

LGBTQ+ Youth and School Climate

October 2022

The 2021 National School Climate Survey, surveying 22,298 self-identified LGBTQ+ students in U.S. schools, found that school climates are **toxic and harmful to students' mental health**.

The vast majority of LGBTQ+ students who attended school in-person at some point during the 2021-2022 academic year (83.1%) experienced in-person harassment or assault based on personal characteristics, including sexual orientation, gender expression, gender, religion, actual or perceived race and ethnicity, and actual or perceived disability.

The numbers are shocking. **Verbal harassment/ bullying by teachers and staff is pervasive.**

- 72% of students reported hearing negative remarks about gender expression from teachers or other schools staff.
- 58% of students reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff.
- Only one-tenth of LGBTQ+ students (10.9%) reported that school staff intervened most of the time or always when overhearing homophobic remarks at school.
- Less than one-tenth of LGBTQ+ students (8.8%) reported that school staff intervened most of the time or always when overhearing negative remarks about gender expression.

Physical harassment/assault by other students is pervasive.

- 31.2% of LGBTQ+ students were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) in the past year based on their sexual orientation or gender expression.

- 12.5% were physically assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, injured with a weapon) in the past year based on their sexual orientation or gender expression.
- In a further breakdown, 22.4% of LGBTQ+ students were physically harassed at school based on their sexual orientation; 8.8% were physically assaulted based on their sexual orientation; and 8.2% were physically assaulted based on their gender expression.

LGBTQ+ students report little access to inclusive education, report negative lessons being taught about them.

- A majority (71.6% of LGBTQ+ students reported that their classes did not include any LGBTQ+ topics in class.
- Under a fifth of LGBTQ+ students were taught positive representations about LGBTQ_ people, history, or events in their schools.
- 14.4% had been taught negative content about LGBTQ+ topics.

GSA clubs are becoming less prevalent in schools despite evidence they decrease bullying and improve school climates across the board.

The percentage of LGBTQ+ students who had a GSA available at their school dropped from more than 50% in recent years to less than 40% in 2021. GSAs, also known as Gay/Straight Alliances or Gender/Sexuality Alliances, are student-led clubs that encourage kids to meet in mixed groups that foster acceptance and support.

Schools with active GSAs report substantially less bullying and harassment of LGBTQ+ students and other students. A decrease in GSAs in schools tracks with increases in harassment and assault, though the Survey cannot by design demonstrate a causal effect.

School climates for LGBTQ+ kids are getting worse. Mental health outcomes are too.

The Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Educators Network (GLSEN) has conducted its school climate survey every two years for the last twenty years, and trends over the last several years are grim. In 2017, the survey found victimization based on gender expression increasing. In 2019, verbal and physical harassment and assault were pervasive.

2021 is harder to compare because of increased on-line learning due to the COVID pandemic, but LGBTQ+ children doing in-person learning reported pervasively negative experiences.

More LGBTQ+ kids are skipping school, fewer are making plans for higher education, and negative mental health outcomes like depression and suicidal thoughts are high.

Intersectional considerations are highly significant. Black students and other students of color who identify as LGBTQ+ report significantly more bullying and abuse. Gender-nonconforming students report especially high levels of bullying and abuse. Poor mental health outcomes track closely with rates of bullying and abuse, so students with more than one marginalized identity report especially poor outcomes.

Being LGBTQ+ in school is not fun or fashionable. It's dangerous, and we need to act together as a nation to support our children.

James Finn, a columnist with the LA Blade, a former Air Force intelligence analyst, and novelist, focuses on LGBTQ+ youth issues. He has been writing about such climates and interviewing students and parents for years. While GLSEN's School Climate survey is not designed to look at causes for toxic school climates, he draws some reasonable inferences about what is going on in our schools. He writes:

Ash Tough in Carroll County Maryland is an important illustration.

When Ash was in 8th grade last year, they began to identify as nonbinary, coming out to family, then to friends and teachers. The response they got at first in school was pretty good, even though their mom tells me she worried quite a bit for Ash. I interviewed Ash and their mom because they eventually became the center of an intense county hate storm after Ash brought a small rainbow flag to school one day on a whim. More than 20 students called Ash ugly homophobic slurs, and about 10 students publicly urged them to commit suicide

Staff were mostly (though not entirely) supportive, but Ash was so shocked they attended the next school board meeting and asked board members to please help. A different student spoke up to suggest supportive teachers could put little rainbow flags on their desks to indicate safe spaces, and the board greenlighted the idea.

Then all hell broke loose in Carroll County.

It took a while for opposition to build, but Ash eventually became the target of hate speech, insults, and death wishes from adults in their community. Ash told me they have no particular political views, saying "I don't even care about politics," but groups like Moms for Liberty and other partisan Republican groups put the 13-year-old in their crosshairs. Norms of civilized behavior collapsed as adult community leaders called a child nasty names on public forums.

Students emboldened by their conservative parents directed even more slurs and hate speech at Ash. Their school climate grew worse.

Then the school board, responding to the hatred directed against Ash, voted to ban rainbow flags at school. Students felt more emboldened and validated, and Ash's school climate grew much MORE toxic. Today, LGBTQ+ students in the Carroll County school system live with inevitable, pervasive, toxic slurs and hate speech – not just tolerated by adults but abetted by parents and community leaders who engage in the same behavior. That's how it happens.

Ash is only one example, and GLSEN's latest survey shows they are far from alone. KYLP is receiving more and more complaints from students and parents

with similar stories from right here in Kentucky.

Students and their parents from one school district in Northern Kentucky have recently complained to KYLP that their high school issued a new rule prohibiting teachers from telling students their pronouns, asking a student for the student's pronouns, and from using pronouns in their email signatures.

Administrators told teachers that they cannot have "safe space" stickers in their classrooms. The principal claims that the stickers create division and make people feel "othered" for being homophobic. The school also prohibited students from wearing pride flag stickers to show their support for LGBTQ+ students, reasoning that such a show of support would create an "us vs them" environment at the school. At last year's homecoming parade, students were ripping up pride flags and throwing them in the mud. Again, the administration responded by claiming that pride flags invite homophobia and gives people a reason to be intolerant.

Of even more concern, the school's SBDM passed a rule that forces all clubs to submit a roster and puts clubs in Infinite Campus where parents can see them, putting GSA students at risk of being outed to their families, who could be hostile, which could result in negative outcomes for LGBTQ+ students, including depression, homelessness, and suicidality.

The toxic mood on the rights today is unhealthy and irrational. Politicians are attaching transgender and nonbinary children and youth with proposed laws that would deny them affirming health care and mental health care, criminalize parents and health care providers for supporting their children, and prohibiting all mention of sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression in schools.

KYLP is working to protect these children and youth from these political attacks. If you agree that schools should not be a hostile place for LGBTQ+ children and youth, read GLSEN's National School Climate Survey and demand that your school board protect our kids.

A hostile school climate affects students' academic success and mental health.

LGBTQ+ students who experience victimization and discrimination at school have worse educational outcomes and poorer psychological well-being.

LGBTQ+ students who experienced higher levels of in-person victimization because of their sexual orientation were nearly three times as likely to have missed school in the past month than those who experienced lower levels (60.7% vs. 23.3%); felt lower levels of belonging to their school community, performed poorer academically, (2.83 vs 3.15 average GPA, and were nearly twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue any post-secondary education (e.g., college or trade school) than those who experienced lower levels (16.6% vs. 9.4%); were nearly twice as likely to have been disciplined at school than those who experienced lower levels of victimization (61.1% vs. 33.6%); and had lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression than those who experienced lower levels of victimization.

LGBTQ+ students who experienced higher levels of victimization because of their gender were almost three times as likely to have missed school in the past month than those who experienced lower levels (60.3% vs. 24.4%); felt lower levels of belonging to their school community, performed poorer academically (2.76 vs. 3.17 avg. GPA), and were twice as likely to report that they did not plan to pursue post-secondary education than those who experienced lower levels; were more likely to have been disciplined at school than those who experienced lower levels (60.9% vs. 33.9%); and had lower self-esteem and higher levels of depression than those who experienced lower levels of victimization.

Of the LGBTQ+ students who indicated that they were considering dropping out of school, half (51.5%) indicated that they were doing so because of a hostile school climate.

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