GLSEN®

The 2007 National School Climate Survey

Key Findings on the Experiences of
Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Youth
in our Nation's Schools

Methods

GLSEN used two methods to locate survey participants in an effort to obtain a representative national sample of LGBT youth: outreach through community-based groups serving LGBT youth and outreach via the Internet. With our first method, we randomly selected 50 community-based groups from a list of over 300 groups nationwide, which asked their youth participants to complete a paper version of the survey. Our second method utilized GLSEN's web presence, e-communications and online advertising to obtain participants. We posted notices of the survey on LGBT-youth oriented listservs and websites and emailed notices to GLSEN chapters and youth advocacy organizations. To ensure representation of transgender youth and youth of color, we made special efforts to reach out to organizations that serve these populations. We also conducted targeted advertising on the MySpace social networking site. The advertisements targeted users between 13 and 18 years of age who identified in their user profile as gay, lesbian or bisexual. The sample consisted of a total of 6,209 LGBT K-12 students, from all 50 states and the District of Columbia, between the ages of 13 and 21. About two-thirds of the sample (64.4%) was white, over half (57.7%) was female and over half identified as gay or lesbian (53.6%). Students were in grades 6 to 12, with the largest numbers being in 10th or 11th grade.

About the Survey

Given the limited attention paid by federal, state and local policymakers to the issues facing many lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students, and because our work at GLSEN (the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network) to make schools safe for all students is an ongoing one, it is important for us to keep informed about the experiences of LGBT students in their schools. Since 1999, GLSEN has conducted the National School Climate Survey (NSCS) every two years to document the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students in America's schools. The NSCS remains one of the few studies to examine the school experiences of LGB students nationally, and is the only national study to include transgender students.

In our 2007 survey, we examine the experiences of LGBT students with regard to indicators of negative school climate: hearing biased remarks, including homophobic remarks, in school; feeling unsafe in school because of personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation or race/ethnicity; missing classes or days of school because of safety reasons; and experiences of harassment and assault in school. Further, we also examine the possible negative effects of a hostile school climate on LGBT students' achievement and educational aspirations. We explore the diverse nature of LGBT students' experiences and report how these differ by students' personal and community characteristics. We also examine whether or not students report experiences of victimization to school officials or to family members and how these adults address the problem. In addition, we demonstrate the degree to which LGBT students have access to supportive resources in school and explore the possible benefits of these resources. Such resources include: Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), safe school laws and policies, supportive school staff, inclusive curricula and library resources on LGBT-related topics.
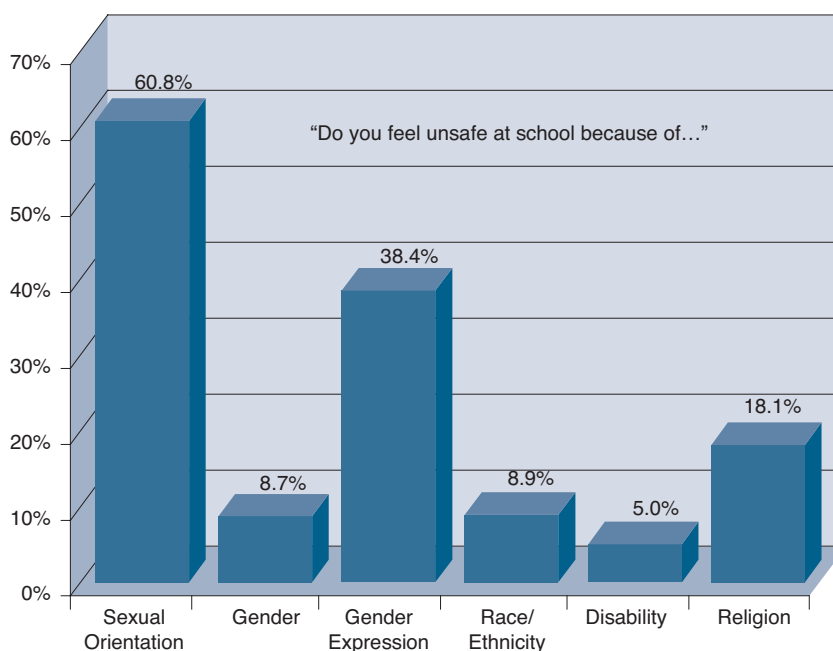
Schools nationwide are unsafe environments for a distressing majority of LGBT students who continue to face harassment and even physical assault, often without intervention from school staff.

Keeping classrooms and hallways free of homophobic, sexist and other types of biased language is a crucial aspect of creating a safe school climate for students. Yet 9 out of 10 students heard these types of biased language in their schools, most commonly anti-LGBT remarks.

Nearly three-fourths of students heard homophobic (73.6%) remarks often or frequently at school.

Nine out of ten (90.2%) students heard "gay" used in a negative way often or frequently at school, and the vast majority (83.1%) reported that they felt distressed to some degree by this.

Percentage of Students Who Felt Unsafe at School

"Do you feel unsafe at school because of…"

Category	Percentage
Sexual Orientation	60.8%
Gender	8.7%
Gender Expression	38.4%
Race/Ethnicity	8.9%
Disability	5.0%
Religion	18.1%

Nearly nine-tenths of students (86.2%) reported being verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) at school because of their sexual orientation. And two-thirds (66.5%) of students were verbally harassed because of their gender expression.

Almost half (44.1%) of students had been physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation and three in ten students (30.4%) because of their gender expression.

For some, victimization was even more severe—22.1% reported being physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) because of their sexual orientation and 14.2% because of their gender expression.

The majority (60.8%) of students who were harassed or assaulted in school did not report the incident to school staff, believing little to no action would be taken or the situation could become worse if reported. In fact, nearly a third (31.1%) of the students who did report an incident said that school staff did nothing in response.

Male student,
11th grade, NC

"I have learned that harassment in schools is a norm. Kids would scream the term 'faggot' as they saw me in the halls. None of the teachers said a word, and that is what scared me…I don't feel safe at my school because I'm gay."

Many LGBT students are forced to miss class or entire days of school rather than face a hostile environment where they experience continual harassment. These students are being denied their right to an education.

For all students, feeling unsafe or uncomfortable in school may negatively affect their academic success, particularly if it results in avoiding classes or missing entire days of school. Because LGBT students often face a hostile school climate due to their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, they may be at greater risk for missing school.

Nearly one-third of LGBT students reported skipping a class at least once in the past month and missing at least one day of school in the past month because they felt uncomfortable or unsafe. These rates are more than five times higher than those from a national survey[*] of secondary school students in general:
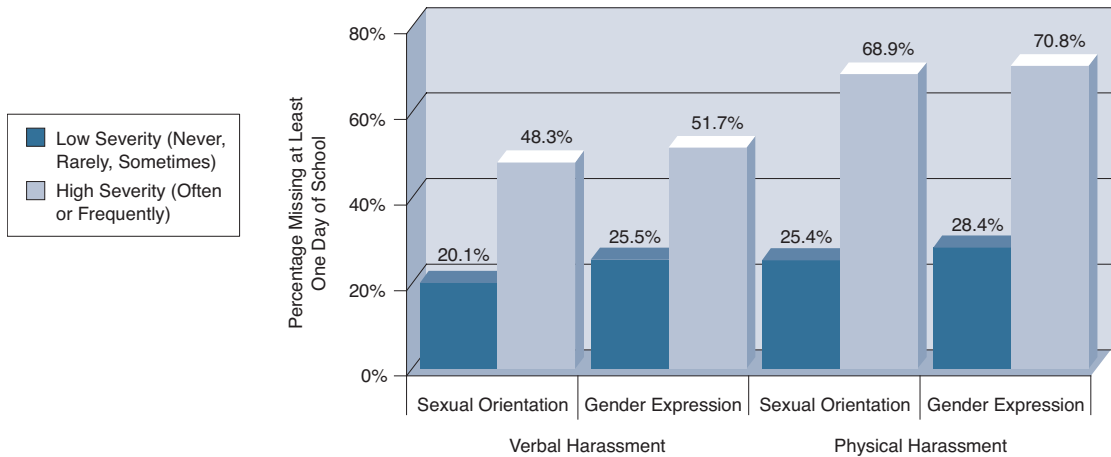

31.7% of LGBT students missed a class because of feeling unsafe, compared to only 5.5% of a national sample[*] of secondary school students.

32.7% of LGBT students missed a day of school because of feeling unsafe, compared to only 4.5% of a national sample[*] of secondary school students.

* Harris Interactive and GLSEN. (2005). *From Teasing to Torment: School Climate in America, A Survey of Students and Teachers.* New York: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

**Severity of In-School Harassment and
Missing Days of School for Safety Reasons**

Percentage Missing at Least One Day of School

- Low Severity (Never, Rarely, Sometimes)
- High Severity (Often or Frequently)

Verbal Harassment — Sexual Orientation: 20.1% / 48.3%
Verbal Harassment — Gender Expression: 25.5% / 51.7%
Physical Harassment — Sexual Orientation: 25.4% / 68.9%
Physical Harassment — Gender Expression: 28.4% / 70.8%

We found that experiences with harassment were related to missing days of school for the LGBT students in our survey. Students were twice as likely to have missed school in the past month if they had experienced high frequencies of verbal harassment related to their sexual orientation (48.3% versus 20.1%) or how they express their gender (51.7% versus 25.5%). Furthermore, students who had experienced high frequencies of physical harassment because of these characteristics were almost three times more likely than other students to have missed school in the past month due to safety concerns (physical harassment based on sexual orientation: 68.9% versus 25.4%, based on gender expression: 70.8% versus 28.4%).

Female student, 12th grade, MD

"I stayed home because everyone hated me so much that it made me hate myself, and I thought there was something completely wrong with me. I missed almost three weeks in a row to avoid seeing the other students."
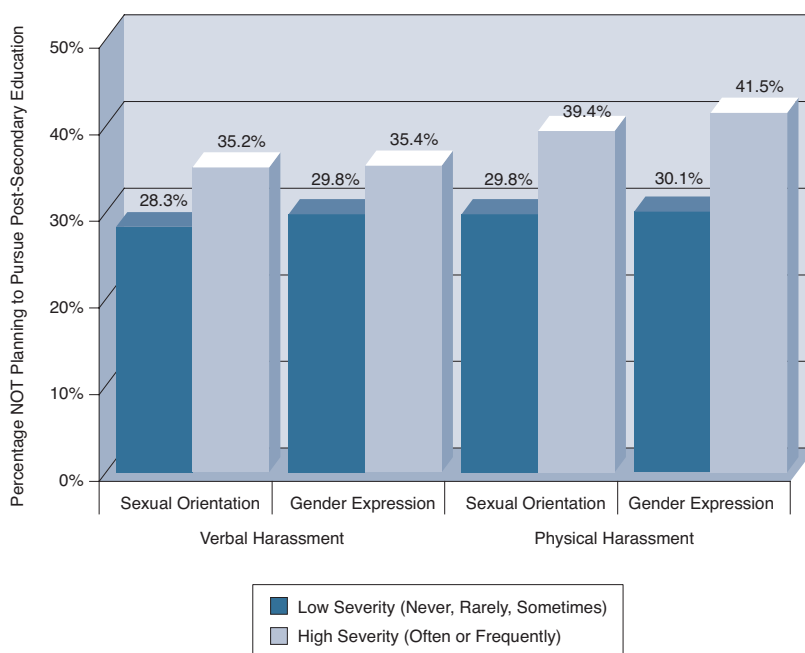
Students cannot succeed in school when they do not feel safe. The incidence of in-school victimization experienced by LGBT students hinders their academic success and educational aspirations.

A lack of safety undermines school's central promise—the opportunity to learn and achieve—as fear leads many LGBT students to skip class, miss school and, in some cases, receive lower grades and disengage altogether from school.

The percentage of LGBT students who did not plan to pursue any type of post-secondary education (obtaining a high school diploma only or not finishing high school) was almost twice that of a national sample of students (12.4% versus 6.6%).*

*Educational Longitudinal Study: 2002/04 Data Files and Electronic Codebook System. (First follow-up) [ECB/CD-ROM Public Use]. (2005). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Services [Producer and Distributor]

Severity of In-School Harassment and Educational Aspirations

Chart — Percentage NOT Planning to Pursue Post-Secondary Education:

Verbal Harassment:
- Sexual Orientation: Low Severity 28.3%, High Severity 35.2%
- Gender Expression: Low Severity 29.8%, High Severity 35.4%

Physical Harassment:
- Sexual Orientation: Low Severity 29.8%, High Severity 39.4%
- Gender Expression: Low Severity 30.1%, High Severity 41.5%

Legend:
- Low Severity (Never, Rarely, Sometimes)
- High Severity (Often or Frequently)

and Academic Achievement

Increased harassment was related to students' future education plans. LGBT students who reported that they were often or frequently harassed in school because of their sexual orientation or gender expression were more likely than other students to report that they did not plan to pursue a college education—41.5% of students who experienced high frequencies of physical harassment did not plan to go to college, for example, compared to 30.1% of those who had not experienced high frequencies of physical harassment.

The differences in educational aspirations between our sample of LGBT students and a general population sample of high school students appears to be related to the higher incidence of in-school victimization reported by LGBT students. A higher frequency of harassment was also related to lower academic achievement among LGBT students.

The reported grade point average of students who were more frequently harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression was almost half a grade lower than for students who were less often harassed (2.8 versus 2.4).

Female student,
12th grade, MD

"I have to present projects orally in a lot of my classes. In the classes where there are kids who harass me and make me feel unsafe, I consistently get lower grades on the presentation scores of my projects."

Gay-Straight Alliances

The presence of Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) can create a more welcoming climate for LGBT students and allies.

Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) or similar student clubs can promote respect for all members of the school community and provide critical support to LGBT students and their allies. The existence of these clubs can make schools safer and more welcoming for LGBT students.

Students in schools with a Gay-Straight Alliance:

Reported hearing fewer homophobic remarks;

Experienced less harassment and assault because of their sexual orientation and gender expression;

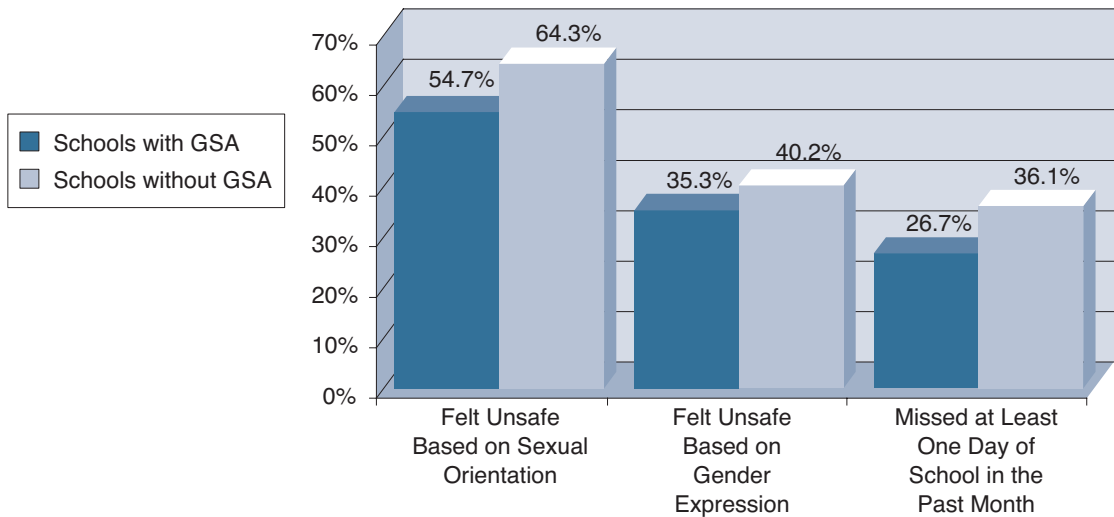Were more likely to report incidents of harassment and assault;

Were less likely to feel unsafe because of their sexual orientation or gender expression;

Were less likely to miss school because of safety concerns; and

Reported a greater sense of belonging to their school community.

Presence of Gay-Straight Alliances and Feelings of Safety and Missing School

Legend:
- Schools with GSA
- Schools without GSA

Felt Unsafe Based on Sexual Orientation: 54.7% (with GSA), 64.3% (without GSA)

Felt Unsafe Based on Gender Expression: 35.3% (with GSA), 40.2% (without GSA)

Missed at Least One Day of School in the Past Month: 26.7% (with GSA), 36.1% (without GSA)

Given that GSAs, like all student clubs, have a faculty advisor, having a GSA at school may help LGBT students identify supportive school staff. Almost all students (97.4%) in schools with a GSA said that they could identify one or more supportive staff, compared to only three quarters (73.8%) of students in schools without a GSA.

Unfortunately, only slightly more than a third (36.3%) of LGBT students reported having a GSA at school.

As more and more GSAs form in schools across the country, students themselves are making inroads on the problem of bullying and harassment. More than 3,500 GSAs had registered with GLSEN as of fall 2007.

Supportive educators can make a critical difference in the lives of LGBT students.

Knowing that there is a caring adult in school may have a significant positive impact on the school experiences for LGBT students. Most (82.5%) students surveyed could identify at least one school staff member whom they believed was supportive of LGBT students, yet less than half (36.3%) said that they knew six or more supportive educators.

Students with supportive educators (six or more):

Were less likely to miss at least one day of school in the past month because of safety reasons (20.4%) than students with no supportive educators (39.8%);
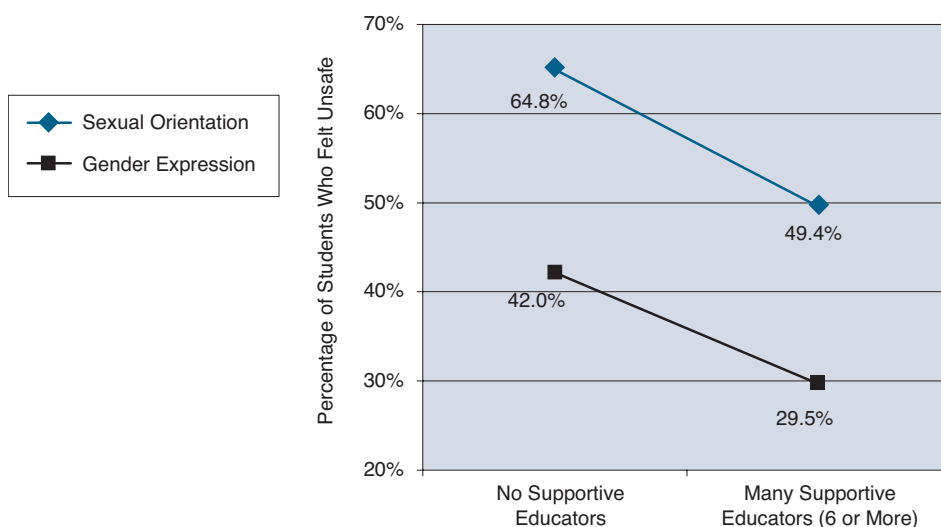
Had higher grade point averages than students without supportive educators (2.9 versus 2.5);

Reported higher educational aspirations than those without supportive educators; and

Reported a greater sense of belonging to their school community than those without supportive educators.

Having educators intervene when they hear and see anti-LGBT harassment is crucial for improving school climate. Students who reported that educators effectively intervened when witnessing harassment or assault experienced less victimization based on sexual orientation or gender expression. They also reported decreased absenteeism related to safety concerns.

**Feelings of Safety and Number of
Supportive Educators**

Percentage of Students Who Felt Unsafe

- ◆ Sexual Orientation
- ■ Gender Expression

70%

64.8%

60%

50%
49.4%

42.0%
40%

30%
29.5%

20%

No Supportive
Educators

Many Supportive
Educators (6 or More)

LGBT-related resources, such as an inclusive curriculum that provides positive representations of LGBT history, people and events, have been shown to enhance the school experience for LGBT students. Compared to other students, students in schools with an inclusive curriculum: heard fewer homophobic remarks; were less likely to be victimized or feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation or gender identity/expression; had a greater sense of belonging to their school community; and talked about LGBT issues with their teachers more often and rated these conversations more positively. Yet only one-tenth (10.5%) of students were exposed to positive representations of LGBT people, history or events in their classes. Additionally, less than a fifth (14.5%) reported that LGBT-related topics were included in their textbooks or other assigned readings.

Through local GLSEN Chapters and partnerships with school districts and national education organizations, GLSEN has trained thousands of educators to promote support for LGBT students.

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School policies that directly addresss anti-LGBT bullying and harassment can create better learning environments for LGBT students.

One major step that schools can take to affirm their support for all students' safety is the implementation and enforcement of safe school policies. GLSEN believes that the most effective policies are comprehensive policies that explicitly provide protection by enumerating personal characteristics, including sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Students from schools with a comprehensive, enumerated policy reported a less hostile and more supportive school climate as well as:

Heard fewer homophobic remarks (68.8% frequently or often) compared to students in schools with generic, non-enumerated policies (74.3%) or no policy (75.0%);
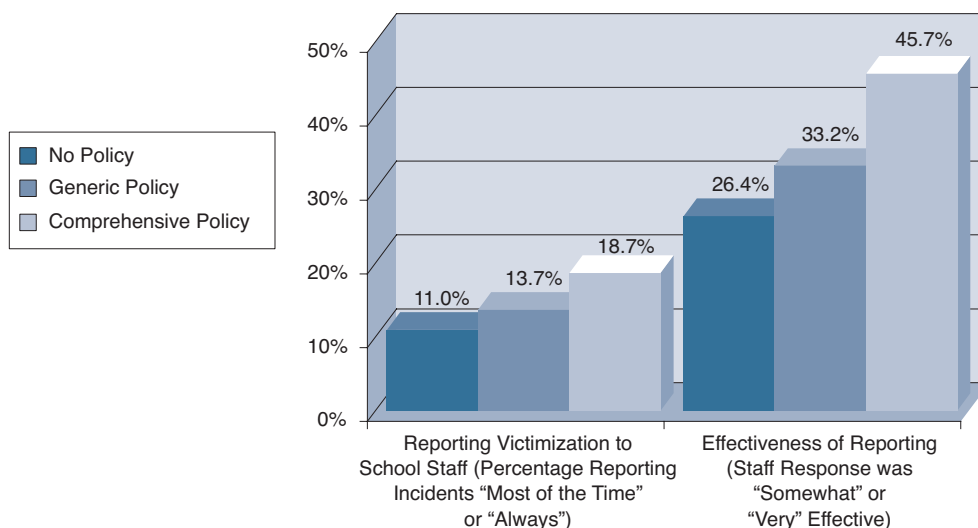
Experienced lower levels of victimization related to their sexual orientation than students with generic policies or no policies at all;

Were more likely to report that school staff intervened most of the time or always when hearing homophobic language in school (29.1%) compared to students in schools with generic policies (17.5%) or no policies (13.1%); and

Were more likely to report incidents of harassment and assault to school staff (18.7% reported most of the time or always) compared to students in schools with generic policies (13.7%) or no policies at all (11.0%).

Comprehensive Safe School Laws and Policies

**Reporting of Incidents and Effectiveness
of Reporting by Type of Safe School Policy**

Legend:
- No Policy
- Generic Policy
- Comprehensive Policy

Reporting Victimization to School Staff (Percentage Reporting Incidents "Most of the Time" or "Always"):
- 11.0%
- 13.7%
- 18.7%

Effectiveness of Reporting (Staff Response was "Somewhat" or "Very" Effective):
- 26.4%
- 33.2%
- 45.7%

Students from schools with a generic policy, as in past surveys, experienced similar harassment levels as students from schools with no policies at all. Yet, less than one in five students (18.7%) reported that their school had a comprehensive policy, whereas 37.6% reported that their school had a generic policy. Thus, almost half (43.8%) of all students reported that they attend schools without any type of safe school policy.

Results from the NSCS provide further evidence that students in states that had comprehensive legislation (prior to the survey) experience less victimization based on their sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. States with generic safe school laws appeared to offer no greater protection than states with no safe school legislation whatsoever.

As of 2008, seven states and the District of Columbia protect students from bullying and harassment based on both sexual orientation and gender expression: California, Iowa, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, New Jersey and Vermont.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Action is needed to ensure that every child in our schools is safe and free to learn.

The results of the 2007 National School Climate Survey show that schools can be unsafe learning environments for LGBT students. Hearing biased or derogatory language at school, especially homophobic and sexist remarks, was a common occurrence. Intervention on the part of school staff, however, was not. Teachers and other school authorities did not often intervene when homophobic or negative remarks about gender expression were made in their presence, and students' use of such language remained largely unchallenged. Even when informed of actual incidents of harassment and assault, school staff did not respond effectively—and many did not respond at all.

Three-quarters of the students in our survey reported being made to feel unsafe at school because of at least one personal characteristic, with sexual orientation and gender expression being the characteristics most commonly reported.

Almost 90% of the students reported that they had been verbally harassed at school because of their sexual orientation, and two-thirds had been harassed because of how they expressed their gender.

In addition, many students reported experiencing incidents of physical harassment and assault related to their sexual orientation or gender expression, as well as sexual harassment, deliberate property damage and cyberbullying.

School climate is not just about safety, but also about a student's ability to learn and right to an education. LGBT students who experienced frequent harassment based on their sexual orientation were more likely to report missing school and had lower GPAs than students who were not as frequently harassed. Therefore, improving school climate not only facilitates student safety, but also enhances a student's ability to learn and educational outcomes.

Although the results of this report illustrate the dire experience in school for many LGBT students, it also highlights the important role that educators and institutional supports can play in remedying the situation. GLSEN's work is devoted to addressing the urgent need to create safer schools for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. To this end, we recommend the following measures:

Advocate for comprehensive safe school and anti-discrimination legislation at the state and federal level that specifically enumerates sexual orientation and gender identity/expression as protected categories;

Implement comprehensive safe school policies in individual schools and districts, with clear and effective systems for reporting and addressing incidents that students experience;

Support GSAs or similar student clubs that address LGBT issues and work to improve school climate;

Provide training for school staff to improve rates of intervention and increase the number of supportive faculty and staff available to students; and

Increase student access to appropriate and accurate information regarding LGBT people, history and events through inclusive curriculum, library resources and access to Internet resources through school computers.

Taken together, such measures can move us toward a future in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

Learn More

The full **2007 National School Climate Survey** report goes into greater depth on the issues highlighted in this Executive Summary, and explores a number of other topics, including:

Changes in school experiences of LGBT students and available resources over time through comparison of findings from the 2001, 2003, 2005 and 2007 National School Climate Surveys;

Frequency of biased remarks, harassment/assault and feelings of safety based on race/ethnicity, religion and disability;

Frequency of sexual harassment, relational aggression and cyberbullying;

Comparisons of school climate for LGBT students by personal demographics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation) and school district characteristics (e.g., region, locale, poverty);

Comparisons of availability of LGBT-related resources by school district characteristics (e.g., region, locale, poverty);

Relationship between being out, i.e., open about one's sexual orientation or gender identity, and students' school experiences;

"Parental permission" policies for participating in student clubs, i.e., Gay-Straight Alliances; and

The effect of anti-LGBT legislation on school climate.

The full 2007 National School Climate Survey is available for purchase at www.GLSENSTORE.org or for download at www.GLSEN.org

About GLSEN

GLSEN, the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, is the leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all students.

Established in 1995, GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

For more information on our educator resources, research, public policy agenda, student organizing programs or development initiatives, visit www.glsen.org.

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