

## INSIDE PENNSYLVANIA SCHOOLS: THE EXPERIENCES OF LGBT STUDENTS

Findings from the 2007 National School Climate Survey demonstrate that Pennsylvania schools were not safe for many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) students. Significant percentages of Pennsylvania students experienced harassment at school, often because of their sexual orientation and how they expressed their gender. In addition, most LGBT students in Pennsylvania did not have access to important school resources, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, and were not protected by comprehensive school anti-harassment policies.

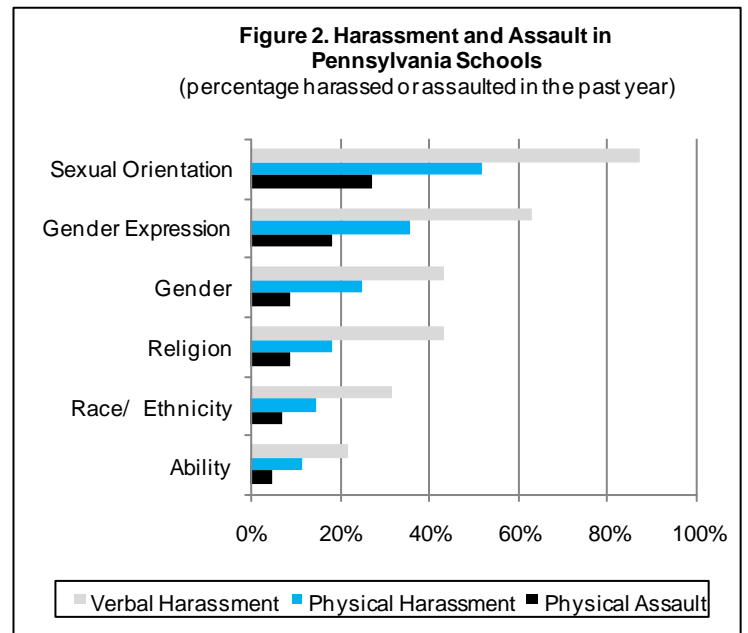
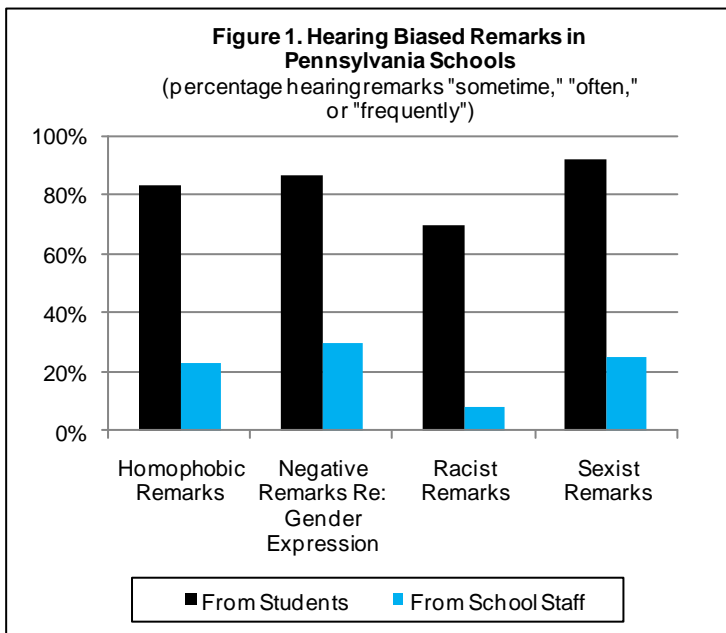
LGBT students in Pennsylvania schools heard various types of biased language in school. Homophobic and sexist remarks were the most commonly heard.

- 98% of LGBT students in Pennsylvania regularly (sometimes, often, or frequently) heard the word “gay” used in a negative way in school, such as in the expressions “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay.”
- 83% of students regularly heard homophobic remarks, such as “dyke” or “faggot,” from other students in school (see Figure 1).
- 87% regularly heard other students in their school make negative remarks about how someone expressed their gender, such as comments about someone not acting “feminine” or “masculine” enough (see Figure 1).

- LGBT students in Pennsylvania also heard biased remarks from teachers and other school staff: 30% of students regularly heard school staff make negative remarks about someone’s gender expression, and 23% regularly heard homophobic remarks from school staff (see Figure 1).

Many LGBT students in Pennsylvania schools experienced verbal harassment (e.g., called names or threatened), physical harassment (e.g., shoved or pushed), and physical assault (e.g., punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon), most often related to their sexual orientation or gender expression. Incidents of harassment and assault were often not reported to adult authorities.

- 88% of LGBT students were verbally harassed in the past year because of their sexual orientation. Almost



two-thirds (63%) were verbally harassed because of how they expressed their gender (see Figure 2).

- 52% of LGBT students were physically harassed in school in the past year because of their sexual orientation, and 36% because of how they expressed their gender (see Figure 2).
- 27% of students were physically assaulted in school in the past year because of their sexual orientation, and 18% because of their gender expression (see Figure 2).
- 54% of students who were harassed or assaulted in school *never* reported it to school staff, and 46% *never* told a family member about the incident. Among students who did report incidents to school authorities, only 32% said that reporting resulted in effective intervention by school staff.

Harassment in school was related to restricted access to education and lower educational aspirations among Pennsylvania LGBT students.

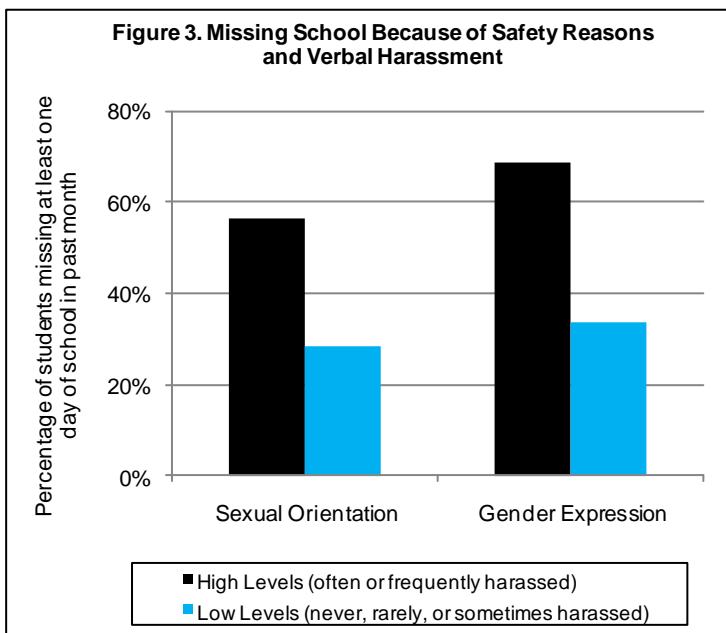
- 39% of LGBT students had skipped class at least once in the past month because they felt unsafe, and 44% had missed at least one entire day of school due to safety concerns.
- Students who experienced high levels of harassment because of their sexual orientation were almost twice

as likely to miss days of school because they felt unsafe than students who did not experience high levels of harassment (56% versus 28%) (see Figure 3).

- Students who experienced high levels of harassment related to their gender expression were almost twice as likely to miss school because they felt unsafe (69% versus 34%) (see Figure 3).
- The grade point average (GPA) of LGBT students who were more frequently verbally harassed because of their sexual orientation was significantly lower than the GPA of students who were less frequently harassed (2.7 versus 3.0).

Many Pennsylvania LGBT students did not have access to LGBT-related school resources that may improve school climate and lessen the negative effects of harassment and assault.

- 64% of students believed that their school had some type of policy for reporting incidents of in-school harassment and assault. Yet, only 19% reported that their school had a comprehensive policy, one that included specific protections based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression.
- Compared to LGBT students in schools with a generic anti-harassment policy (one that did not specifically include sexual orientation or gender identity/expression), students in schools with a comprehensive policy were more likely to report that school staff effectively addressed incidents of harassment and assault (53% versus 19%).
- Having adults in school who provide support to LGBT students can offset the negative implications of a hostile school climate for these students. Eight out of ten students (80%) could identify at least one teacher or other school staff person who they felt was supportive of LGBT students in their school.
- LGBT students with many supportive staff members (6 or more) were less likely to miss school because they felt unsafe than those with few supportive staff (32% versus 49%). Students with many supportive educators were also more likely to plan to attend college (78% versus 52% of those with few supportive staff). Unfortunately, only 31% of students could identify many supportive personnel in school.

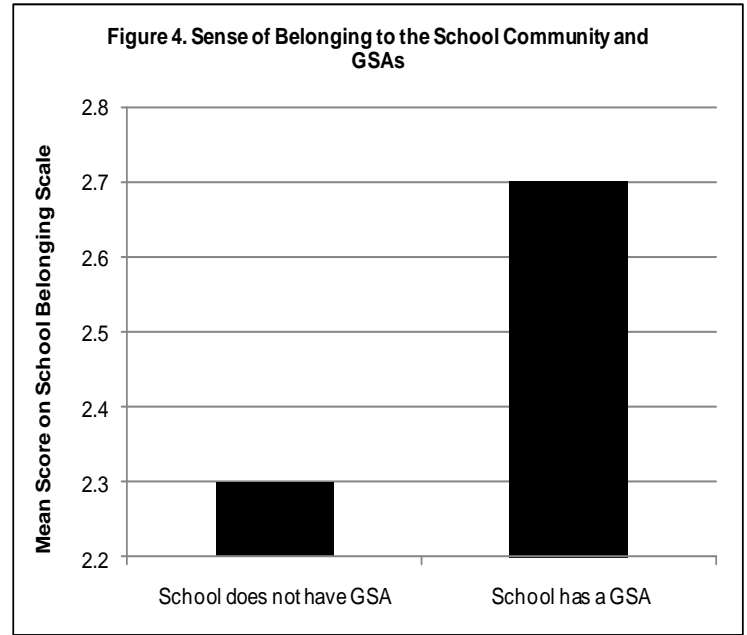


- Only about a quarter (26%) LGBT students in Pennsylvania reported having a student club that provided support and addressed the issues of LGBT students, such as a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA), in school. LGBT students with a Gay-Straight Alliances (GSA) were more likely to feel a part of their school community (see Figure 4).

### SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Pennsylvania schools were not a safe place for many LGBT secondary school students. Biased language, especially homophobic language and negative remarks about gender expression, was very common in Pennsylvania schools. Students reported hearing biased remarks from not only from their peers, but from school personnel as well. LGBT students also faced harassment in school, both verbal and physical in nature, with sexual orientation and gender expression being the characteristics more commonly targeted. These experiences led many students to miss classes and entire days of school because they felt unsafe, and LGBT students experiencing high levels of harassment were particularly at risk of absenteeism due to safety concerns. Furthermore, students who were frequently harassed reported lower grade point averages than other students, suggesting that a negative school climate may hinder students' ability to succeed academically. Unfortunately, incidents of harassment and assault often went unreported to school authorities and students' families.

It is clear that there is a need for action to create safe school environments for Pennsylvania students. Findings from this report suggest that comprehensive safe school policies, supportive educators, and GSAs may help to create a more positive school environment for LGBT students. As such, all Pennsylvania schools and school districts should implement safe school policies that offer explicit protection to students who are most often the targets of bullying and harassment based on personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Pennsylvania schools should also provide professional development for teachers and other school staff to ensure that they are equipped to effectively intervene in biased behaviors, harassment and assault, and serve as support for LGBT students. In addition, Pennsylvania schools should support student clubs that address LGBT students' issues.



**About the Research**

In 2007, GLSEN conducted the fifth National School Climate Survey (NSCS), a biennial survey of LGBT secondary school students. The NSCS examines the experiences of LGBT youth in U.S. middle and high schools, documenting anti-LGBT bias and behaviors that make schools unsafe for many of these youth. The national sample consisted of 6,209 LGBT students, who were from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. A total of 242 respondents were attending schools in Pennsylvania state at the time of the survey. The majority of the sample was White (70%), 8% was Latino, 7% African American and 5% or less was Native American or Asian/Pacific Islander. A little more than half of the students identified as female (59%), 34% as male, and 5% as transgender. Almost all (90%) attended public schools, and 67% were in urban or suburban communities. The results reported in this Research Brief have a margin of error of +/- 6%. For the national NSCS report or for any other GLSEN research, go to [www.glsen.org/research](http://www.glsen.org/research).

### About GLSEN

GLSEN, or the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network, is a national education organization working to ensure that each member of every school community is valued and respected regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

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