Transgender Student Well-Being

In the past several years, the rights of transgender and gender non-conforming (TGNC) people to access bathrooms, locker rooms, and other gender-segregated facilities has emerged as a highly contested public and political issue. Efforts to restrict access by TGNC people to facilities aligned with their sex assigned at birth have often focused on children and schools.

75% of TGNC youth feel unsafe at school due to their gender expression.[9]

These political debates have often included rhetoric that if TGNC students use the bathroom that aligns with their gender identity, it will endanger other students. Yet a growing body of new research demonstrates that transgender students are among those who have the most negative experiences and least safety at school. Research has documented extensive bullying based on gender identity or expression,[9,57,59–61] with consequences for TGNC students' academic performance, attendance, educational aspirations, and feelings of safety at school. A recent national study of LGBTQ youth found that 75% of TGNC youth feel unsafe at school due to their gender expression, relative to 32% of cisgender (that is, non-transgender) males and 23% of cisgender females,[9] and that TGNC youth report feeling particularly unsafe in bathrooms, locker, rooms, and gym class.

Research on TGNC students also shows high levels of mental and physical health risks, including elevated rates of mental health disorders,[62,63] substance use,[64–66] and self-harm.[67,68]

TRANSGENDER STUDENT WELL-BEING: WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

Like for LGB youth,[69–71] experiences of bullying play an important role in the health and well-being of transgender youth.[64,67] Studies show that improving school climate and reducing bullying are essential approaches for supporting the health of transgender students. For example, a recent study found that bullying based on gender identity was pervasive at school; however, transgender, queer, or questioning students in schools that had anti-bullying policies, LGBT resources, LGBT-inclusive curricula, and GSAs reported feeling more connected to adults at school and more feelings of safety.[59] Another study found that a number of safe school policies and practices were associated with less absenteeism and victimization for all LGBTQ students, but the positive impact of inclusive policies and GSAs was strongest for transgender youth.[12]

Finally, new research is uncovering strategies specific to the well-being of transgender youth. For example, a recent study[72] showed that among transgender youth, many use a name that was different from the name given to them at birth. For those youth, when they could use their chosen names at school, home, work, and with friends, they reported 71% fewer symptoms of severe depression, 29% fewer reported thoughts of suicide, and 56% fewer suicidal attempts. This research suggests that other youth, parents, and school personnel can support transgender youth by referring to them by their chosen name.

RECOMMENDATIONS

☑ School policy-makers should:

- Adopt policies and practices that support transgender and gender non-conforming students; for example, adjust administrative systems to allow for names in school records, forms, and other identification systems that are different from those given at birth.
- Support professional development for school personnel on understanding gender identity and expression in youth.

☑ School personnel should:

- Request training to understand and support transgender students.
- Intervene in bullying.
- Call transgender students by their chosen names.

☑ Students can:

- Speak out and stand up for transgender and gender nonconforming students if they witness bullying.
- Find out if their school has policies that include safety and protection based on gender identity or expression.
- Call one another by chosen or preferred names.

DOWNLOAD THE FULL POLICY BRIEF, INCLUDING END NOTES THAT PERTAIN TO THIS SECTION

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