

# Promoting School Safety for LGBTQ and All Students

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# Promoting School Safety

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) students often experience negative school climates, where they are subjected to bias-based bullying and discrimination based on sexual and gender diversity. These negative school climates can threaten LGBTQ students' health and well-being. At the same time, a large and consistent body of research shows that four strategies help to keep LGBTQ and all students safe and supported at school:

- 1 Inclusive, enumerated policies
- 2 Professional development on LGBTQ issues
- 3 LGBTQ-related resources
- 4 Student-led clubs (Genders and Sexualities Alliances – or GSAs)

This research review summarizes the scientific evidence on each of these safe-school strategies. First, the presence of enumerated policies is associated with more positive school experiences and health for LGBTQ and all youth. Second, pre-service and in-service training can help equip teachers with practical tools to support and protect all students effectively. Third, students report safer school climates when their school curricula includes attention to sexual orientation and gender identity. Fourth, the presence of a GSA, as well as participation in one, can improve students' school experiences and well-being.



In recent years, significant public attention has been devoted to transgender youth in schools. Most research has studied LGBTQ students as one group. In this brief, we include specific attention to new studies that focus on the distinct experiences of transgender students.

Studies have used several ways to define sexual and gender diversity for students. Some studies have focused on only LGB students; others combine LGBTQ students into one group; some distinguish between LGB and transgender and queer or questioning youth; and some (but very few) focus on the unique experiences of transgender youth. In this report, we refer to “LGBTQ students”, but when referring to original research we use the language from specific studies. For example, we refer to “LGB” when a study specifically included LGB but not transgender, questioning, or queer youth.

Much of the available research related to school policy change focuses on teachers. We refer to “school personnel” in order to include not only teachers but the range of adult authorities involved in schooling: teachers, school administrators, and all school staff (e.g., classroom aides, cafeteria workers, or bus drivers).

**Drawing from the research findings, each section includes recommendations for multiple audiences, including policy-makers, professional associations in the field of education, schools of education, school personnel, parents, and students.**



# Inclusive, Enumerated Policies

Enumerated policies are policies that list characteristics or traits of students that may be the basis of bullying or discrimination at school. Inclusive, enumerated policies are a basic step towards creating safe and supportive schools for LGBTQ and all youth.<sup>1-3</sup> These policies call for protection for all students from bullying and discrimination, and intentionally list the characteristics of specific groups of students that experience more bullying and discrimination to promote safety.

## HOW COMMON ARE ENUMERATED POLICIES?

Although there is no current national legislation regarding inclusive enumerated policies in the United States, a number of individual states have enacted legislation to protect students from bullying and discrimination on the basis of actual or perceived sexual and gender diversity or expression through enumerated policies.

**FOR STATE-SPECIFIC INFORMATION  
REGARDING ENUMERATED ANTI-BULLYING  
LAWS, VISIT:**

 [lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/safe\\_school\\_laws](https://lgbtmap.org/equality-maps/safe_school_laws)



## WHY IS ENUMERATION IMPORTANT?

Multiple studies at state,<sup>4-6</sup> national,<sup>3,7-10</sup> and international<sup>11,12</sup> levels find that enumerated school policies are associated with improved school experiences and health for LGBTQ and all students.<sup>1-4</sup> Specifically, when enumerated policies are present, LGBT students feel safer at school, hear fewer homophobic remarks, experience less victimization based on sexual orientation and gender expression, report less absenteeism at school, show more self-esteem and higher academic achievement, and are less at risk for suicide and substance use.<sup>3-9,11,13-15</sup>

Studies show that in the presence of enumerated policies, teachers show more supportive behaviors toward LGBT students<sup>16</sup> and intervene more often in instances of harassment.<sup>7</sup> In a recent study on the impact of the presence of enumerated policies, twice as many educators reported these policies were effective in decreasing school bullying compared to educators who believe these policies to be ineffective.<sup>17</sup> Further, students in schools with enumerated policies are less likely to report homophobic or transphobic attitudes or remarks toward LGBT peers.<sup>7,18</sup>

Of course, school communities must be aware of these policies in order for them to be most effective. In some cases, students, parents, and school personnel are unaware of safe schools policies and believe that there are no procedures to deal with explicit protection for students who are (or who are perceived to be) LGBTQ.<sup>19,20</sup> In these situations, LGBT students may feel less assured that they can be supported.<sup>16,19-21</sup> A key strategy for promoting school safety, then, is to disseminate information about school policies so that students and educators know about and understand state and local policies that affect them.<sup>22,23</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Policy-makers at the state and school district levels should enact inclusive and enumerated educational laws and policies.
- ✓ School personnel should establish local policies in school districts, schools, and classrooms.
- ✓ School personnel, parents, and students should:
  - Learn about policies in their school and school district.
  - Raise awareness of the need for inclusive and enumerated policies.
  - Advocate for local and state policy change.

## Enumerated policies can be protective for students in a number of ways:

- 1 They provide students with a clear understanding of their rights to safety at school.
- 2 They provide school personnel with the policy guidance to implement anti-bullying policies and practices.
- 3 They signal to school personnel and students that LGBTQ-based discrimination should not be tolerated.

# School Personnel Support and Training

Support from school personnel is another essential strategy for creating school contexts in which LGBTQ and all youth can thrive. Caring and supportive adults are critical to the safety and well-being of all students, especially those who are vulnerable, such as LGBTQ students.<sup>7</sup> Most school personnel want to be supportive of students but may not be aware of the distinct challenges or needs of LGBTQ students or may not feel capable of intervening in bullying. For these reasons, providing training for school personnel to understand and support LGBTQ students is essential.<sup>24,25</sup>



## SUPPORT FROM SCHOOL PERSONNEL IS CRUCIAL

Studies show that when LGBTQ youth view school personnel as supportive, they feel safer, have fewer absences for safety reasons, report lower levels of victimization based on their sexual and gender diversity, and have higher grades.<sup>7,15,26</sup>

A critical aspect of support for LGBTQ students is intervening when bullying happens. According to a recent study, LGBTQ students reported feeling safer in schools where educators intervened more often in anti-LGBTQ remarks compared to students in schools where educators intervened less frequently.<sup>7</sup> According to a national study, LGBTQ students say that teachers intervene less often when homophobic remarks are made than when racist or sexist remarks are made.<sup>7</sup> A recent report<sup>27</sup> also found a decrease in the frequency of intervention by school personnel in homophobic remarks from 2013 to 2015. Just as alarming, a recent study has shown that the effectiveness of staff intervention did not change between 2015 and 2017.<sup>7</sup> Lack of effective intervention by school personnel may stem from barriers including lack of education about LGBTQ issues, lack of institutional support, and fear of backlash.<sup>19</sup> A national report<sup>10</sup> from 2016 found that only 26% of teachers said they are able to support LGBT students (e.g. discussing LGBT issues and advocating for inclusive policies) without any barriers. The remaining 74% of teachers said they do not participate in supportive actions because of professional pressure (e.g., lack of administrative support, or backlash from parents or community), personal beliefs (e.g., that addressing LGBT issues is not necessary or appropriate), or practical concerns (e.g., lack of time; not knowing how to include LGBT issues).

**26%** of teachers said they have no barriers to supporting LGBT students.



**74%** of teachers said they do not participate in supportive actions because of professional pressure.

It is especially concerning that some LGBTQ students say that school personnel are often the ones using homophobic language. In a national survey of LGBTQ students, over half (57%) reported hearing homophobic remarks from school personnel, while almost three-fourths (71%) have reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from school personnel.<sup>7</sup> This same survey found that from 2013 to 2017, there was an increase in frequency of hearing school staff make negative remarks about gender expression. When adults at school neglect to intervene in homophobic remarks or make these kinds of remarks, students learn that homophobic language is normal and prejudice is acceptable at school.

### When school personnel intervene to stop negative comments, students are more likely to:

- 1 Feel that their schools are safe for LGBT students.
- 2 Hear fewer LGBT-related slurs.
- 3 Experience less LGBT bullying
- 4 Have higher grades.
- 5 Report lower levels of absenteeism.
- 6 Participate more in school.
- 7 Have more caring relationships with teachers.

**57%** of LGBTQ students reported hearing homophobic remarks from school personnel.



## TRAINING SCHOOL PERSONNEL MAKES A DIFFERENCE

Pre-service and in-service professional development for school personnel can build awareness, empathy, and self-efficacy, resulting in actionable supportive behaviors for LGBTQ students.<sup>24,25</sup> For example, teacher training that provides opportunities for exposure to LGBT people, raises awareness of homophobic bullying, and builds teachers' skills to intervene in homophobic behaviors have been suggested as effective strategies to promote teachers' interventions in homophobic bullying and harassment.<sup>28</sup>

Several studies show that professional development for school personnel on LGBTQ issues is effective. A study from a national sample of secondary school teachers<sup>10</sup> found that professional development on LGBT issues was related to increased intervention in response to homophobic remarks, but general professional development on bullying was not related to increased teacher intervention in the same circumstances. These findings were supported by another study<sup>16</sup> which showed that professional development on LGBT issues was positively associated with behaviors and activities to support LGBT students. These trainings also serve to develop empathy for and understanding of LGBT youth for both teachers and administrators, which encourages more intervention in anti-LGBT remarks.<sup>29</sup> Finally, another study<sup>30</sup> found that students reported less bullying in schools with multiple LGBT-supportive practices in place, including having an LGBT point-person available and providing LGBT-related professional development.

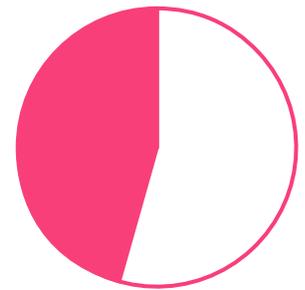
## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Schools of education at colleges and universities should integrate education about LGBTQ issues and the needs of LGBTQ students into teacher education.
- ✓ Professional education associations should offer continuing education and professional development about LGBTQ issues and the needs of LGBTQ students.
- ✓ School personnel should:
  - Intervene in discriminatory bullying.
  - Seek out resources to support LGBTQ students.
  - Participate in trainings to better understand their LGBTQ students.
- ✓ Parents should support efforts by schools and school districts to provide LGBTQ-focused professional development and training to school personnel.
- ✓ Students can advocate for, and participate in, LGBTQ-focused professional development for their teachers and other school personnel.



# Student-Led Clubs (GSAs)

LGBTQ-focused, student-led, school-based clubs (often called gay-straight alliances, or gender-sexuality alliances, i.e., GSAs), are organizations composed of students and advisors that operate like other student extracurricular clubs. In GSAs, LGBTQ students and non-LGBTQ student allies work together to promote social inclusion and a positive school climate for LGBTQ and all students. In 2018, national data from the CDC's School Health Profiles reported that 40% of students across the U.S. attend schools with a GSA or similar club.<sup>31</sup>



In 2018, **40%** of U.S. high school students attended a school with a GSA



Not all GSAs are the same. Depending on the climate of a school or on students' needs, objectives and activities may significantly vary. GSAs may be involved in a range of activities, including providing a platform for education and safety, interpersonal support, leadership development, school-wide advocacy training, and recreational activities.<sup>32-34</sup>

## HOW CAN STUDENTS START A GSA IN THEIR SCHOOL?

GSAs can rely on the support of national nonprofit organizations, such as GSA Network (<https://gsanetwork.org/>) and GLSEN (<https://www.glsen.org/>), that assist students in the creation and implementation of their GSAs. These organizations provide useful resources that GSA members and advisors can use to make their clubs more effective.

### GLSEN

 [glsen.org](https://www.glsen.org/)

### ACLU GSA RESOURCE GUIDE

 [aclu.org/other/how-start-gay-straight-alliance-gsa](https://www.aclu.org/other/how-start-gay-straight-alliance-gsa)

### NATIONAL GSA NETWORK

 [gsanetwork.org](https://gsanetwork.org)

## CAN GSAS BE PROHIBITED IN SCHOOLS?

No. Some schools and school personnel believe that GSAs can be prohibited in schools, or may treat them differently from other student clubs and organizations. However, in the United States, students have clear legal rights to form GSAs. To learn more visit:

- [ACLU GSA Resource Guide](#)
- [National GSA Network](#)

## THE BENEFITS OF GSAS APPLY TO ALL STUDENTS

An important and consistent research finding is that participating in a GSA benefits students. Specifically, GSA participation is linked to academic performance (higher grade point average),<sup>35,36</sup> more school belonging,<sup>35</sup> feeling safe at school,<sup>37</sup> and better mental health.<sup>32</sup> Additional recent studies suggest that the positive impact of GSAs on their members may be influenced by several different factors, including the type and amount of students' participation, as well as characteristics of GSA advisors, such as how much time they have served as an advisor, their own and their students' racial/ethnic and gender identities,<sup>38</sup> and their perceptions of support from the school.<sup>39</sup>

It makes sense that GSAs would make a difference for their members. However, research also consistently shows that regardless of GSA membership, simply having a GSA at school is linked to a number of benefits for LGBT<sup>13,27,32,36,40-43</sup> and heterosexual students.<sup>43-45</sup> In a national survey of LGBT students in high schools, those in schools with GSAs reported less homophobic language, less bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identity, and a greater sense of belonging to their school environment.<sup>7</sup> A recent study also suggests that greater involvement in GSAs is linked to more youth empowerment around social justice issues, more validation from fellow students, and more hope for the future.<sup>32</sup>

A statewide study<sup>43</sup> in Massachusetts from more than 15 years ago found that in schools with GSAs, 52% of students reported that school personnel were supportive of LGB students compared to only 37% of students in schools without GSAs. The same study found that 75% of students in schools without GSAs reported anti-gay slurs every day compared to 57% of students in schools with GSAs. In addition to these influences on school-related factors, another growing line of research has shown the connection between having a GSA at school and better mental health and health behavior for LGBT students, including reductions in smoking, drinking and drug use, sex with casual partners,<sup>45,46</sup> psychological distress and depressive symptoms,<sup>32,47,48</sup> suicidal ideation and behavior,<sup>13,44,48-51</sup> and increased self-esteem.<sup>48,52</sup> For example, in a study of 245 LGBT young adults, those who said that they had a GSA at their school when they were teens had higher self-esteem, less depression, and less lifetime suicide attempts compared to those that didn't have GSAs.<sup>48</sup>

Another recent study<sup>37</sup> was the first to examine the role of GSAs by following LGB and questioning students over time: It showed that having a GSA was associated with decreasing homophobic bullying and increasing feelings of safety one year later. Relatedly, another study<sup>53</sup> showed that the presence of a GSA in high school can positively predict supportive attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals among college students. Finally, a statistical review<sup>54</sup> of all published studies of GSAs (a “meta-analysis”) showed that, across studies, LGBT students with GSAs in their schools are 30% less likely to report homophobic victimization and 36% more likely to feel safe compared to LGBT students in schools without GSAs.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✔ Professional education associations should raise awareness of GSAs and other student organizations that support LGBTQ and other marginalized students and provide training and support to school personnel.
- ✔ School personnel should:
  - Identify and eliminate barriers to the formation and operation of GSAs, and treat them like any other student organization or club.
  - Seek training on how to support GSAs.
  - Provide resources and support to GSAs and other student organizations.
- ✔ Students can advocate for, start, and participate in GSAs in their schools.



# Access to LGBTQ-Related Resources and Curricula

An effective strategy for creating safe and supportive schools involves making LGBTQ-related resources (such as information and support services) and LGBTQ-inclusive curricula available for all students.<sup>1,2,55</sup> Access to resources can be provided in libraries; through internet resources; through safe zone trainings that identify supportive school personnel; during in-school assemblies and announcements that highlight resources and support; in textbooks and lectures; and through visible images of LGBTQ topics and people in posters on walls in classrooms and hallways.<sup>55-59</sup> LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum integrates topics related to sexual and gender diversity within a standard school curriculum (e.g., health education, literature, science, or mathematics). Multiple studies have shown the importance of access to these kinds of resources and inclusive curricula for student safety and belonging.<sup>58-61</sup>





Some educators report barriers to accessing and using inclusive curricula, including not knowing how or where to access inclusive curricula<sup>62</sup> or worrying that parents and/or community members may not be supportive.<sup>61</sup> For this reason, it is especially important for school administrators, parents, and other members of school communities to share and promote inclusive curricula.

## **LGBTQ-RELATED RESOURCES AND SAFE SPACES CREATE VISIBILITY AND BELONGING**

A recent national survey of LGBTQ students<sup>7</sup> found that when students know how and where to access appropriate and accurate information regarding LGBTQ people at school, they feel that their schools are safer for themselves and for other LGBTQ students. Another study<sup>40</sup> found that students with access to LGBT-related resources scored higher on resilience factors such as perceptions that adults care about them or that teachers treat students fairly. The identification of “safe spaces” or “safe zones” for LGBT students has emerged in several studies as another school resource associated with positive school climates.<sup>56–58</sup> Safe Zone initiatives are programs aimed to promote inclusivity and support by providing voluntary trainings on LGBT issues and providing training participants with “safe zone” stickers that they can post to identify spaces where students may feel free to openly discuss sexual and gender diversity.<sup>57</sup> The available research on “safe spaces” has shown that such initiatives contribute to greater safety, inclusiveness, and connection at school for LGBT students.<sup>7,56,58</sup>

## **LGBTQ-INCLUSIVE CURRICULA ARE LINKED TO ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT AND STUDENT HEALTH**

There is strong evidence that LGBTQ-inclusive curricula help create safe and fair learning environments for all students.<sup>32,55,59</sup> According to research, students who say that they have learned about LGBT issues at school report less bullying,<sup>15,55,63</sup> more safety,<sup>43,64</sup> less absenteeism,<sup>7,15</sup> and less homophobic language and negative remarks based on gender expression in their schools.<sup>7</sup> An LGBT-inclusive curriculum has also been shown to directly promote the health of LGB youth: in one state-wide study, teacher sensitivity to LGB issues in HIV education was linked to lower sexual risk-taking in LGB youth.<sup>60</sup>

Most students in U.S. schools report that their curricula do not include access to LGBTQ people, history, or events at school.<sup>7</sup> Students who lack these resources are more likely to attend a religious private school, to be in middle school, and/or to attend school in a rural area.<sup>7</sup> As of 2021, only four U.S. states – California, Colorado, New Jersey, and Illinois – mandate the teaching of LGBTQ history curricula. More common are “no promo homo laws” which prohibit the discussion of, or positive portrayal of, LGBT issues in some forms of instruction (e.g., HIV education). Such laws are currently in place in five states and have been shown to be associated with less inclusive curricula and less supportive school personnel, as well as less acceptance of LGBT people by students, more homophobic remarks, and more school bullying.<sup>84</sup>

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- ✓ Policymakers and school administrators should work to ensure that LGBTQ people and history are included in school curricula through state laws, educational guidelines, and school district policies, as well as professional development for school personnel for inclusive curriculum.
  
- ✓ School personnel should:
  - Be a resource for LGBTQ youth.
  - Ensure that libraries have resources for LGBTQ youth.
  - Request and attend safe zone trainings.
  - Promote visibility and inclusion through visual materials (posters), in public settings (school assemblies), and in classroom curricula.
  - Appeal to school administrators for LGBTQ-inclusive classroom curricula.
  
- ✓ Students can request that LGBTQ resources be made available at school

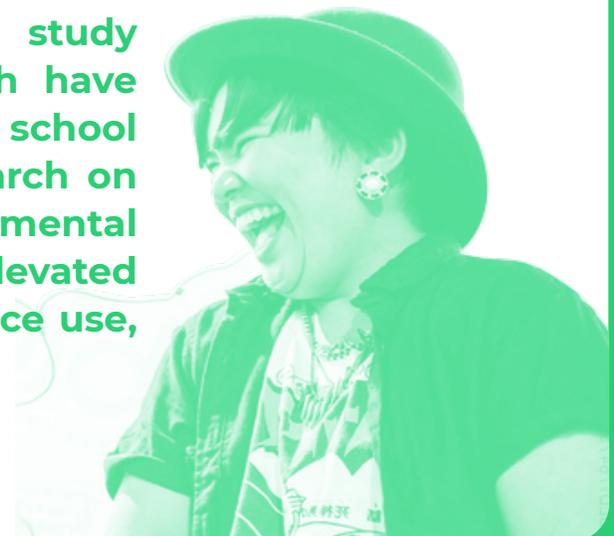


# Transgender Student Well-Being

Research has documented extensive bullying based on gender identity or expression,<sup>7,64-68</sup> with consequences for transgender and gender nonconforming (TGNC) students' academic performance, attendance, educational aspirations, feelings of safety at school, and health. A recent national study of LGBTQ youth<sup>7</sup> found that 73% of TGNC youth feel unsafe at school due to their gender expression, relative to 34% of cisgender (that is, non-transgender) males and 18% of cisgender females, and that TGNC youth report feeling particularly unsafe in bathrooms, locker rooms, and gym class. This corresponds with data from the same study demonstrating that 74% of TGNC youth have experienced harassment and assault at school based on their gender expression. Research on TGNC students also shows high levels of mental and physical health risks, including elevated rates of mental health disorders, substance use, and self-harm.<sup>69-77</sup>



**73%** of TGNC youth feel unsafe at school due to their gender expression.<sup>9</sup>



## TRANSGENDER STUDENT WELL-BEING: WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO?

Like for LGB youth,<sup>78–80</sup> experiences of bullying play an important role in the health and wellbeing of transgender youth.<sup>73,76,81</sup> Studies show that improving school climate and reducing bullying are essential approaches for supporting the health of transgender students. For example, a recent study<sup>65</sup> 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. Another study<sup>15</sup> found that a number of safe school policies and practices were associated with less absence and victimization for all LGBTQ students, but the positive impact of inclusive policies and GSAs were even stronger for transgender youth than LGB youth.

Finally, new research is uncovering strategies specific to the wellbeing of transgender youth. For example, a recent study<sup>82</sup> showed that among transgender youth, many use names that were 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 than TGNC who could not use their chosen names in these contexts. Conversely, using TGNC students' incorrect names or pronouns can have a negative effect on student wellbeing.<sup>83</sup> 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.

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