

LGBT STUDENT SAFETY : STEPS SCHOOLS CAN TAKE

School safety is a problem in California: data from the 2000-2001 California Healthy Kids Survey, which included over 237,000 California students, show that 7.5% of students in 7th, 9th, and 11th grades report being bullied based on actual or perceived sexual orientation. But what steps can schools take to promote school safety for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students? We conducted the Preventing School Harassment (PSH) survey in 2003, 2004 and 2005 to answer this question.

- Establish and publicize a harassment policy that specifically includes sexual orientation and gender, including gender identity, appearance, and behavior.
- Train teachers and staff to intervene when they hear slurs or negative comments based on sexual orientation or gender non-conformity.
- Support the establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance or similar student club.
- Ensure that students know where to go for information and support related to sexual orientation and gender identity.
- Introduce curriculum that includes LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity.

- Fewer incidents of harassment and bullying
- Fewer bias-related comments and less name-calling.
- Greater feelings of safety.
- Improved connections to school, community, and supportive adults.

Step 1: Establish and publicize a school policy that specifically prohibits harassment on the basis of actual and perceived sexual orientation and gender, including gender identity, appearance, and behavior.

Having a policy that prohibits discrimination based on actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender is an important first step for establishing a positive school environment. However, policies alone are not enough. Harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation is far too common in schools, and the presence of a school policy, absent any implementation activities, does not make a strong difference for students' experiences of harassment.

Step 2: Teacher intervention in harassment makes a difference: train teachers and staff to stop slurs and harassment.

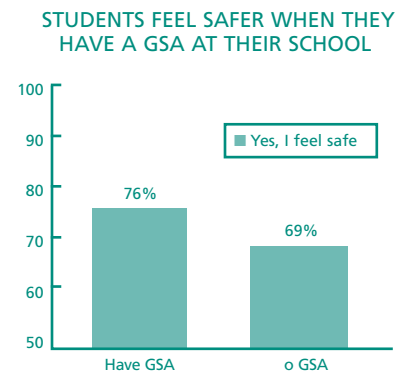
Harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender non-conformity is less common when teachers stop negative comments and slurs based on sexual orientation. As shown in Figure 1, students whose teachers stop negative comments and slurs based on sexual orientation report feeling safer at school.

Teacher intervention is also linked to other school safety outcomes. For example, only 23% of students who said that teachers did step in were harassed based on actual or perceived sexual orientation; in comparison, 36% of students who said that a teacher did not step in reported being harassed. The results are similar for harassment based on gender presentation (being not masculine or feminine enough). Only 20% who said that teachers did step in reported gender presentation harassment, whereas 27% of students who said that teachers did not step in were harassed.



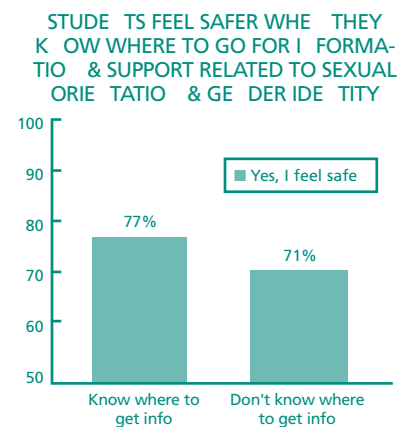
Step 3: Support the establishment of a Gay-Straight Alliance or similar student club.

Having a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) is linked with feelings of safety at school. Figure 2 shows that feelings of safety are stronger among students who report having a GSA at their school.



Step 4: Ensure that students know where to go for information and support related to sexual orientation and gender identity.

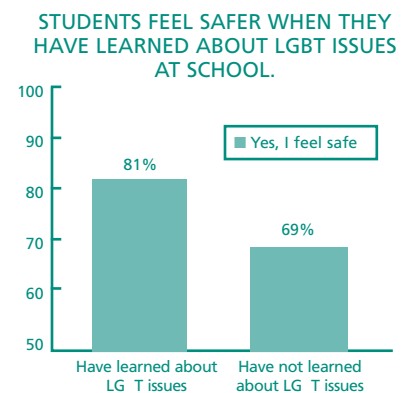
Knowing where to get information and support related to sexual orientation and gender identity is linked to feelings of safety as shown in Figure 3. Feelings of safety at school are stronger among students who know where to get information and support about sexual orientation and gender identity.



Step 5: Introduce curriculum that includes LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity.

Teaching about LGBT issues is linked to feelings of safety as shown in Figure 4. 81% of students report feeling safe at school when they have learned about LGBT issues, compared to 69% who have not learned about LGBT issues at school.

Learning about LGBT issues is linked with other school safety experiences. For example, harassment based on actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender non-conformity is less common among students who have learned about LGBT issues in school. When students were asked whether they had been harassed based on actual or perceived sexual orientation, only 22% of students who had learned about LGBT issues in school reported harassment, compared to 35% of students who said they had not learned about LGBT issues in school. The findings were similar with regard to harassment based on gender presentation (being not masculine or feminine enough). In schools where students said they had learned about LGBT issues, 19% reported gender-based harassment compared to 28% of students who said they had not learned about LGBT issues.



Teachers and school site staff who have the most contact with students are uniquely situated to help create a positive and safe school climate and help students achieve their full potential. Teachers and staff should:

1. Intervene when they hear bias-related comments and slurs. Use each comment as an opportunity to provide education and reaffirm school policy.
2. Request training on preventing harassment and discrimination, and ask to help publicize school policies on harassment.
3. Set the climate in their classrooms early and as often as necessary, letting students know that bias-related harassment and slurs are not acceptable.
4. Treat all forms of bias-related harassment and slurs as serious and preventable.
5. Find out about community resources and information related to sexual orientation and gender identity.
6. Integrate representations of LGBT people and discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity into existing curricula.

California's law prohibiting discrimination and harassment based on actual and perceived sexual orientation and gender, including gender identity, appearance, and behavior has yet to improve the safety of many students because implementation and enforcement of the law is inconsistent across the state. Local school officials and administrators must confront the serious health and safety outcomes of bias-motivated harassment and take steps to make change in their schools.

Local school officials and administrators should:

1. Mandate training for staff, faculty, and students on bias-motivated harassment, including training that specifically addresses harassment and discrimination based on actual or perceived sexual orientation and gender, including gender identity, appearance, and behavior.
2. Clearly and regularly publicize district policies related to bias-motivated harassment, with specific reference to sexual orientation and gender, including gender identity, appearance, and behavior.
 - Include a serious discussion about such harassment in student handbooks, including information making it clear how students can file a complaint.
 - Post policies in clear language throughout all schools.
 - Reinforce the policy in school assemblies or other media, especially when incidents of bias harassment or violence occur.
3. Identify and eliminate barriers to the formation of Gay-Straight Alliances and other student anti-bias clubs, and support their formation on every campus.
 - Place no restrictions on GSAs that would not be placed on any other student club.
 - Support GSAs' activities to reduce harassment on campus.
 - Re-evaluate any policies that may have the unintentional effect of discouraging student participation in a GSA (for instance, a parental permission policy or a policy requiring the disclosure of the names of students interested in participating to school administrators).
4. Train professional counselors and/or peer counselors on each campus to provide students with information and support related to sexual orientation and gender identity, and to address the multiple health risks associated with bias-related harassment. Publicize the availability of these counseling resources to students.
5. Take consistent disciplinary action to stop all forms of bias-related harassment and make sure that students are aware that it is not tolerated or condoned.
 - Treat every form of bias-related harassment as preventable, unacceptable, and deserving of a clear response.
 - Focus problem solving on eliminating bias-related harassment, rather than on avoiding the problem by, for instance, changing the harassed student's schedule or referring him or her to independent study.
6. Take steps to measure bias-related harassment in their school districts, such as adding an optional module to the CHKS on bias-related harassment, including age-appropriate demographic questions asking students their sexual orientation and gender identity.
7. Integrate representations of LGBT people and discussion of sexual orientation and gender identity into existing curricula.

If students feel safe and empowered, they have the ability to make their schools safer. Students can:

1. Speak out when they hear slurs or negative comments like “that’s so gay.”
2. Start a Gay-Straight Alliance to help fight harassment and discrimination at school, or join the club if one already exists.
3. Find out if the school harassment policy includes harassment based on actual and perceived sexual orientation and gender, including gender identity, appearance, and behavior and advocate for changing the policy if it does not.
4. Find out how to make a complaint when harassment occurs.
5. Speak out in support of specific steps school districts and schools can take: publicizing and enforcing anti-harassment policies, supporting GSAs, providing resources to students, training teachers and other staff, measuring bias-related harassment in their local school district, and including LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity in the curriculum.

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 what happens at school when bias-related name-calling, harassment, and bullying occur. Ask their children if they know what to do if they are harassed.
2. Talk to their children about sexual orientation and gender identity, name calling, and discrimination.
3. Speak out in support of specific steps school districts and schools can take: publicizing and enforcing anti-harassment policies, supporting GSAs, providing resources to students, training teachers and other staff, measuring bias-related harassment in their local school district, and including LGBT people and information about sexual orientation and gender identity in the curriculum.

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

Data are from the 2003, 2004, and 2005 Preventing School Harassment (PSH) survey. The survey was designed to study the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and questioning high school students in California, 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 over 2,400 students were collected in schools and on the internet. Students were asked about their experiences of safety at school and about the steps schools can take to make schools safer.

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