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## Promoting School Safety for LGBTQ and All Students

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### Abstract

Schools are often unsafe for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) students; they frequently experience negative or hostile school climates, including bullying and discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity at school. Negative school climates and discriminatory experiences can threaten LGBTQ students' well-being.

Simultaneously, a consistent body of research identifies strategies to support LGBTQ and all students to be safe and thrive at school. First, policies that specifically identify or enumerate protected groups such as LGBTQ students create supportive contexts for all youth. Second, professional development prepares educators and other school personnel with tools to support and protect all students. Third, access to information and support related to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (SOGIE), including curricula that is SOGIE-inclusive, provides students with resources, support, and inclusion, creating school climate. Fourth, the presence of student-led clubs or organizations such as gender-sexuality alliances (i.e., GSAs) improve students' school experiences and well-being, and contribute to positive school climate. This article reviews the research foundations of each of these strategies and concludes with recommendations for multiple audiences: policy-makers, school personnel, parents, and students.

### tweet

Students deserve safe schools. Research-based strategies promote safety for LGBTQ and all students: 1) Explicit anti-bullying policies; 2) Teacher professional development; 3) Gender-Sexuality Alliances; 4) Inclusive curricula & spaces.

Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning (LGBTQ) students often experience negative school environments, where they are subject to victimization based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression. As a result, LGBTQ students are more likely to report negative physical and mental health outcomes than their peers. Over the last decade, four strategies have emerged in the research literature to prevent or at least minimize these risks: specifically inclusive anti-bullying policies, professional

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development on LGBTQ issues, LGBTQ-related resources, and student-led clubs like Gender and Sexuality Alliances (GSAs) (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2019, 2020). This paper summarizes research evidence on each of these safe-school strategies and provides recommendations for multiple audiences, including policy-makers, professional associations in the field of education, schools of education, school personnel, parents, and students.

Before reviewing the evidence, note that studies have used several ways to define sexual orientation and gender identity. We refer to “LGBTQ students,” but when referencing 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. Further, most research to date has focused on only sexual orientation (or the experiences of LGB youth) or combines LGB with transgender youth. Thus, most studies have not provided specific attention to transgender and gender diverse youth, although there has been growing research attention to transgender and gender diverse youth (Day et al., 2018; Ioverno & Russell, 2021; Olsen & Gülgöz, 2018; Olsen et al., 2016). Finally, we refer to “school personnel” in order to include teachers as well as other school personnel, including school administrators, classroom aides, cafeteria workers, or bus drivers.

### **Strategy #1: Inclusive, Enumerated Policies**

Enumerated policies are policies that explicitly list characteristics or traits of students that may be the subject of bullying and harassment at school. Inclusive, enumerated policies are a critical tool for creating safe and supportive schools for LGBTQ and all youth (Black et al., 2012; Kull et al., 2016).

In March 2021, President Biden made history by signing the Executive Order on Guaranteeing an Educational Environment Free from Discrimination on the Basis of Sex, Including Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity (Exec. Order 14021, 2021). The Executive Order marks the first time that federal policy has provided legal protection against discrimination for LGBTQ students in K-12 education across the United States. However, as a presidential action, the policy lacks permanency and can be swiftly overturned by the next federal administration. Additionally, as a federal policy, federal agencies are responsible for the policy’s implementation and legal action could be pursued under this order only through the federal court system. Given the lack of action from the U.S. Congress, many states have enacted legislation over the past two decades to protect students from bullying and harassment based on sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression through inclusive, enumerated policies.

Enumerated policies can be protective for students in a number of ways: they provide school educators and administrators with implementation guidance for anti-bullying policies and practices, signal to school communities that LGBTQ-based discrimination will not be tolerated, and provide students with a clear understanding of their rights to safety at school. Studies show that when enumerated policies are present, teachers show more support for their LGBT students (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016) and intervene more frequently when hearing anti-LGBTQ remarks (Kosciw et al., 2020). Further, students protected by

enumerated policies are less likely to report homophobic or transphobic attitudes, remarks, and behaviors toward LGBT peers (Horn & Szalacha, 2009; Kosciw et al., 2020). This is especially true for transgender youth; Greytak et al. (2013) found that several safe school policies and practices were associated with less victimization for all LGBTQ students, but the positive impact of inclusive policies and GSAs were even stronger for transgender youth than LGB youth.

Multiple studies at state (Meyer et al., 2019), national (Kosciw et al., 2020; Kull et al., 2016), and international (Berger et al., 2017) levels find that enumerated policies are associated with improved education environments for LGBTQ and all students. Specifically, in the presence of enumerated policies, LGBT students feel safer at school, hear less homophobic language, experience less identity-based victimization (Kull et al., 2016), report less absenteeism at school (Greytak, 2013), and are less at risk for suicide and substance use (Frost et al., 2019; Hatzenbuehler & Keyes, 2013; Konishi et al., 2013).

In some cases, students, parents, and school personnel are unaware of safe schools policies and lack knowledge of explicit protections for students who are (or who are perceived to be) LGBTQ (Schneider & Dimito, 2008). When policy implementation lacks appropriate communication, LGBT students may feel less assured of support by their school communities (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). To counter this, a key strategy for promoting school safety is to disseminate information about school policies so students and educators understand public policies affecting their daily environments (Hall & Chapman, 2018).

## Strategy #2: School Personnel Support and Training

Support from school personnel – including school administrators, educators, and staff – is critical to promoting the safety and well-being of vulnerable and marginalized students, including LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2020). Most school personnel desire to support students but may not understand the needs of LGBTQ students. For this reason, training for all school personnel to increase knowledge about supporting LGBTQ students is essential (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010; Payne & Smith, 2011).

Studies show that when LGBTQ youth view school personnel as supportive, they feel safer at school, report less absenteeism, experience less victimization based on their sexual orientation and gender identity, feel like they belong in their school community, and maintain higher grade point averages (Greytak et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2020; Seelman et al., 2012).

A critical benchmark for supporting LGBTQ students is intervening when bullying and harassment occurs. National studies over the past five years have exposed the need for further support and training for school personnel on issues of LGBTQ identities. In a recent study, LGBTQ students reported that teachers intervene less often for homophobic remarks compared to racist or sexist remarks (Kosciw et al., 2018; see also Kosciw et al., 2016). The lack of effective intervention by school personnel may stem from barriers including fear of backlash, a lack of education about how to support LGBTQ students, and little to no institutional support (Meyer, 2008). A national study (Greytak et al., 2016) from 2016

found that just 26% of teachers said they could support the needs of their LGBT students (e.g. discussing LGBT issues and advocating for inclusive, enumerated policies) without any barriers. The remaining 74% of teachers said they did not participate in supportive actions because of professional pressure from the school community (e.g., lack of administrative support or backlash from parents or community members), personal beliefs (e.g., that addressing LGBT issues is not necessary or appropriate), or practical concerns (e.g., lack of time and limited knowledge about LGBT issues).

Some LGBTQ students report even school personnel using homophobic and transphobic language. In a recent national survey of LGBTQ students, a majority (52.4%) reported hearing homophobic remarks from school personnel, while a strong majority (66.7%) have reported hearing negative remarks about gender identity and expression from school personnel (Kosciw et al., 2020). When educators and school administrators fail to intervene in homophobic remarks or make these kinds of remarks themselves, students become normalized to harmful, anti-LGBTQ language and learn that prejudice is acceptable at school.

Training demonstrably benefits school personnel. Pre-service and in- service professional development for school personnel on subjects of LGBTQ identities can build empathy, awareness, and self-efficacy, developing actionable supportive behaviors for LGBTQ students (Greytak & Kosciw, 2010; Payne & Smith, 2011). For example, professional development that incorporates exposure to LGBT people raises awareness of homophobic bullying and builds teachers' skills to intervene in homophobic behaviors (Greytak & Kosciw, 2014). LGBTQ-specific training must be distinct. In a national sample of secondary school teachers (Greytak et al., 2016), training on LGBT issues relates to more intervention in response to homophobic remarks, but professional development on bullying and harassment in general was not. Teacher training on LGBT issues positively associates with activities to support LGBT students (Swanson & Gettinger, 2016). Students report less bullying in schools with multiple LGBT-supportive practices in place, including providing LGBT-related professional development and having an LGBT point-person available (Gower et al., 2017).

### **Strategy #3: Student-Led Clubs (GSAs)**

Student-led, LGBTQ-focused, 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. Through GSAs, LGBTQ students and non- LGBTQ student allies work together to promote social inclusion and foster a positive school climate for LGBTQ and all students on their school campus. 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 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2019). GSAs may be involved in a range of activities, including providing a platform for education and safety, leadership development, school-wide advocacy training, interpersonal support, and recreational activities (Poteat et al., 2019).

Consistently, participation in GSAs is associated with a range of positive outcomes for students: higher grade point averages (Walls et al., 2010), more school belonging (Toomey & Russell, 2011), feeling safe at school (Ioverno et al., 2016), and better mental health (Poteat et al., 2019). In addition, greater involvement in GSAs is linked to more youth empowerment around social justice issues, increased validation from fellow students, and more hope for the future (Poteat et al., 2019).

Regardless of GSA membership, simply having an active GSA at school is linked to a number of benefits for LGBT students (Kosciw et al., 2020; Poteat et al., 2019; Walls et al., 2010) and heterosexual students (Poteat et al., 2013; Saewyc et al., 2014). In a national survey of LGBT high school students, those in schools with GSAs reported less bullying based on sexual orientation or gender identity, less homophobic language, and a greater sense of belonging in their school environment (Kosciw et al., 2020). In the first longitudinal study of LGB youth, having a GSA was associated with decreasing homophobic bullying and increasing feelings of safety one year later (Ioverno et al., 2016). Relatedly, the presence of a GSA in high school can positively predict supportive attitudes towards LGBTQ individuals among college students (Worthen, 2014). Finally, a meta-analysis showed that, across studies, LGBT students with GSAs in their schools are 36% more likely to feel safe and 30% less likely to report homophobic victimization compared to LGBT students in schools without GSAs (Marx & Kettrey, 2016).

In addition to improved school experiences, a growing body of research has connected having a GSA at school with better mental health and health behavior for LGBT students, including lower levels of smoking, drinking and drug use, sex with casual partners (Heck et al., 2014; Poteat et al., 2013), psychological distress and depressive symptoms (Poteat et al., 2019; Toomey et al., 2011), suicidal ideation and behavior (Poteat & Russell, 2013; Saewyc et al., 2014; Walls et al., 2013), and greater self-esteem (McCormick et al., 2015).

#### **Strategy #4: Access to LGBTQ-Related Resources and Curricula**

An effective strategy for creating safe and supportive schools gives all students access to LGBTQ-related resources and LGBTQ-inclusive curricula (Snapp et al., 2015). LGBTQ-related resources refer to information and support services provided in libraries, schools' websites, or posters on walls in classrooms and hallways. Schools can support the visibility of these resources through in-school assemblies or school-wide announcements or the introduction of LGBTQ-inclusive textbooks and lectures (Burdge et al., 2013; Katz et al., 2016). LGBTQ-inclusive curricula integrate topics related to sexual orientation and gender identity within a standard school curriculum (e.g., health education, history, literature, science, or mathematics).

Most LGBTQ students in U.S. schools report that their curricula do not access LGBTQ people, history, or events (Kosciw et al., 2020). Moreover, educators often do not know how or where to access LGBTQ-related materials (Westheimer & Szalacha, 2015) or are worried that parents and/or community members may not support inclusive curricula (Page, 2017). As of 2020, only four U.S. states – California, Colorado, New Jersey, and Illinois – mandate the teaching of LGBTQ history curricula.

Nevertheless, a recent national survey of LGBTQ students (Kosciw et al., 2020) 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 other LGBTQ students. Further, students who say that they have learned about LGBT issues at school report less bullying (Greytak et al., 2013; Snapp et al., 2016), more safety (Toomey et al., 2012), less absenteeism (Greytak et al., 2013; Kosciw et al., 2020), and less homophobic language and negative remarks based on gender expression in their schools (Kosciw et al., 2020). Inclusive curricula are particularly relevant to adolescent sexual health education, but sexuality education (if offered as school curricula at all) has often been either silent about or irrelevant to LGBTQ people and issues (Pampati et al., 2020). Yet in one state-wide study, teacher sensitivity to LGB issues in HIV education was associated with lower sexual risk-taking in LGB youth (Blake et al., 2001).

The identification of “safe spaces” or “safe zones” for LGBT students has emerged in a few studies as a central strategy for promoting positive school climates (Katz et al., 2016). Safe-Zone initiatives aim to promote inclusivity and support by providing voluntary training for school personnel on LGBT issues and providing participants with “safe zone” stickers that they can use to identify spaces (e.g., a classroom or office) where students may feel free to openly discuss topics related to sexual orientation and gender identity (Ratts et al., 2013). The available research on “safe spaces” has shown that such initiatives contribute to greater inclusiveness, safety, and connection at school for LGBT students (Evans, 2002; Katz et al., 2016; Kosciw et al., 2020).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

In the last decade, strong evidence supports four strategies to create safe and supportive schools for LGBTQ and all students (NASEM, 2019, 2020). Everyone—students, parents, school personnel, and policy-makers—can suggest, support, and help implement the strategies described here. Table 1 provides specific, actionable recommendations for each strategy, for these key stakeholders. All our students deserve safe schools.

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**highlights**

- Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer and questioning (LGBTQ) students experience discrimination or bullying at school; such experiences undermine youth health and achievement.
- In the last decade, research has identified strategies to promote school safety and wellbeing for LGBTQ and all students.
- Policies that specifically identify protected groups like LGBTQ students create contexts that are more supportive for LGBTQ and all youth, and are associated with student adjustment and achievement.
- Professional development on LGBTQ-specific topics prepares educators and other school personnel with tools to support and protect LGBTQ and all students.
- Access to information and support related to sexual orientation and gender identity or expression (SOGIE), including curricula that is SOGIE-inclusive, provides students with resources and support and promotes an inclusive school climate.
- Student-led clubs or organizations such as gender-sexuality alliances (i.e., GSAs) improve students' school experiences and well-being, and contribute to positive school climate.

**Table 1:**

## Recommendations

	Policy-makers	School Personnel	Students & Parents
<b>Inclusive, Enumerated Policies</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enact inclusive and enumerated educational laws and policies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Establish and publicize local policies in school districts, schools, and classrooms.</li> <li>Learn about policies in their school and school district.</li> <li>Raise awareness of the need for inclusive and enumerated policies.</li> <li>Advocate for local and state policy change.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learn about policies in their school and school district.</li> <li>Raise awareness of the need for inclusive and enumerated policies.</li> <li>Advocate for local and state policy change.</li> </ul>
<b>School Personnel Support &amp; Training</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Enact policies and provide funding to support school personnel training on addressing discriminatory bullying and implementing safe schools' strategies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intervene in discriminatory bullying.</li> <li>Seek resources support LGBTQ students.</li> <li>Participate in trainings to better understand their LGBTQ students.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents should support efforts by schools and school districts to provide LGBTQ-focused professional development and training to school personnel.</li> <li>Students can advocate for, and participate in, LGBTQ-focused professional development for their teachers and other school personnel.</li> </ul>
<b>Student- Led Clubs (GSAs)</b>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify and eliminate barriers to the formation and operation of GSAs and treat them like any other student organization or club.</li> <li>Seek training on how to support GSAs.</li> <li>Support GSAs and other student organizations.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Parents and students can advocate for GSAs in their schools</li> <li>Students can start, and participate in GSAs in their schools.</li> </ul>
<b>Access to LGBTQ-Related Resources &amp; Curricula</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ensure LGBTQ people and history in curricula through state laws, educational guidelines, and school district policies, as well as professional development for school personnel for inclusive curriculum.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Be a resource for LGBTQ youth.</li> <li>Ensure that libraries have resources for LGBTQ youth.</li> <li>Request and attend safe zone trainings.</li> <li>Promote visibility and inclusion through visual materials (posters) and in public settings (school assemblies).</li> <li>Appeal to school administrators for LGBTQ-inclusive classroom curricula.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Request LGBTQ resource.</li> </ul>