INSIDE NEW YORK SCHOOLS: THE EXPERIENCES OF LGBT STUDENTS

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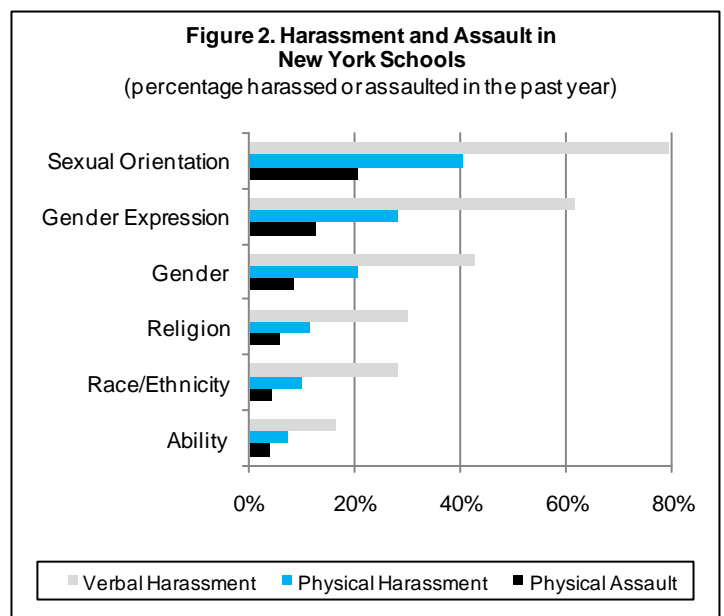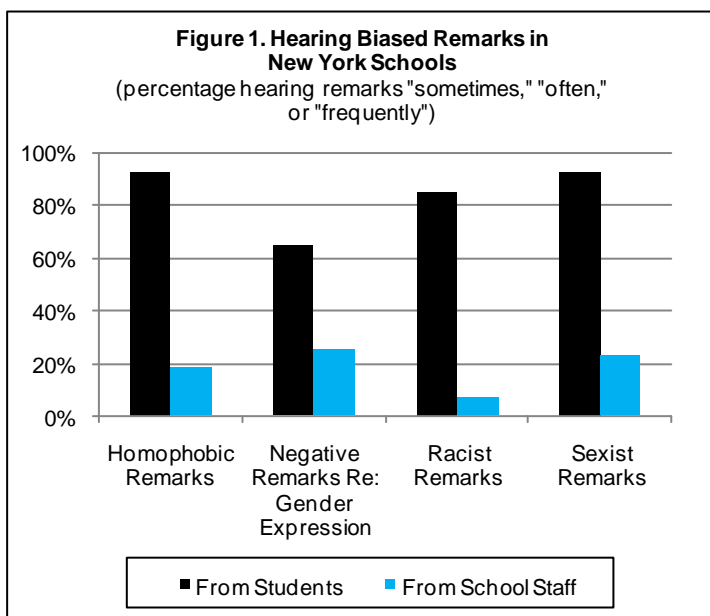
LGBT students in New York schools heard various types of biased language in school. Homophobic remarks were the most commonly heard.

- 96% of LGBT students in New York 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."

- 93% of students regularly heard homophobic remarks, such as "dyke" or "faggot," from other students in school (see Figure 1).

- 65% 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 New York also heard biased remarks from teachers and other school staff: 25% of students regularly heard school staff make negative remarks about someone's gender expression, and 18% regularly heard homophobic remarks from school staff (see Figure 1).

Many LGBT students in New York schools experienced harassment, both verbal and physical in nature, most often related to their sexual orientation or gender expression. Incidents of harassment and assault were often not reported to adult authorities.

- 79% of LGBT students were verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) in the past year because of their sexual orientation. Almost two-thirds (62%) were verbally harassed because of how they expressed their gender (see Figure 2).

Figure 1. Hearing Biased Remarks in New York Schools
(percentage hearing remarks "sometimes," "often," or "frequently")

Categories: Homophobic Remarks, Negative Remarks Re: Gender Expression, Racist Remarks, Sexist Remarks
Legend: From Students, From School Staff

Figure 2. Harassment and Assault in New York Schools
(percentage harassed or assaulted in the past year)

Categories: Sexual Orientation, Gender Expression, Gender, Religion, Race/Ethnicity, Ability
Legend: Verbal Harassment, Physical Harassment, Physical Assault

- 41% of LGBT students were physically harassed in school in the past year because of their sexual orientation, and 28% because of how they expressed their gender (see Figure 2).

- 20% of students were physically assaulted (e.g., punched or kicked) in school in the past year because of their sexual orientation, and 13% because of their gender expression (see Figure 2).

- 60% of students who were harassed or assaulted in school *never* reported it to school staff, and 47% *never* told a family member about the incident. Among students who did report incidents to school authorities, only 40% said that reporting resulted in effective intervention by school staff.

Negative school climate was related to restricted access to education and lower academic achievement for LGBT students in New York.
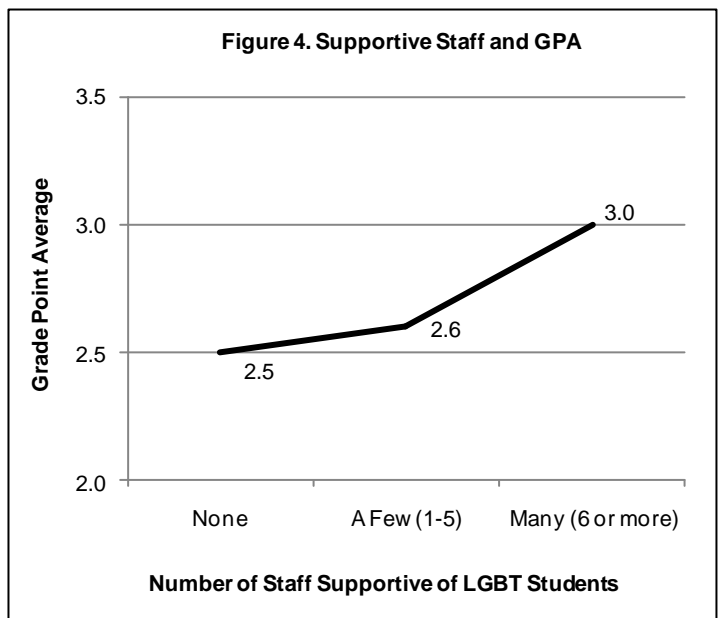
- 35% of LGBT students had skipped class at least once in the past month because they felt unsafe, and 31% had missed at least one entire day of school due to safety concerns.

- Students who experienced high levels of harassment because of their sexual orientation were more than two times as likely to miss days of school because they felt unsafe than students who did not experience high levels of harassment (51% versus 19%) (see Figure 3).
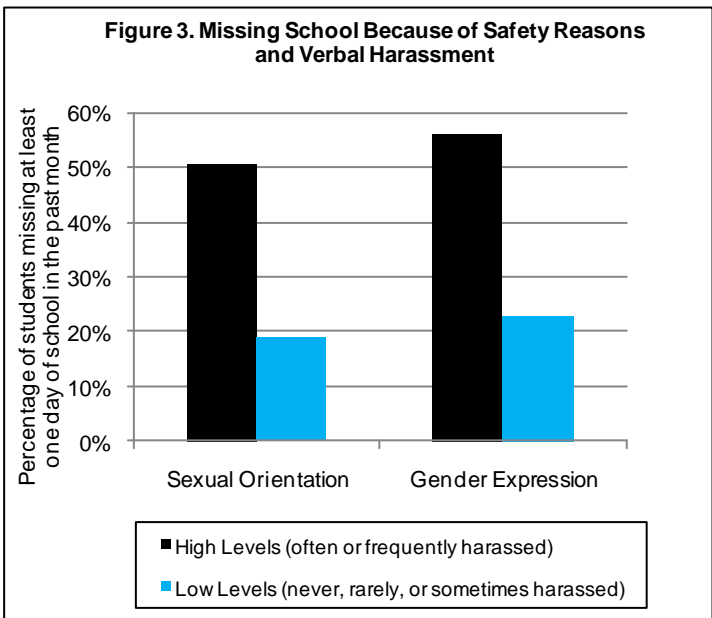
- LGBT students who experienced high levels of verbal harassment because of their sexual orientation had lower grade point averages (GPAs) than other LGBT students (3.0 versus 2.5).

In-school resources for LGBT students, such as comprehensive safe school policies that include specific protections based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression, supportive educators, and Gay-Straight Alliances, improve the school experience for LGBT students in Pennsylvania. Yet many of these students do not have these resources available.

- 54% of New York 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 that includes specific protections based on sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

- 9 in 10 (90%) LGBT students in New York could identify at least one teacher or other school staff person who they felt was supportive of LGBT students in their school. Students with a greater number of supportive staff members had higher grade point averages than students with fewer supportive staff members (see Figure 4). Unfortunately, only about half (46%) of students said that they had 6 or more supportive staff in school.

Figure 3. Missing School Because of Safety Reasons and Verbal Harassment

Figure 4. Supportive Staff and GPA

- LGBT students with a Gay-Straight Alliance (GSA) were less likely to be physically harassed because of their sexual orientation or gender expression (see Figure 5). Yet the majority (52%) of LGBT students in New York did not have a GSA in their school.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

New York schools were not a safe place for many LGBT secondary school students. Biased language, especially sexist and homophobic language, was very common in New York 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.
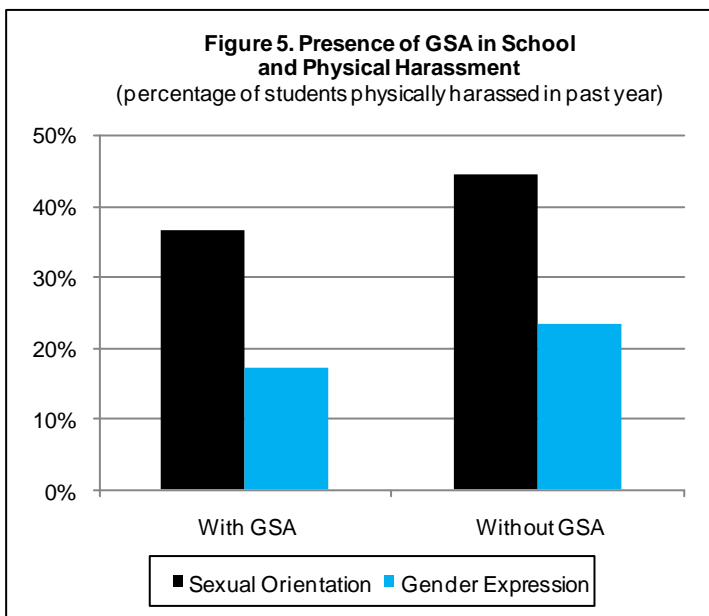
Findings from this report suggest that supportive educators and Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs) may help to create a more positive school environment for LGBT students. As such, New York schools should support student clubs that address LGBT students' issues, and provide training for teachers and other school staff to ensure that they are equipped to effectively intervene in biased remarks harassment or assault and serve as support for LGBT students. New York schools should also establish clear policies that address the use of homophobic and other biased language by school personnel.

Having comprehensive safe school policies may be key to creating safe and inclusive schools in which students are able to succeed. Findings from the *2007 National School Climate Survey* showed that students in schools with comprehensive anti-harassment policies reported lower incidence of negative events, such as harassment, and were more likely to report such events to school staff than students in schools without such policies. Yet, few LGBT students in New York reported that they were protected by a comprehensive policy in school. Thus, it is imperative for New York policymakers to pass protective safe schools legislation that includes explicit protections based on sexual orientation and gender identity and that requires such safe school policies at the district level.

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 442 respondents were attending schools in New York state at the time of the survey. The majority of this sample was White (58%), 20% was Latino, and less then 10% was African American, Native American, or Asian/Pacific Islander. A little more than half of the students identified as female (59%), 33% as male, and less than 5% as transgender. Almost all (90%) attended public schools, and 78% were in urban or suburban communities. The results reported in this Research Brief have a margin of error of +/- 5%. For the national NSCS report or for any other GLSEN research, go to www.glsen.org/research.

Figure 5. Presence of GSA in School and Physical Harassment
(percentage of students physically harassed in past year)

Legend: ■ Sexual Orientation ■ Gender Expression

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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Suggested citation: GLSEN (2009). Inside New York schools: The experiences of LGBT students (GLSEN Research Brief). New York: Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network.

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The *2007 National School Climate Survey*
was made possible by a grant from:

IBM.