

Safe Schools Research Brief 14

Lessons That Matter: LGBTQ Inclusivity and School Safety

Introduction

Data from the California Safe Schools Coalition 2004-2006 Preventing School Harassment (PSH) survey illustrates the importance of LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum on student safety.¹ In particular, students who answered that they learned about LGBTQ people or issues as part of a classroom lesson were more likely to feel safer, more likely to report a stronger sense of school belonging, and less likely to report being harassed based on sexual orientation or gender identity. However, this data did not reveal what kinds of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons students were learning in school, or in what classes students were most likely to learn about LGBTQ topics. The data also did not reveal what types of lessons and in which classes inclusion most effectively impacts school safety.

In an effort to learn more, a new set of questions were included in the 2008 PSH survey. In particular, students reported on specific classes in which they learned about LGBTQ people and issues along with what classes were the most supportive of LGBTQ people and issues.

The 2008 PSH survey data reveal the pervasiveness and supportiveness² of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in school. The data also show how different types of inclusive curriculum (presented in different school contexts and/or classes) impact both individual students and/or the entire school community as a whole. Finally, the data illustrate how the existence of Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) clubs contribute to school safety in both schools with and schools without LGBTQ-inclusive curriculum.

The analysis places student respondents into two groups: LGBTQ and allied students, and heterosexual students who do not participate in GSA clubs. "LGBTQ" refers to lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students, and "allied students" refers to heterosexual students who participate in GSAs. Findings are consistent across both groups unless explicitly stated otherwise.

Pervasiveness and Supportiveness of LGBTQ-Inclusive Lessons

Key Finding 1: LGBTQ-inclusive classroom lessons are common, but less likely to be rated as “supportive” of LGBTQ people or issues.

Forty percent of students report learning about LGBTQ people/issues in the classroom (see Figure 1), but lessons that include LGBTQ people/issues are rated as “neutral/mixed” as often as they are rated as “mostly supportive” (see Figure 2). In several types of classes, heterosexual students even report that up to one third of lessons were “mostly not supportive” of LGBTQ people/issues.

LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are most likely to appear in sexuality education or health classes, followed by English and social studies classes. Additionally, students perceive lessons in these classes to be the most supportive of LGBTQ people/issues. On the other hand, LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are both more rare and rated as more “neutral/mixed” or “mostly not supportive” in science, physical education, and math classes.

LGBTQ and allied students are more likely than non-GSA-participating heterosexual peers to report that LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are “mostly supportive” of LGBTQ people/issues. The reason for this finding is unclear, but it may be that LGBTQ and allied students select classes with supportive teachers, or that LGBTQ and allied students interpret any mention of LGBTQ people/issues as supportive events.

Figure 1. Presence of LGBTQ-Inclusive Lessons in Class

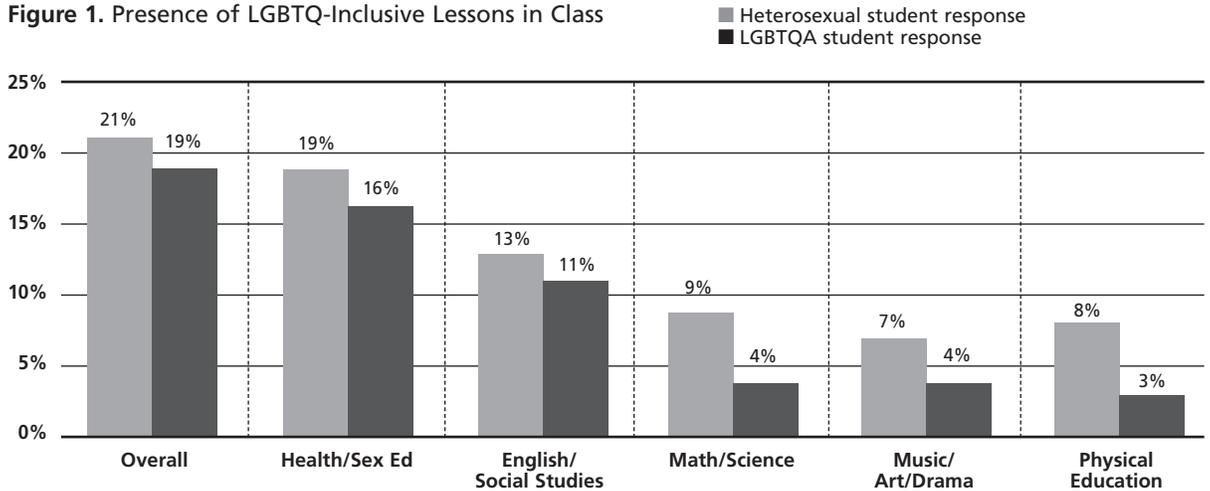
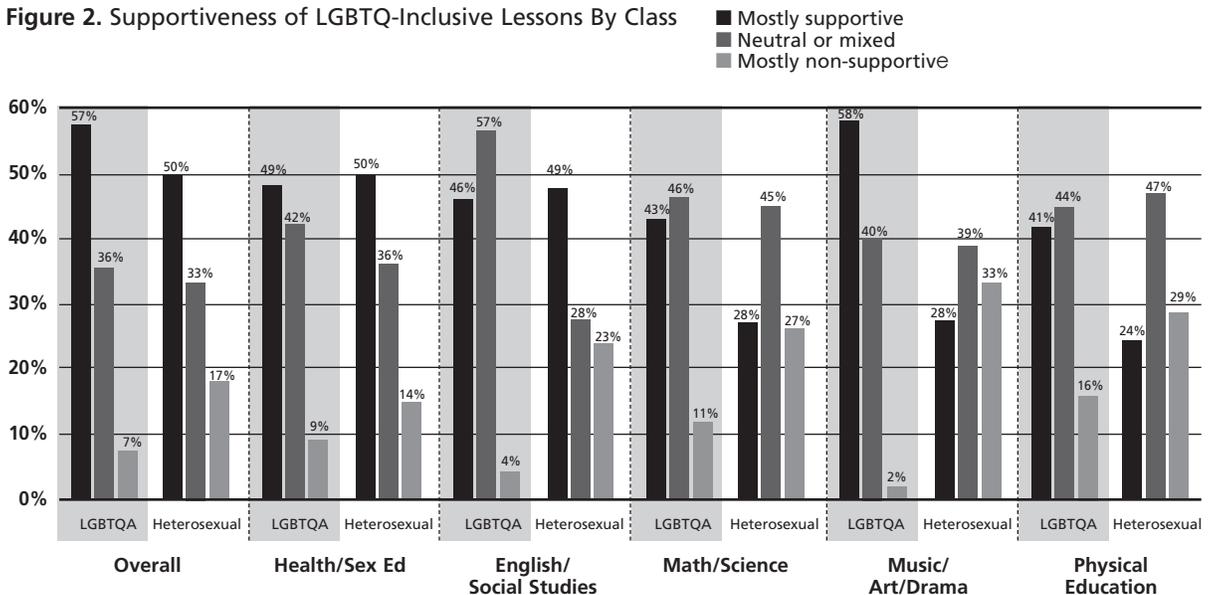


Figure 2. Supportiveness of LGBTQ-Inclusive Lessons By Class



Impacts on Individual Students

Key Finding 2: Any mention of LGBTQ people/issues in class increases individual students' feelings of safety.

Students of any sexual orientation who learn anything about LGBTQ people/issues in any type of class (with the exception of physical education, see below) feel safer and more included in school. This finding is true regardless of whether or not LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are rated by students as “mostly supportive,” “neutral/mixed,” or “mostly not supportive” of LGBTQ people/issues (see Figure 3).

Special Case: Physical Education

The type of class where LGBTQ-inclusive lessons take place affects the strength and breadth of positive outcomes for students' feelings of safety. Physical education (PE) is the *only* type of class in which LGBTQ-inclusive lessons that are rated as “neutral/mixed” have *negative* effects on individual students' feelings of safety, as opposed to a positive effect or no impact at all. The negative impact of neutral or mixed lessons could be associated with the particularly unsafe environment for LGBTQ or gender-nonconforming students that PE classes generally present. For example, 17% of LGBTQ and allied students and 27% of non-GSA-participating heterosexual students rate LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in PE as “mostly not supportive,” which is more than twice the percentage reported in health and sexuality education classes (see Figure 2).

Key Finding 3: Students experience more positive outcomes when LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are rated as “mostly supportive” as opposed to “neutral/mixed” or “mostly not supportive.”

As noted above, students of any sexual orientation who learn about LGBTQ people/issues in class feel safer and more included in school. They are more likely to agree with statements such as “I feel safe at my school” and “My school is safe for students of all races,” and they also report a greater sense of belonging at school. An important distinction, however, is that students are even more likely to agree with a wider range of such positive statements when they rate LGBTQ-inclusive lessons as “mostly supportive” of LGBTQ people/issues. For example, there is a correlation between LGBTQ-inclusive lessons and agreement with the statement “teachers care about students” only when the LGBTQ-inclusive lesson is rated as “mostly supportive” of LGBTQ people/issues (see Figures 3 and 4).

Figure 3. Effects of Presence and Supportiveness of LGBTQ-Inclusive Lessons in PE and Other Classes

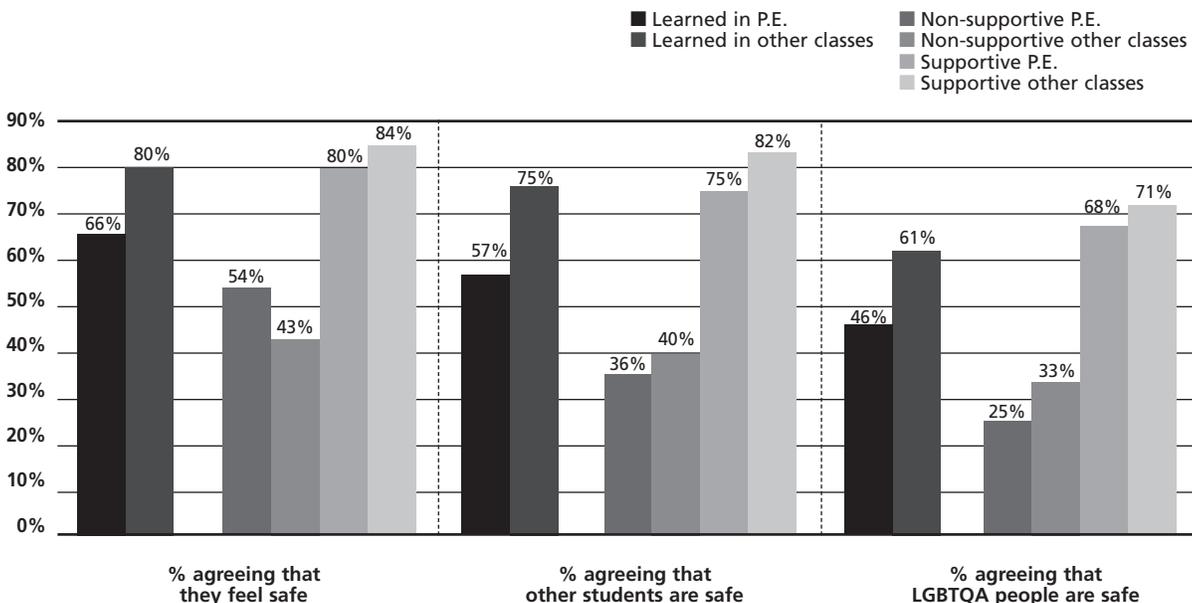
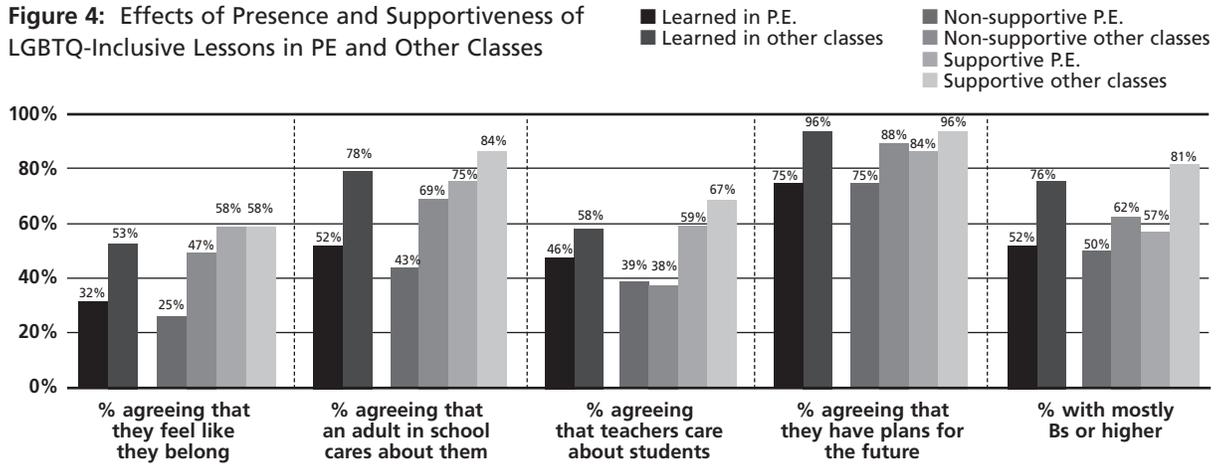


Figure 4: Effects of Presence and Supportiveness of LGBTQ-Inclusive Lessons in PE and Other Classes



Special Case: Physical Education

In addition to the fact that PE is the *only* type of class in which LGBTQ-inclusive lessons that are rated as “neutral/mixed” have *negative* effects on individual students’ feelings of safety, our data also show that when LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in PE are rated as “mostly supportive” they have *the most* significant effect on students’ feelings of safety (see Figures 3 and 4).

Impacts on School Climate

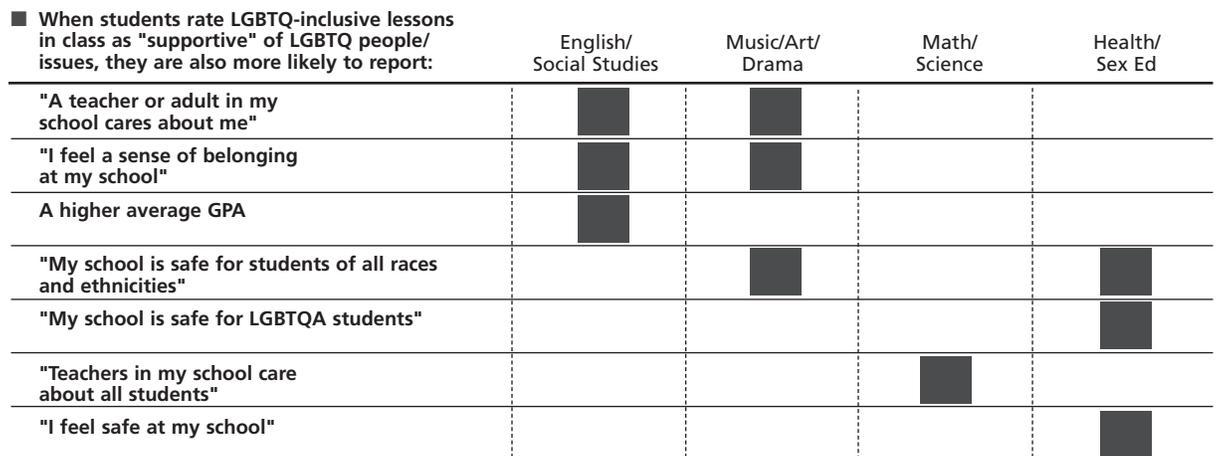
Key Finding 4: LGBTQ-inclusive lessons that are rated as “mostly supportive” of LGBTQ people/issues positively affect school climate as a whole.

Unlike outcomes for individual students outlined above, the school climate as a whole is not necessarily positively affected by any “neutral/mixed” inclusion of LGBTQ people/issues in classroom lessons. However, when LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in class are rated as “mostly supportive,” the school climate as a whole is positively affected (see Figure 5).

This finding is true across the board, regardless of whether students already rated the school climate as generally safe or generally unsafe. For example, regardless of overall reports of safety in any particular school, schools that generally have supportive class lessons on LGBTQ people/issues in English/Social Studies courses also have: more students who feel cared about by adults in school; more students who feel a sense of school belonging; and higher GPAs on average.

Furthermore, schools that generally have supportive class lessons on LGBTQ people/issues in music/arts/drama courses also have: more students who feel cared for by adults in school; more students who feel a sense of school belonging; and more students who feel people of all races are safe at their school.

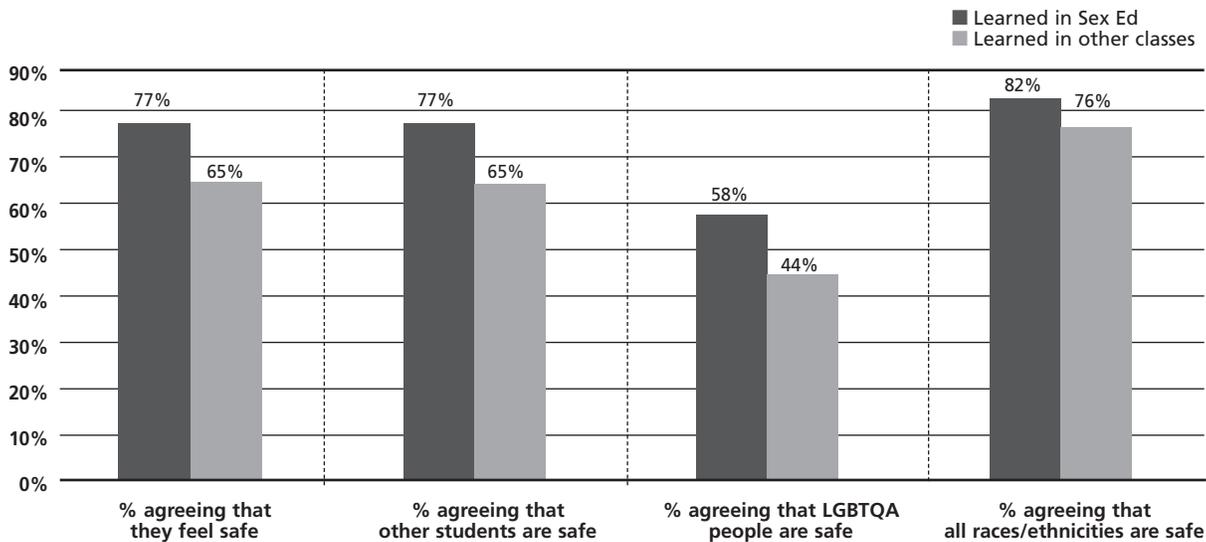
Figure 5: Effects of Supportive LGBTQ-Inclusive Lessons on School Climate



Special Case: Health/Sexuality Education

In every other discipline except health class, it is only when students report that the LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are supportive that there is a correlation with reports of positive school climate. However, it is the case that merely any inclusion of LGBTQ issues/people in health/sexuality education classes is associated with a positive school climate as a whole (see Figure 6). Schools in which students learn about LGBTQ people/issues at all in health/sexuality education courses have: more students who feel a sense of school belonging; and more students who feel that LGBTQ and allied people, people of all races, and other students in general are safe at their school.

Figure 6: Impact of LGBTQ-Inclusive Lessons in Health/Sexuality Education on School Climate



The Gay-Straight Alliance Club (GSA) Effect

Key Finding 5: Individual students who are members of their school’s GSA club report the most positive effects of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons.

The *most positive effects* of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in class are for individual students who are also members of their school’s GSA club. This finding is true regardless of a students' sexual orientation and regardless of whether LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are rated as “mostly supportive,” “neutral/mixed” or “mostly not supportive.” For example, GSA members who learn about LGBTQ people/issues in English or social studies classes have higher GPAs and a stronger sense of school belonging than both non-GSA members and those who do not learn about LGBTQ people/issues.

Key Finding 6: LGBTQ students who are not in GSAs and who have not had access to LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in school report the most negative perceptions of school safety.

LGBTQ students who are not in GSAs and do not report learning about LGBTQ people/issues in class consistently report the most negative school safety outcomes, while students (regardless of sexual orientation) who are GSA members and learn about LGBTQ people/issues in class report the most positive school safety outcomes. For example, LGBTQ students who are not in GSAs and do not report learning about LGBTQ people/issues in any school setting report lower GPAs and a weaker sense of school belonging. A possible explanation for these differences could be that having a GSA and including LGBTQ issues in classroom lessons both promote feelings of safety among students, and students who feel safe at school are more likely to have higher GPAs.³

Conclusion

Previous data⁴ illustrate a correlation between LGBTQ-inclusive lessons and student safety at school. However, the data did not reveal what kinds of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons students are learning in school, or in what classes students are most likely to learn about LGBTQ topics. In an effort to learn more about the correlation between LGBTQ inclusivity and student safety, researchers added new questions to the 2008 Preventing School Harassment (PSH) survey.

Data from the 2008 PSH survey reveal new information about the pervasiveness and supportiveness of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons. First, while LGBTQ-inclusive classroom lessons are found to be common, they are also less likely to be described as supportive of LGBTQ people/issues. However, in classes where LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are most likely to appear (health/sexuality education, English and social studies), the lessons are more likely to be described as supportive of LGBTQ people/issues. In contrast, in classes where LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are the least likely to appear (science, physical education, and math) the lessons are less likely to be described as supportive of LGBTQ people/issues.

Second, students who reported any mention of LGBTQ people/issues in a classroom setting were also more likely to report feeling safe at school. Furthermore, students are even more likely to report positive outcomes regarding school safety when LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are described as “mostly supportive” as opposed to “neutral/mixed,” or “mostly not supportive.” This finding is true regardless of students' sexual orientation.

There is, however, a significant variation when it comes to physical education (PE) classes. For example, LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in PE classes that are described as “neutral/mixed” have *negative* effects on individual students' feelings of safety while lessons described as “mostly supportive” have *the most* positive effects on individual students' feelings of safety. This finding is especially interesting considering the fact that LGBTQ and allied students rate lessons in PE as “mostly not supportive” at twice the rate as lessons in other classes.

LGBTQ-inclusive lessons also impact school climate as a whole. For example, unlike outcomes for individual students, school climate as a whole is not necessarily positively affected when LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are rated as “neutral/mixed.” However, school climate as a whole *is* positively affected by LGBTQ-inclusive lessons that are rated as “mostly supportive.” This finding is true regardless of whether or not the school was previously reported to be especially safe or unsafe overall. Findings vary for health and sexuality education classes where school climate as a whole is positively affected when *any* LGBTQ-inclusive lesson is included in those classes.

Finally, the most positive impact of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons is found for individual students of any sexual orientation who are also members of their school's GSA. Conversely, LGBTQ students who are not in GSAs and who do not have access to LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are the most likely to report a weaker sense of school belonging, and lower GPAs, among other negative outcomes.

Overall, all students, regardless of sexual orientation, show a substantial increase in feelings of safety from LGBTQ-inclusive lessons, especially when they are rated as “mostly supportive” of LGBTQ people/issues and especially when those students are also members of GSAs.

Recommendations

Based on these findings it is important that LGBTQ-inclusive lessons be regularly incorporated into classrooms at school. Below are recommendations for teachers and school site staff, local school officials and administrators, parents, guardians, community members, and students.

Recommendations for teachers and school site staff

LGBTQ-inclusive lessons positively impact school safety in almost all contexts. However, LGBTQ-inclusive lessons that are rated as “mostly supportive” of LGBTQ people (as opposed to “neutral/mixed,” or “mostly not supportive”) have *the greatest* impact on school safety. In an effort to create safer schools, teachers and school site staff should receive professional development so that they have the skills and resources to be able to include LGBTQ lessons that students experience as supportive of LGBTQ people/issues. However, a special effort should be made to train teachers and staff to be successful in the following contexts:

1. **Physical Education:** LGBTQ-inclusive lessons rated as “mostly supportive” have the greatest potential to dramatically increase individual students’ feelings of safety while lessons that are rated as “neutral/mixed” or “mostly not supportive” have the greatest potential to dramatically decrease individual students’ feelings of safety.
2. **Health and Sexuality Education:** There is a strong correlation between LGBTQ inclusivity in health and sexuality education classes and a positive impact on the entire school climate as a whole.
3. **History and Social Studies:** The recent passage of the FAIR Education Act adds LGBT people to the list of already underrepresented groups that social studies and history teachers are required to include in class lessons. Since LGBTQ-inclusive lessons that are rated as “mostly supportive” of LGBTQ people/issues have a particularly positive impact on individual students’ feelings of safety and the school climate as a whole, it is important that social studies and history teachers are adequately trained on how to incorporate LGBTQ people and issues into their lessons.
4. **Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) Clubs:** Students, regardless of sexual orientation, who are members of their school’s GSA and learn about LGBTQ people/issues in class, report the most positive school safety outcomes. Conversely, LGBTQ students who are not in GSAs and who have not had access to LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are the most likely to report a weaker sense of school belonging, and lower GPAs, among other negative outcomes. Teachers and school site staff should support the creation and/or continued success of a GSA club.

FAIR Education Act

The recent passage of California’s Fair, Accurate, Inclusive and Respectful (FAIR) Education Act, which became law on January 1, 2012, updates the California Education Code to integrate age-appropriate, factual information about the roles and contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Americans and people with disabilities into social studies classes.

Recommendations for local school officials and administrators

Previous studies illustrating the importance of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons helped lead to important legislation such as California’s FAIR Education Act. In an effort to comply with the updates to the California Education Code and incorporate the findings in this report, local school officials and administrators should:

1. Provide training for history and social studies teachers so that they are prepared to comply with the education code requirements updated by the FAIR Education Act.
2. Provide training for all staff and faculty on the importance of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons in all disciplines and their effect on school climate.
3. Invite parents, teachers, administrators and other key stakeholders to identify and/or participate in the development of age-appropriate LGBTQ-inclusive lessons that teachers can use in their classrooms.
4. Identify and eliminate barriers to the formation of Gay-Straight Alliances and other student anti-bias clubs, and support their formation.

Recommendations for parents, guardians, and community members

Parents, guardians, and other members of the school community have a role to play in ensuring that school environments are safe places for all students to learn. Parents, guardians, and community members should:

1. Ask their children if their lessons are LGBTQ-inclusive.
2. Ask their children if LGBTQ-inclusive lessons are supportive of LGBTQ people, subjects and issues.
3. Ask their children if they feel safe at school and/or think other students feel safe at school.
4. Speak out in support of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons and a safe school climate for all students.
5. Participate in the identification and/or development of age-appropriate LGBTQ-inclusive lessons that teachers can use in their classrooms.

Recommendations for students:

Students have a right to feel safe at school. They also have a right to a fair, accurate, inclusive and respectful education. Students should:

1. Educate themselves about the FAIR Education Act and find out if their social studies, history and/or government classes incorporate LGBTQ-inclusive lessons about historical events, current events and/or the historical contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people.
 2. Ask their teachers to teach about all relevant subjects, including factual information about social movements, current events and the historical contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.
 3. Consider LGBTQ current events or history as a topic for a presentation or paper.
 4. Speak out in support of their school district and teachers in their efforts to include factual information about social movements, current events and the historical contributions of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people.
 5. Encourage their school site or district curriculum committee to adopt LGBTQ-inclusive lessons for all core 11th grade classes like history or other social science classes such as 12th grade government class.
 6. Start a Gay-Straight Alliance to help fight harassment and discrimination at school, or join the club if one already exists.
 7. Speak out in support of specific steps school districts and schools can take to make sure that lessons in many types of classes are LGBTQ-inclusive and schools are safe.
-

Safe Schools Research Brief 14

Lessons That Matter: LGBTQ Inclusivity and School Safety

About the Research

Data are from the 2008 Preventing School Harassment (PSH) survey. The PSH survey was designed to study the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning high school students and their straight allies, and the steps schools can take to make schools safer. The PSH survey was developed by the California Safe Schools Coalition, and administered by the Gay-Straight Alliance Network. Data from 1,232 students were collected from 154 schools. Students were asked about their experiences of safety at school, and about the steps schools can take to make schools safer. Specifically, students were asked questions about the pervasiveness of LGBTQ-inclusive lessons at school and the relative supportiveness of inclusive lessons.

¹Russell, S.T., Kostroski, O., McGuire, J. K., Laub, C., & Manke, E. (2006). LGBT Issues in the Curriculum Promotes School Safety. (California Safe Schools Coalition Research Brief No. 4). San Francisco, CA: California Safe Schools Coalition.

²The 2008 Preventing School Harassment survey asks students if they “have learned about LGBTQ people or issues as part of a lesson in [their] classes at school,” or “at school [outside of the classroom setting].” Students who answer “yes,” are asked to rate “how supportive [the lessons are] of LGBTQ people/issues” by choosing one of the following options: “Mostly supportive; Neutral/mixed; Mostly not supportive.”

³See California Safe Schools Coalition Research Briefs 3, 4, and 7.

⁴ibid. 1.

Suggested citation:

Burdge, H., Sinclair, K., Laub, C., Russell, S. T. (2012). Lessons That Matter: LGBTQ Inclusivity and School Safety. (Gay-Straight Alliance Network and California Safe Schools Coalition Research Brief No. 14). San Francisco, CA: Gay-Straight Alliance Network.