'neutral'?" asks instructor Merrick-Lockett. "Teachers are constantly asking, 'Do you think I could get in trouble for this? Could I get fired for that?' So a lot of teachers sidestep it. They don't want to deal with district backlash."

English teachers worried they'd get in trouble for teaching books by gay authors, or books with gay characters. Social-studies teachers wondered what to do if a student wrote a term paper on gay rights, or how to address current events like "don't ask, don't tell." Health teachers were

faced with the impossible task of teaching about AIDS awareness and safe sex without mentioning homosexuality. Many teachers decided once again to keep gay issues from the curriculum altogether, rather than chance saying something that could be interpreted as anything other than neutral.

"There has been widespread confusion," says Anoka-Hennepin teachers' union president Julie Blaha. "You ask five people how to interpret the policy and you get five different answers." Silenced by fear, gay teachers became more vigilant than ever to avoid mention of their personal lives, and in closeting themselves, they inadvertently ensured that many students had no real-life gay role models. "I was told by teachers, 'You have to be careful, it's really not safe for you to come out,'" says the psychologist Cashen, who is a lesbian. "I felt like I couldn't have a picture of my family on my desk." When teacher Jefferson Fietek was outed in the community paper, which referred to him as an "open homosexual," he didn't feel he could address the situation with his students even as they passed the newspaper around, tittering. When one finally asked, "Are you gay?" he panicked. "I was terrified to answer that question," Fietek says. "I thought, 'If I violate the policy, what's going to happen to me?'"

The silence of adults was deafening. At Blaine High School, says alum Justin Anderson, "I would hear people calling people 'fags' all the time without it being addressed. Teachers just didn't respond." In Andover High School, when 10th-grader Sam Pinilla was pushed to the ground by three kids calling him a "faggot," he saw a teacher nearby who did nothing to stop the assault. At Anoka High School, a 10th-grade girl became so upset at being mocked as a "lesbo" and a "sinner" - in earshot of teachers - that she complained to an associate principal, who counseled her to "lay low"; the girl would later attempt suicide. At Anoka Middle School for the Arts, after Kyle Rooker was urinated upon from above in a boys' bathroom stall, an associate principal told him, "It was probably water." Jackson Middle School seventh-grader Dylon Frei was passed notes saying, "Get out of this town, fag"; when a teacher intercepted one such note, she simply threw it away.

"You feel horrible about yourself," remembers Dylon. "Like, why do these kids hate me so much? And why won't anybody help me?" The following year, after Dylon was hit in the head with a binder and called "fag," the associate principal told Dylon that since there was no proof of the incident she could take no action. By contrast, Dylon and others saw how the same teachers who ignored anti-gay insults were quick to reprimand kids who uttered racial slurs. It further reinforced the message resonating throughout the district: Gay kids simply didn't deserve protection.

"Justin?" Tammy Aaberg rapped on her son's locked bedroom door again. It was past noon, and not a peep from inside, unusual for Justin.

"Justin?" She could hear her own voice rising as she pounded harder, suddenly overtaken by a wild terror she couldn't name. "Justin!" she yelled. Tammy grabbed a screwdriver and loosened the doorknob. She pushed open the door. He was wearing his Anoka High School sweatpants and an old soccer shirt. His feet were dangling off the ground. Justin was hanging from the frame of his futon, which he'd taken out from under his mattress and stood upright in the corner of his room. Screaming, Tammy ran to hold him and recoiled at his cold skin. His limp body was grotesquely bloated - her baby - eyes closed, head lolling to the right, a dried smear of saliva trailing from the corner of his mouth. His cheeks were strafed with scratch marks, as though in his final moments he'd tried to claw his noose loose. He'd cinched the woven belt so tight that the mortician would have a hard time masking the imprint it left in the flesh above Justin's collar.

Still screaming, Tammy ran to call 911. She didn't notice the cellphone on the floor below Justin's feet, containing his last words, a text in the wee hours:
:-(he had typed to a girlfriend.

What's wrong

Nothing

I can come over

No I'm fine

Are you sure you'll be ok

No it's ok I'll be fine, I promise

Seeking relief from bullying, Brittany transferred to Jackson Middle School. Her very first day of eighth grade, eight boys crowded around her on the bus home. "Hey, Brittany, I heard your friend Sam shot herself," one began.

"Did you see her blow her brains out?"

"Did you pull the trigger for her?"

"What did it look like?"

"Was there brain all over the wall?"

"You should do it too. You should go blow your head off."

Sobbing, Brittany ran from the bus stop and into her mother's arms. Her mom called Jackson's guidance office to report the incident, but as before, nothing ever seemed to come of their complaints. Not after the Gelderts' Halloween lawn decorations were destroyed, and the boys on the bus asked, "How was the mess last night?" Not after Brittany told the associate principal about the mob of kids who pushed her down the hall and nearly into a trash can. Her name became Dyke, Queer, Faggot, Guy, Freak, Transvestite, Bitch, Cunt, Slut, Whore, Skank, Prostitute, Hooker. Brittany felt worn to a nub, exhausted from scanning for threat, stripped of emotional armor. In her journal, she wrote, "Brittany is dead."

As Brittany vainly cried out for help, the school board was busy trying to figure out how to continue tactfully ignoring the existence of LGBT kids like her. Justin Aaberg's suicide, Anoka-Hennepin's seventh, had sent the district into damage-control mode. "Everything changed after Justin," remembers teacher Fietek. "The rage at his funeral, students were storming up to me saying, 'Why the hell did the school let this happen? They let it happen to Sam and they let it happen to Justin!'" Individual teachers quietly began taking small risks, overstepping the bounds of neutrality to offer solace to gay students in crisis. "My job is just a job; these children are losing their lives," says Fietek. "The story I hear repeatedly is 'Nobody else is like me, nobody else is going through what I'm going through.' That's the lie they've been fed, but they're buying into it based on the fear we have about open and honest conversations about sexual orientation." LGBT students were stunned to be told for the first time about the existence of the neutrality policy that had been responsible for their teachers' behavior. But no one was more outraged to hear of it than Tammy Aaberg. Six weeks after her son's death, Aaberg became the first to publicly confront the Anoka-Hennepin school board about the link between the policy, anti-gay bullying and suicide. She demanded the policy be revoked. "What about my parental rights to have my gay son go to school and learn without being bullied?" Aaberg asked, weeping, as the board stared back impassively from behind a raised dais.

Anti-gay backlash was instant. Minnesota Family Council president Tom Prichard blogged that Justin's suicide could only be blamed upon one thing: his gayness. "Youth who embrace homosexuality are at greater risk [of suicide], because they've embraced an unhealthy sexual identity and lifestyle," Prichard wrote. Anoka-Hennepin conservatives formally organized into

the Parents Action League, declaring opposition to the "radical homosexual" agenda in schools. Its stated goals, advertised on its website, included promoting Day of Truth, providing resources for students "seeking to leave the homosexual lifestyle," supporting the neutrality policy and targeting "pro-gay activist teachers who fail to abide by district policies."

Asked on a radio program whether the anti-gay agenda of her ilk bore any responsibility for the bullying and suicides, Barb Anderson, co-author of the original "No Homo Promo," held fast to her principles, blaming pro-gay groups for the tragedies. She explained that such "child corruption" agencies allow "quote-unquote gay kids" to wrongly feel legitimized. "And then these kids are locked into a lifestyle with their choices limited, and many times this can be disastrous to them as they get into the behavior which leads to disease and death," Anderson said. She added that if LGBT kids weren't encouraged to come out of the closet in the first place, they wouldn't be in a position to be bullied.

Yet while everyone in the district was buzzing about the neutrality policy, the board simply refused to discuss it, not even when students began appearing before them to detail their experiences with LGBT harassment. "The board stated quite clearly that they were standing behind that policy and were not willing to take another look," recalls board member Wenzel. Further insulating itself from reality, the district launched an investigation into the suicides and unsurprisingly, absolved itself of any responsibility. "Based on all the information we've been able to gather," read a statement from the superintendent's office, "none of the suicides were connected to incidents of bullying or harassment."

Just to be on the safe side, however, the district held PowerPoint presentations in a handful of schools to train teachers how to defend gay students from harassment while also remaining neutral on homosexuality. One slide instructed teachers that if they hear gay slurs - say, the word "fag" - the best response is a tepid "That language is unacceptable in this school." ("If a more authoritative response is needed," the slide added, the teacher could continue with the stilted, almost apologetic explanation, "In this school we are required to welcome all people and to make them feel safe.") But teachers were, of course, reminded to never show "personal support for GLBT people" in the classroom.

Teachers left the training sessions more confused than ever about how to interpret the rules. And the board, it turned out, was equally confused. When a local advocacy group, Gay Equity Team, met with the school board, the vice-chair thought the policy applied only to health classes, while the chair asserted it applied to all curricula; and when the district legal counsel commented that some discussions about homosexuality were allowed, yet another board member expressed surprise, saying he thought any discussion on the topic was forbidden. "How can the district ever train on a policy they do not understand themselves?" GET officials asked in a follow-up letter. "Is there any doubt that teachers and staff are confused? The board is confused!"

With the adults thus distracted by endless policy discussions, the entire district became a place of dread for students. Every time a loudspeaker crackled in class, kids braced themselves for the feared preamble, "We've had a tragic loss." Students spoke in hushed tones; some wept openly in the halls. "It had that feeling of a horror movie - everyone was talking about death," says one 16-year-old student who broke down at Anoka High School one day and was carted off to a psychiatric hospital for suicidal ideation. Over the course of the 2010-2011 school year, 700 students were evaluated for serious mental-health issues, including hospitalizations for depression and suicide attempts. Kids flooded school counselors' offices, which reported an explosion of children engaging in dangerous behaviors like cutting or asphyxiating each other in the "choking game."

Amid the pandemonium, the district's eighth suicide landed like a bomb: Cole Wilson, an Anoka High School senior with no apparent LGBT connection. The news was frightening, but also horrifyingly familiar. "People were dying one after another," remembers former district student Katie MacDonald, 16, who struggled with suicidal thoughts. "Every time you said goodbye to a friend, you felt like, 'Is this the last time I'm going to see you?'"

As a late-afternoon storm beats against the windows, 15-year-old Brittany Geldert sits in her living room. Her layered auburn hair falls into her face. Her ears are lined with piercings; her nail polish is black. "They said I had anger, depression, suicidal ideation, anxiety, an eating disorder," she recites, speaking of the month she spent at a psychiatric hospital last year, at the end of eighth grade. "Mentally being degraded like that, I translated that to 'I don't deserve to be happy,'" she says, barely holding back tears, as both parents look on with wet eyes. "Like I deserved the punishment - I've been earning the punishment I've been getting."

She's fighting hard to rebuild her decimated sense of self. It's a far darker self than before, a guarded, distant teenager who bears little resemblance to the openhearted young girl she was not long ago. But Brittany is also finding a reserve of strength she never realized she had, having stepped up as one of five plaintiffs in the civil rights lawsuit against her school district. The road to the federal lawsuit was paved shortly after Justin Aaberg's suicide, when a district teacher contacted the Southern Poverty Law Center to report the anti-gay climate, and the startling proportion of LGBT-related suicide victims. After months of fact-finding, lawyers built a case based on the harrowing stories of anti-gay harassment in order to legally dispute Anoka-Hennepin's neutrality policy. The lawsuit accuses the district of violating the kids' constitutional rights to equal access to education. In addition to making financial demands, the lawsuit seeks to repeal the neutrality policy, implement LGBT-sensitivity training for students and staff, and provide guidance for teachers on how to respond to anti-gay bullying.

The school district hasn't been anxious for a legal brawl, and the two parties have been in settlement talks practically since the papers were filed. Yet the district still stubbornly clung to the neutrality policy until, at a mid-December school-board meeting, it proposed finally eliminating the policy - claiming the move has nothing to do with the discrimination lawsuit - and, bizarrely, replacing it with the Controversial Topics Curriculum Policy, which requires teachers to not reveal their personal opinions when discussing "controversial topics." The proposal was loudly rejected both by conservatives, who blasted the board for retreating ("The gay activists now have it all," proclaimed one Parents Action League member) and by LGBT advocates, who understood "controversial topics" to mean gays. Faced with such overwhelming disapproval, the board withdrew its proposed policy in January - and suggested a new policy in its place: the Respectful Learning Environment Curriculum Policy, which the board is expected to swiftly approve.

The school district insists it has been portrayed unfairly. Superintendent Carlson points out it has been working hard to address the mental-health needs of its students by hiring more counselors and staff - everything, it seems, but admit that its policy has created problems for its LGBT community. "We understand that gay kids are bullied and harassed on a daily basis," and that that can lead to suicide, Carlson says. "But that was not the case here. If you're looking for a cause, look in the area of mental health." In that sense, the district is in step with PAL. "How could not discussing homosexuality in the public-school classrooms cause a teen to take his or her own life?" PAL asked Rolling Stone in an e-mail, calling the idea "absurd," going on to say, "Because homosexual activists have hijacked and exploited teen suicides for their moral and political utility, much of society seems not to be looking closely and openly at all the possible

causes of the tragedies," including mental illness. Arguably, however, it is members of PAL who have hijacked this entire discussion from the very start: Though they've claimed to represent the "majority" opinion on gay issues, and say they have 1,200 supporters, one PAL parent reported that they have less than two dozen members.

Teachers' union president Blaha, who calls the district's behavior throughout this ordeal "irrational," speculates that the district's stupefying denial is a reaction to the terrible notion that they might have played a part in children's suffering, or even their deaths: "I think your mind just reels in the face of that stress and that horror. They just lost their way."

That denial reaches right up to the pinnacle of the local political food chain: Michele Bachmann, who stayed silent on the suicide cluster in her congressional district for months - until Justin's mom, Tammy Aaberg, forced her to comment. In September, while Bachmann was running for the GOP presidential nomination, Aaberg delivered a petition of 141,000 signatures to Bachmann's office, asking her to address the Anoka-Hennepin suicides and publicly denounce anti-gay bullying. Bachmann has publicly stated her opposition to anti-bullying legislation, asking in a 2006 state Senate committee hearing, "What will be our definition of bullying? Will it get to the point where we are completely stifling free speech and expression?... Will we be expecting boys to be girls?" Bachmann responded to the petition with a generic letter to constituents telling them that "bullying is wrong," and "all human lives have undeniable value." Tammy Aaberg found out about the letter secondhand. "I never got a letter," says Tammy, seated in the finished basement of the Aabergs' new home in Champlin; the family couldn't bear to remain in the old house where Justin hanged himself. "My kid died in her district. And I'm the one that presented the dang petition!" In a closed room a few feet away are Justin's remaining possessions: his cello, in a closet; his soccer equipment, still packed in his Adidas bag. Tammy's suffering hasn't ended. In mid-December, her nine-year-old son was hospitalized for suicidal tendencies; he'd tried to drown himself in the bathtub, wanting to see his big brother again. Justin's suicide has left Tammy on a mission, transforming her into an LGBT activist and a den mother for gay teens, intent upon turning her own tragedy into others' salvation. She knows too well the price of indifference, or hostility, or denial. Because there's one group of kids who can't afford to live in denial, a group for whom the usual raw teenage struggles over identity, peer acceptance and controlling one's own impulsivity are matters of extreme urgency - quite possibly matters of life or death.

Which brings us to Anoka Middle School for the Arts' first Gay Straight Alliance meeting of the school year, where 19 kids seated on the linoleum floor try to explain to me what the GSA has meant to them. "It's a place of freedom, where I can just be myself," a preppy boy in basketball shorts says. This GSA, Sam Johnson's legacy, held its first meeting shortly after her death under the tutelage of teacher Fietek, and has been a crucial place for LGBT kids and their friends to find support and learn coping skills. Though still a source of local controversy, there is now a student-initiated GSA in every Anoka-Hennepin middle and high school. As three advisers look on, the kids gush about how affirming the club is - and how necessary, in light of how unsafe they continue to feel at school. "I'll still get bullied to the point where-" begins a skinny eighth-grade girl, then takes a breath. "I actually had to go to the hospital for suicide," she continues, looking at the floor. "I just recently stopped cutting because of bullying."

I ask for a show of hands: How many of you feel safe at school? Of the 19 kids assembled, two raise their hands. The feeling of insecurity continues to reverberate particularly through the Anoka-Hennepin middle schools these days, in the wake of the district's ninth suicide. In May, Northdale Middle School's Jordan Yenor, a 14-year-old with no evident LGBT connection, took

his life. Psychologist Cashen says that at Northdale Middle alone this school year, several students have been hospitalized for mental-health issues, and at least 14 more assessed for suicidal ideation; for a quarter of them, she says, "Sexual orientation was in the mix."

A slight boy with an asymmetrical haircut speaks in a soft voice. "What this GSA means to me, is: In sixth grade my, my only friend here, committed suicide." The room goes still. He's talking about Samantha. The boy starts to cry. "She was the one who reached out to me." He doubles over in tears, and everyone collapses on top of him in a group hug. From somewhere in the pile, he continues to speak in a trembling voice: "I joined the GSA 'cause I wanted to be just like her. I wanted to be nice and - loved."

<http://readersupportednews.org/news-section2/328-121/9792-one-towns-war-on-gay-teens>