

# Anti-LGBTQ curriculum emails spurred a new club in Hackensack. Now, it's won a \$10K grant



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HACKENSACK — Three years after a city Board of Education member’s criticism of LGBTQ curriculum sparked calls for her resignation, a gay-straight alliance club that formed in the wake of the controversy is thriving at Hackensack Middle School.

The club, for LGBTQ youth and their allies, is now among the school’s largest, with more than 100 members.

This school year, a \$10,000 grant from the It Gets Better Project — one of 50 the nonprofit awards to a school in each state — will support the club’s work to encourage inclusivity. And in June, the club will host a schoolwide Pride celebration, including a visit from Jason Collins, the first openly gay NBA player.

“Every district can improve in terms of LGBTQ inclusivity, but we had even more work to do because of this Board of Education member,” said Dee Kalman, the club’s volunteer adviser and teacher. “Middle school can be one of the hardest times of anybody’s life. Then add being LGBTQ on top of middle school, and during COVID. These kids know they have a safe space to go in the building if they need it.”



In February 2019, board member Frances Cogelja criticized the requirement to teach LGBTQ curriculum, in emails to acting Superintendent Rosemary Marks, after New Jersey became the second state in the nation to mandate that schools create lessons about the contributions of individuals who are gay or transgender.

"I find it repugnant that someone's sexual preferences have anything to do with their contributions or achievements in society," Cogelja wrote.

"Everywhere I turn, this alternate lifestyle narrative is being shoved [down] our children's throats. Where does it end???"

When those comments were made public that June by a defeated slate of school board candidates, they caused an uproar in the city and beyond. Among those calling for her resignation were Democratic Sens. Bob Menendez and

Cory Booker, Bergen County Executive Jim Tedesco and a group of nearly two dozen faith leaders and organizations.

Cogelja refused to resign, but she eventually did step down in November 2020 after accidentally broadcasting while on a bathroom break during a board meeting.

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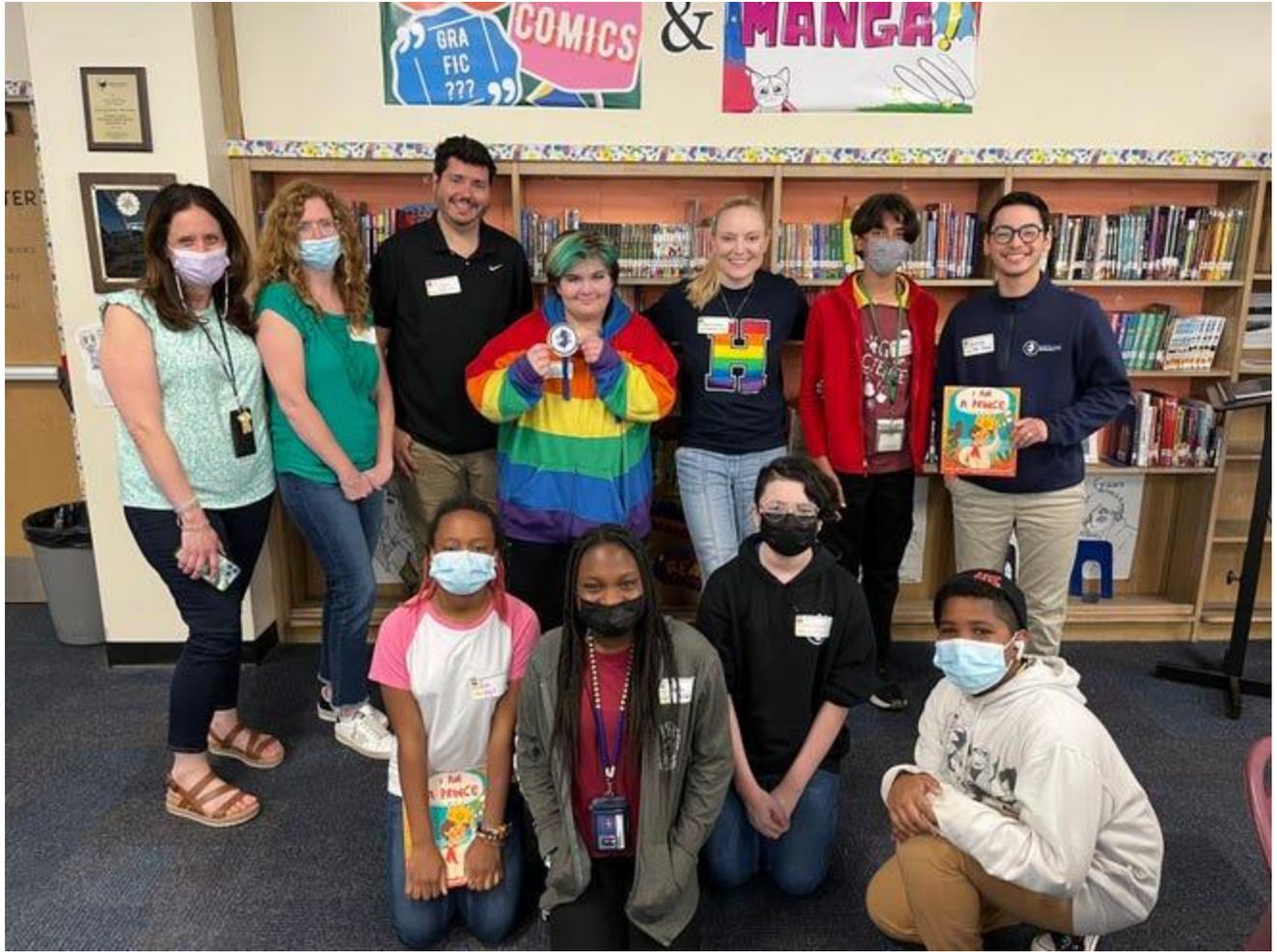
Reed Rodriguez, who had faced bullying and harassment as he embraced his identity as a transgender male, planted the idea for the club that September as a sixth grader.

When the principal asked what the school could do to make him more comfortable there, he had three requests: a recognition of his name change, a gender-inclusive bathroom and a gay-straight alliance.

“We wanted it to be a safe space. If you wanted to talk, you could, but you didn't have to,” said Reed, now 14. “It made everyone feel less alone.”

His mother, Lara Rodriguez, served on the school board alongside Cogelja but resigned in June 2020 after Reed talked about his struggles at school.

“As a mom, I could no longer remain on a board my child had a problem with,” she said. “The easiest decision I ever made was to leave the board and spend the summer figuring out how to help him feel more secure.”



Many high schools have gay-straight alliance clubs, but Hackensack is just the second such club in a Bergen County middle school. (Tenafly Middle School was the first.)

“At this point in their lives, when kids are just beginning to discover things about themselves, it’s a crucial age,” said George Ives, the father of Vinayan, an 11-year-old ally in the club entering sixth grade. “This is a place where students know they are safe to think, discuss and simply be.”

Hackensack Middle School’s diverse makeup — a quarter of its students are Black, 64% are Latino, 4% are Asian and 5% are white, according to state data — adds more urgency to the club’s message of inclusivity, Kalman said.

“Our LGBTQ youth are our most vulnerable. They are the most likely to contemplate or attempt suicide, the most likely to be harassed or assaulted, self-harm or be chronically absent,” she said. “These statistics are even more staggering among students of color.”

The school has made strides in its inclusivity, Reed Rodriguez said, but the daily questioning of his clothing choices and confrontations in bathrooms continued, and in February, he transferred to a private school.

“My child is still alive because of this club,” Lara Rodriguez said. “Hopefully there won’t be another situation like what happened to my child, where they are bullied for years to the point they develop anxiety and depression. They’ll have a support system in place.”



At first, the club met virtually, a format driven by COVID concerns but yielding unexpected benefits, Kalman said. Curious students who might not have been comfortable attending in person could log on anonymously. One

student began that year quietly listening and by June was marching with the club in the Pride parade in Tenafly.

The club has collected items to donate to an LGBTQ youth homeless shelter in New York City and hosted speakers including Schuyler Bailar, the first transgender athlete to compete in the NCAA, and Sarah McBride of Delaware, the nation's first openly transgender state senator.

Over the past three years, the district has invested in LGBTQ training among the staff and added a gender-neutral single-stall bathroom in the building. Teachers, administrators and students regularly include pronouns in their email signatures, and the school celebrates Pride in June and LGBTQ History Month in October.

“The long-lasting negative effects of bullying on children have been well established,” said Robert Sanchez, the district's schools superintendent. “In my opinion, anything we can do to reduce the potential for bullying and teen suicide is a worthwhile endeavor.”

Last school year, among the yearbook superlatives nominated and voted on by students, such as most athletic, most popular and best smile, was best couple. The winners were two female students.

“We still have more work to do, but I don't know too many middle schools where on a regular basis the word 'gay' is announced on the loudspeaker for a school club and not as a slur in the hallway,” Kalman said. “That's so affirming for these kids who are questioning who they are.”