

Removing Barriers to LGBTQ Student Safety and Achievement

Comprehensive protections from bullying and harassment help everyone.

Students who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, or questioning (LGBTQ) continue to experience bullying and harassment from their peers in K-12 education. LGBTQ students experience discrimination based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, as well as intersecting identities that encompass race, disability status, ethnicity, religion, color, national origin, among other categories. These lived experiences create barriers to short-term and long-term educational attainment and well-being.

In 2017, homophobic remarks and victimization rates leveled off, after years of measured improvements. Worse, there was a steady increase in youth reporting negative remarks about transgender people, and a recent upward trend in the frequency of staff making negative remarks about gender expression. My organization, GLSEN, reported these findings in its 2017 National School Climate Survey:

- The vast majority of LGBTQ students (87.3 percent) experienced harassment or assault based on personal characteristics, including sexual orientation, gender expression, gender, religion, race and ethnicity, and disability. Seven in ten LGBTQ students (70.1 percent) experienced verbal harassment based on sexual orientation and more than half based on gender expression (59.1 percent) or gender (53.2 percent).
- More than a third of LGBTQ students (34.8 percent) had missed at least one day of school in the previous month because of feeling unsafe at school, and at least two in five students avoided bathrooms (42.7 percent) and locker rooms (40.6 percent) because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable.

- The frequency of verbal harassment based on gender expression increased from 2015 to 2017, after years of decline, and there were no improvements in reports of physical harassment and assault based on gender expression from 2015 to 2017 (figure 1).

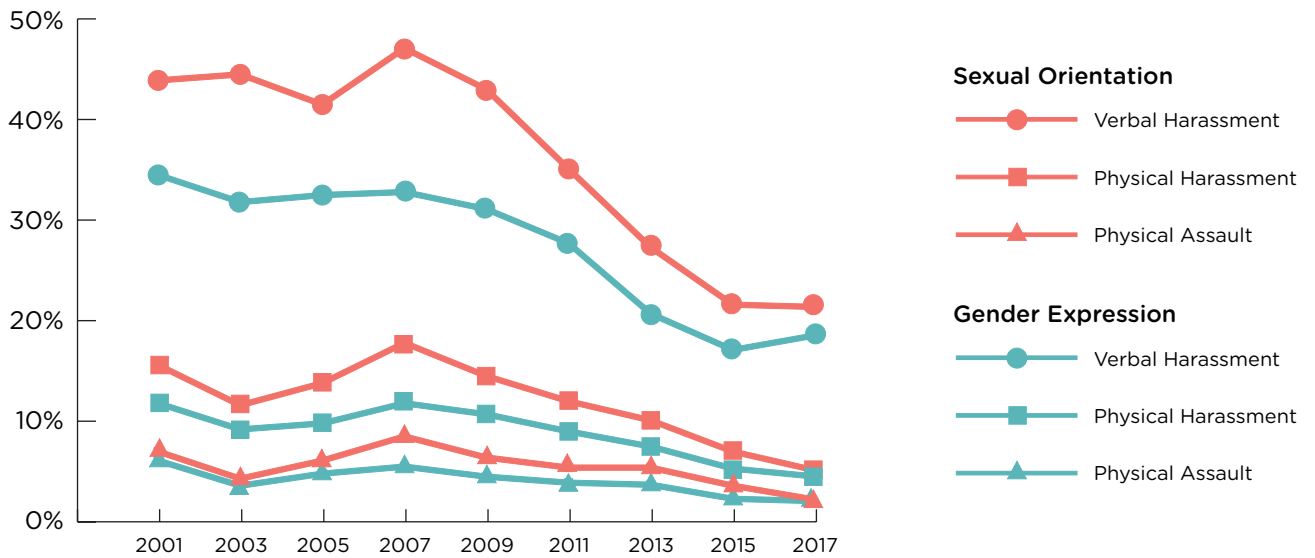
- In 2017, hostile school climates negatively affected LGBTQ students' mental health and educational outcomes. LGBTQ students who experienced high levels of anti-LGBTQ victimization were nearly twice as likely to report that they do not plan to pursue postsecondary education. Also, LGBTQ students who experienced high levels of anti-LGBTQ victimization and discrimination had lower GPAs, lower self-esteem, and higher levels of depression.¹

Public policy proposals at the federal, state, and local levels continue to target LGBTQ students in ways that seek to strengthen rather than remove barriers to full inclusion and achievement in educational institutions. State boards of education have the power to develop supportive policy frameworks that promote positive transformations in schools where LGBTQ students can feel safe and learn. In place of harmful and discriminatory policies, boards can lead in establishing comprehensive statewide antibullying and harassment standards, along with nondiscrimination protections that apply to K-12 education and that cover students and educators.

State boards can also leverage their power to convene statewide task forces that include students, parents, caregivers, youth-serving organizations, and educators who can help evaluate and strengthen bullying prevention efforts. For example, the Illinois State Board of Education convened a school bullying prevention

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Figure 1. Frequency of School Victimization Based on Sexual Orientation and Gender Expression Over Time (Percentage of LGBTQ Students Reporting Event Often or Frequently Based on Estimated Marginal Means)



Source: GLSEN. Download the National School Climate Survey summary, full report, and infographics at glsen.org/nscs.

task force that led efforts to strengthen statewide and local policies.² In addition, these bodies can consider developing inclusive curricular standards that acknowledge and reflect the history and experiences of all communities, including LGBTQ people, people of color, and persons with disabilities. State task forces can also lead public engagement campaigns such as No Name Calling Week, Day of Silence, and Ally Week, which seek to raise awareness and promote community actions that make schools safer for LGBTQ students.

Establish Comprehensive Protections

In the absence of federal standards on bullying and harassment prevention, state governments have passed a diverse range of antibullying and harassment laws, which create a patchwork of unequal protections for students living in different areas of the country.³ Over the past 20 years, policymakers in all 50 states have identified additional ways to strengthen state laws to make schools safer for LGBTQ students. State boards might consider the

following recommendations when assessing ways to strengthen their state's bullying prevention statute and administrative regulations.

When educators make schools safer and more inclusive for LGBTQ students, schools are safer for all students. Seventeen states and the District of Columbia have passed antibullying and harassment laws that specifically enumerate protections for students based on their sexual orientation, gender identity, gender expression, and other protected categories, such as race, color, national origin, sex, disability status, and religion.⁴

GLSEN has found that enumerated laws not only make schools safer for LGBTQ students, but for all students. Students who attended schools with an enumerated antibullying and harassment policy heard homophobic and racist remarks less often and were less likely to feel unsafe compared with students in schools without enumerated protections or no policies. Students covered by enumerated policies were also less likely to perceive bullying, name-calling, or harassment as a problem at their school compared with students in other schools.⁵

Replace punitive discipline with restorative practices. Restorative discipline practices, such as Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, are a key component of comprehensive bullying and harassment protections. By replacing punitive practices with restorative discipline, educators can help alleviate harms associated with punitive discipline, which disproportionately affects students of color and students with disabilities (see also article on page 43).⁶

Punitive discipline also disproportionately affects LGBTQ students:

- Sixty percent of LGBTQ students reported that they were disciplined because of their identity as an LGBTQ person.⁷
- LGBTQ students of color are almost twice as likely to be suspended as white LGBTQ students.⁸
- Over 45 percent of transgender and gender nonconforming students reported some form of discipline, compared with only 35 percent of cisgender LGBTQ students.⁹

Create distinct processes for family notification of incidents. Most LGBTQ students never report incidents of harassment or assault to school staff, commonly because they fear being outed as LGBTQ to staff or to family members; 43.3 percent of LGBTQ students said they did not always report these types of victimization experiences. Further, 10.8 percent of LGBTQ students reported that school staff had outed them to their families without their permission.¹⁰ In recognition of potential harms to students from being outed to parents and other family members who may not affirm their sexual orientation and/or gender identity, educators should create plans at the district and school level for processing reports of bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation and gender identity.

Identify systems to collect and aggregate incident data. State boards can support and encourage local collection and submission of data on bullying and harassment incidents that can be used to evaluate and strengthen bullying prevention efforts. By leveraging tools like online reporting forms, local education agencies (LEAs) can more readily submit uniform data that can inform more accurate statewide reporting. For example, the Maryland State

Department of Education distributes an electronic reporting instrument that LEAs populate with incident reports. Detailed instructions explain each category of information, such as incident location, description, alleged motives, investigative methods, and corrective actions. The department also publishes sample forms and related materials. Its statewide report is available to educators and the public, who can reference the data to help identify best practices and recommend areas for improvement.

Provide and adequately fund professional development for educators to address anti-LGBTQ bias. Funding and implementing evidence-based professional development training for educators is one of the central elements of school transformations that make schools safer for LGBTQ students. Educators who are skilled at addressing anti-LGBTQ bias can better support students and advocate for change in their schools. These skills include a number of core competencies such as having an awareness of the prevalence of anti-LGBTQ language and behavior in schools and a willingness and ability to intervene when anti-LGBTQ bullying and harassment occurs.

Develop resources that advance local policy adoption and implementation. Once state antibullying and harassment legislation is passed, these laws often require LEAs to adopt a policy that incorporates all the requirements of the new law, which catalyzes implementation in a district's schools. Yet GLSEN has found that 26.3 percent of LEAs had not adopted an antibullying policy when state law required it.¹¹ In states with laws enumerating sexual orientation and gender identity, 38.7 and 60.3 percent of LEAs were not including similar protections in their policies, respectively.

State agencies can encourage and accelerate comprehensive LEA policy adoption and implementation in schools in several ways. Many jurisdictions publish a model policy that school boards or other LEA officials with similar authority can reference so they can more readily incorporate state standards. The availability of policy guidance is among the strongest predictors of the inclusion of key characteristics—LGBTQ enumeration, professional development requirements, and accountability stipulations—in LEA policies.¹²

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Issue guidance on the needs of transgender students. It is estimated that over 150,000 transgender students between the ages of 13 and 17 attend U.S. schools. Transgender students experience pervasive hostility, discrimination, and bullying at school. The majority of transgender students also face discriminatory school policies limiting their access to facilities. Transgender students are often targeted by school officials. Many transgender students report serious physical and emotional health consequences.¹³

States such as Maryland, Michigan, and Oregon have recognized the need to promulgate guidance to address the unique needs of transgender students. The proliferation of potentially harmful legislation at the state level has increased the urgency for educators to have access to this type of guidance. Several issues of concern could similarly be addressed in state-wide standards:

- maintenance of a safe, supportive learning environment free from discrimination and harassment for LGBTQ students;
- prevention of and response to bullying and harassment;
- maintenance of student records to reflect their gender identity, name, and pronouns as disclosed by the student;
- student identity;
- protection of student privacy and the confidentiality of sensitive information;
- enforcement of sex-based dress codes;
- student participation in sex-specific school activities, events, and athletics and use of school facilities;
- compliance with applicable nondiscrimination laws.

Build Support for Nondiscrimination Protections

Only 22 states and the District of Columbia have comprehensive nondiscrimination protections that cover workplace concerns for LGBTQ educators. When LGBTQ teachers and allies feel safer at work due to workplace protections, their ability to make schools safer for LGBTQ students is enhanced. Supportive

educators serve as an important resource for LGBTQ students.¹⁴

Educators who affirm LGBTQ students help set a safe, positive tone in schools by preventing and resolving incidents of harassment and bullying based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. They serve as staff advisors to student clubs such as Gay-Straight Alliances or Gender and Sexuality Alliances, which address LGBTQ issues. Affirming teachers are more likely to incorporate positive representations of LGBTQ people, history, or events in their instruction. Educators who affirm LGBTQ students often also serve as staff leads on the implementation of antibullying and harassment laws.

Such educators can support students who experience discrimination by increasing awareness of the process for filing complaints with the Office for Civil Rights at the U.S. Education Department. GLSEN has found that 62.2 percent of students reported experiencing LGBTQ-related discriminatory policies or practices at school.¹⁵ Such policies include being prevented from wearing clothes considered inappropriate based on their perceived gender, from accessing a restroom that corresponds with their gender identity, and from discussing or writing about LGBTQ topics in school assignments.

Convene Task Forces and Councils

As educators know, local communities' unique characteristics affect the types of programs that will remove barriers to LGBTQ safety and educational attainment effectively. At least 13 states and the District of Columbia have convened antibullying and harassment task forces to help identify ways to make schools safer. These bodies conducted research and organized community listening sessions to better understand existing issues and programs. Educators, students, school counselors, and other community leaders on these task forces helped guide the content of regulations and model policies that state agencies subsequently issued. They crafted recommendations on professional development for educators, antibullying and harassment trainings for students, and have the potential to provide leadership on a broader set of issues.

For example, task force members could examine the work of advocates in a growing number of states who are building support for the adoption and implementation of inclusive curricular standards. In 2019, Maryland became the sixth state to approve the addition of LGBTQ-inclusive curricular standards following Illinois, California, New Jersey, Colorado, and Oregon. A portion of these jurisdictions have amended their statewide curricular standards to include the experiences of persons with disabilities and communities of color in K-12 curriculum.

Teaching LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum has profound, positive impacts for LGBTQ students, GLSEN research suggests. Compared with students in schools without such curriculum, LGBTQ students in schools with LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum were less likely to hear “gay” used in a negative way, were less likely to hear negative remarks about gender expression, performed better academically in school, and were more likely to plan on pursuing postsecondary education.¹⁶

Through their convening power, state boards can make schools more affirming for LGBTQ students. They can adopt resolutions in support of GLSEN’s education and youth programs. Over the years, tens of thousands of students, educators, and community members have participated in No Name Calling Week to focus national attention on the problem and to provide students and educators with the tools and inspiration to launch dialogue in their communities. They have also been a part of the annual Day of Silence, a national student-led demonstration where LGBTQ students and allies all around the country—and the world—take a vow of silence to protest the harmful effects of bullying and harassment on LGBTQ people in schools. In September, educators, students, and community members can celebrate the annual Ally Week program, which recognizes that everyone has a role in supporting LGBTQ students in K-12 schools.

Barriers to LGBTQ safety and achievement are persistent, but state boards can help. They can develop affirming policies that are uniquely tailored to the needs of their state and communities. This work continues to be critically important. Students who do not feel safe at school cannot learn and achieve their potential. ■

¹Joseph G. Kosciw et al., “The 2017 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth in Our Nation’s Schools,” report (New York: GLSEN, 2018). This survey gathered data from 23,001 students aged 13-24 who identify as LGBTQ from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and 5 U.S. territories. The survey was disseminated through LGBTQ and other youth-serving organizations and social media, with respondents opting in; as such, it is a nonrandom sample.

²See Illinois State Board of Education School Bullying Prevention Task Force, web page, <https://www.isbe.net/Pages/School-Bullying-Prevention-Task-Force.aspx>.

³StopBullying.gov, “Laws, Policies & Regulations,” web page, <https://www.stopbullying.gov/laws/index.html>.

⁴GLSEN, “Policy Maps,” web page, <https://www.glsen.org/policy-maps>.

⁵Kosciw et al., “2017 National School Climate Survey.”

⁶U.S. Government Accountability Office, “Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities,” GAO-18-258 (March 2018); U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, “Beyond Suspensions: Examining School Discipline Policies and Connections to the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Students of Color with Disabilities,” briefing report (2019), <https://www.usccr.gov/pubs/2019/07-23-Beyond-Suspensions.pdf>.

⁷Kosciw et al., “2017 National School Climate Survey.”

⁸GLSEN, “Educational Exclusion: Drop Out, Push Out, and the School-to-Prison Pipeline among LGBTQ Youth” (New York: GLSEN, 2016).

⁹Ibid.

¹⁰Ibid.

¹¹Ryan M. Kull, Joseph G. Kosciw, and Emily A. Greytak, “From Statehouse to Schoolhouse: Antibullying Policy Efforts in U.S. States and School Districts” (New York: GLSEN, 2015).

¹²Ibid.

¹³Movement Advancement Project and GLSEN, “Separation and Stigma: Transgender Youth & School Facilities,” April 2017, <http://lgbtmap.org/transgender-youth-school>.

¹⁴Kosciw, “The 2017 National School Climate Survey.”

¹⁵Ibid.

¹⁶Ibid.

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