Chapter 3 examines several key events in the 1990s and 2000s that opened the door for greater queer visibility in public schools, particularly on the behalf of queer students who were willing to be “out” about their identities. I also address the dilemmas that queer educators confronted if they came out or were forcibly “outed.”

The 1990s and 2000s were marked by a rapidly changing landscape for queer public school students. Moved by greater queer visibility in the popular media¹ as well as by a growing body of research detailing the dismal conditions confronting queer youth in the United States, and bolstered by an ironic US Supreme Court decision in Board of Education of Westside Community Schools v. Mergens (1990),² some states and public school districts began offering tepid to more-vigorous supports for queer students attending their public schools. Additionally, some municipalities and school districts began to protect queer identity, either in municipal codes or collective-bargaining contracts. Part of this support was spurred by the rise of a school-centered queer advocacy group, GLSEN. And finally sexuality education became the norm in the United States, although in many locales it followed the heterosexist and moralistic “abstinence only” formula. In this chapter, I examine several key events in the 1990s that opened the door for greater queer visibility in public schools, particularly on the behalf of queer students and educators who were willing to be “out” about their identities. I also address the dilemmas that queer public school educators confronted when they came out or, in some instances, were outed. While the political landscape remained hostile for US queers during this era, it began to shift towards more favorable paths, depending on the particular locale and on one critically important Supreme Court decision. To simplify, the hate was not quite as hateful. But acceptance as full and equal citizens was still far off. Therefore, the realization that queer children had legitimate needs that should be addressed by public schools was similarly still far off.

### Ronald Reagan and the rise of gay–straight alliances

It shall be unlawful for any public secondary school which receives Federal financial assistance and which has a limited open forum to deny equal access or a fair opportunity to, or discriminate against, any students who wish to conduct a meeting within that limited open forum on the basis of the religious, political, philosophical, or other content of the speech at such meetings. (Equal Access Act)³

In 1984, Ronald Reagan signed the Equal Access Act (EAA) into law. Long a proponent of state-supported religious exercises in public schools, Reagan saw this as the first step in restoring daily state-sponsored religious practices, like the traditional opening prayer that was common