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# Supporting LGBTQ+ Youth

Indiana Youth Institute | September 2021

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This brief is part of a series that provides the current context, key data, and recommendations to support LGBTQ+ youth. The data highlights that LGBTQ+ youth in Indiana continue to face complex barriers, such as stigma, victimization, bias, and rejection, leading to poor outcomes. **Given the landscape, LGBTQ+ youth need youth serving professionals, advocates, and mentors more than ever.**

## LGBTQ+ Youth In Schools

A positive learning environments for all students is pertinent as school safety affects students' emotional well-being and academic achievement. Nationally, a majority of LGBTQ+ students feel unsafe at school and are likely to skip class or even full days of school to avoid the anti-LGBTQ+ name-calling, bullying, and harassment.<sup>1</sup> Fear at school can contribute to an unhealthy school climate and lead to negative student behavior. Students who feel unsafe at school are more likely to miss days of class. Students who witness school violence are more likely to experience health problems, social and emotional difficulties, and poor academic performance.<sup>2</sup> When LGBTQ+ teens face ridicule and violence within schools across the United States, it can negatively impact their school attendance and academic performance. Compared with students harassed for other reasons, students who feel harassed for their race, religion, ability, perceived sexual orientation, or gender are more likely to have lower grades and skip school. Moreover, there are higher dropout rates when students perceive higher rates of bullying and teasing in a school.<sup>3</sup>

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Researchers have found that LGBTQ+ students in schools with more positive school climates were at lower risk of suicidality and reported fewer depressive symptoms compared to students in less positive school climates.<sup>4</sup> In Indiana, 95% of LGBTQ+ students have reported regularly (sometimes, often, or frequently) hearing "Gay" by students used in a negative way at school. Some also regularly heard school staff make homophobic remarks (21%) and negative remarks about someone's gender expression (34%).<sup>5</sup> Understanding the negative impacts that can occur, schools and youth-serving organizations can adequately address factors like bias and stigma, that are influencing these trends to create safe and inclusive environments for LGBTQ+ teens.<sup>6</sup>

### What the data show:

- 71% or about 3 out of 4 LGBTQ+ students in Indiana experienced at least one form of anti-LGBTQ+ discrimination at school during the past year.
- 39% of Indiana LGBTQ+ students and 73% of transgender students were unable to use the school bathroom aligned with their gender.
- 55% of Indiana's transgender students and 31% of LGBTQ+ students were prevented from using their chosen name

or pronouns in school.<sup>7</sup> Using a person's chosen name and desired pronouns can be seen as a form of mutual respect and basic courtesy, and the experience of being misgendered

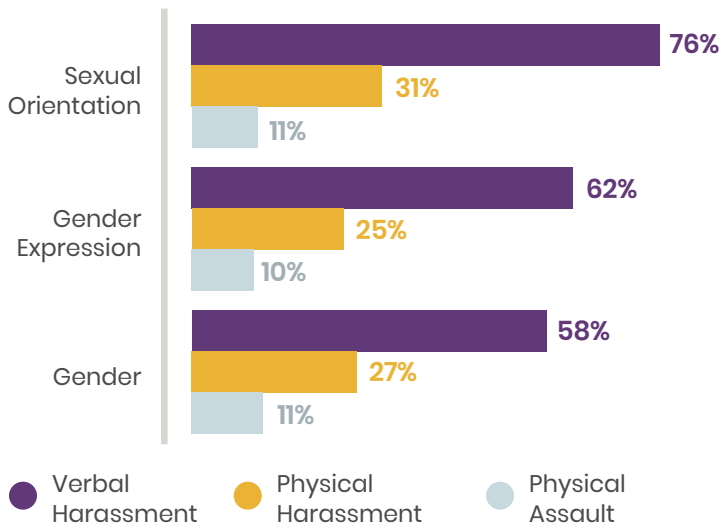
can be hurtful, angering, and even distracting.<sup>8</sup> Additionally, when someone refers to another person using the wrong pronouns, especially on purpose, that can lead to that person feeling disrespected and can lead to dysphoria, exclusion and alienation.<sup>9</sup>

- 97% of Indiana's LGBTQ+ students could identify at least one school staff individual who was supportive of LGBTQ+ students; however, only 55% could identify six or more individuals within the school who were supportive.<sup>10</sup>



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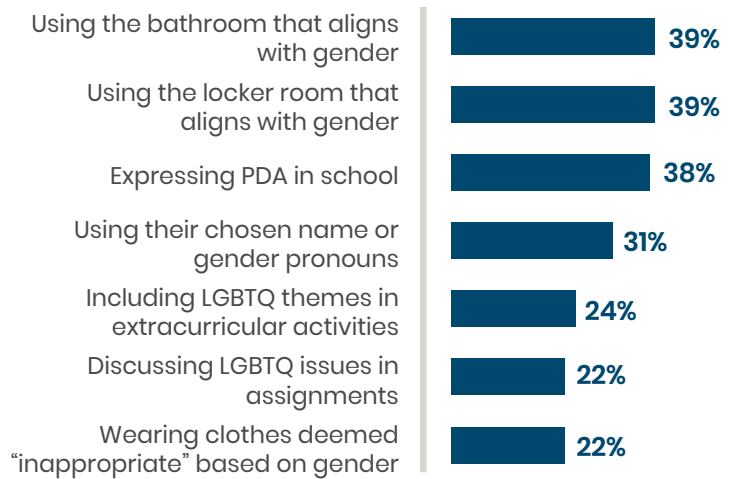
**Percentage of LGBTQ+ Students Harassed or Assaulted in the Past Year by Factor, Indiana: 2019**



Source: GLSEN

**Anti-LGBTQ+ Discrimination Most Commonly Reported in Schools, Indiana: 2019**

Percentage of LGBTQ+ Students who Were Prevented from...



Source: GLSEN

**LEVERAGING THE DATA**

**Locally:**

- **Assess school climate to inform improvement strategies:** To advance educational equity for all students, regularly assess the school climate and student experience in schools. Strategies to assess school climate include:
  - ☑ Conducting school climate surveys to use data to better understand the landscape of student experiences, including instances of bias, bullying, harassment, discrimination, relationships with teachers and peers, and school connectedness;
  - ☑ Monitoring disparities in school climate for LGBTQ+ students by disaggregating relevant data by sexual orientation and gender, including transgender identity; and
  - ☑ Including measures of school climate, discipline data, and incidents of bullying and harassment in any diagnostic reviews, such as needs assessments for school improvement, disaggregated by sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender expression, along with race, ethnicity, disability status, and ELL status.<sup>11</sup>
- **Implement a Gay Straight Alliance (GSAs):** Gay Straight Alliance clubs are student-run organizations that unite LGBTQ+ and allied youth to build community and organize around issues impacting them in their schools and communities. Traditionally, GSAs were established to serve as safe spaces for LGBTQ+ youth in middle schools and high schools and have evolved as vehicles for deep social change related to racial, gender, and educational

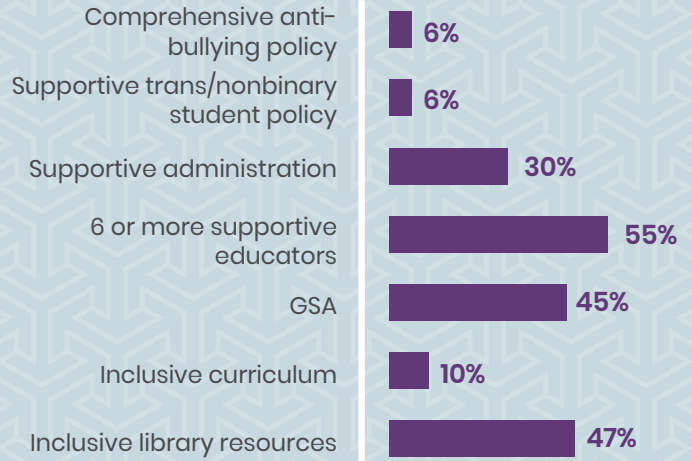
justice.<sup>12</sup> Students attending schools with a GSA report hearing fewer homophobic remarks and fewer negative remarks about gender expression and transgender people, were less likely to feel unsafe and miss school for safety reasons, and report a greater sense of belonging to their school community.<sup>13</sup> 45% of Indiana’s LGBTQ+ students had access to a GSA or similar student club providing a safe and affirming space and promotes a more welcoming school climate for LGBTQ+ students.<sup>14</sup>

- **Establish and implement anti-bullying policies (including cyberbullying):** Anti-bullying policies should enumerate each of the following to ensure that the policy is effective, fair and enforceable:

- ☑ A detailed definition of bullying, harassment and discrimination
- ☑ Clear guidelines on maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of all students
- ☑ Protections for students in gender-segregated areas and activities
- ☑ Protections for perceived, as well as actual, sexual orientation and gender identity
- ☑ Specific language to address school and district dress code policies
- ☑ Effective training for school officials, leading to proper implementation

An anti-bullying policy is only effective insofar as its comprehensive, inclusive, and highly specific. The aim is to better protect all students, not only vulnerable LGBTQ+ students.<sup>15</sup> For more information, please check out the [GLSEN Model School Policy](#).

### Availability of LGBTQ+ Related Resources and Supports in Schools, Indiana: 2019



Source: GLSEN

- **Provide professional development for school staff on LGBTQ+ student issues:** Educators maintain a valuable role in creating and maintain positive learning environments for LGBTQ+ youth by advocating for them to school administration and leading classroom environments.<sup>16</sup> Committed adults engage students in learning, foster mutual respect and caring, and meet the personal learning needs of each student.<sup>17</sup> For many students, having supportive adult allies in can help create a welcoming and safe environment for students to learn.<sup>18</sup> Providing educators with professional development and resources focused on creating inclusive learning environments is a strategy to expand access to inclusive and supportive educators. Schools can ensure that professional learning is inclusive of LGBTQ+ students with multiple intersecting identities (e.g., LGBTQ+ students of color, undocumented LGBTQ+ students, or LGBTQ+ students with disabilities), as these students often endure additional forms of discrimination and stigma. Also, schools can ensure that staff are skilled and confident in their abilities to implement learning opportunities, such as cultural competency training or safe space training, which increase awareness of issues impacting LGBTQ+ students and the effective strategies for improving their educational experiences.

## Statewide:

- **Adopt and implement policies that enable all students to participate in any school activity:** Discriminatory policies and practices that mark official school activities as distinctly non-LGBTQ+ prevent LGBTQ+ students from participating in the school community as fully and completely as other students. As indicated in the 2019 National School Climate Survey report by GLSEN, LGBTQ+ students reported discriminatory experiences with regard to school athletics, where 10.2% of students indicated that school staff or coaches had prevented or discouraged them from playing sports because they were LGBTQ+. Moreover, LGBTQ+ students can be indirectly discouraged from participating in sports if they are unable to use the locker rooms aligned with their gender identity, and other LGBTQ+ students may be prevented from using gendered locker rooms based on their same-sex attraction. LGBTQ+ students who experienced this locker room discrimination were less likely to participate in school sports, and were more likely to avoid gym class, sports fields, and locker rooms at school.<sup>19</sup> LGBTQ+ youth benefit both academically and socially from participating in school activities. When given equal access as their peers, LGBTQ+ students experience well-being and school belonging. Restricting access to school activities based on gender identity or sexual orientation further stigmatizes LGBTQ+ youth and could have negative repercussions on their mental health. Because of these benefits, the state and various can work in partnership with them to ensure participation and facility usage that is affirming and safe for all students.<sup>20</sup>

## Promising Practices

**Colorado:** The Colorado High School Activities Association's (CHSAA) policy states that to insure appropriate gender assignment for purposes of athletic eligibility, a transgender student-athlete's home school will be the first point of contact for determining the student's eligibility to participate in CHSAA sanctioned event(s). The student and parent(s)/guardian must notify the school in writing that the student has a consistent gender identity different than the student's gender assigned at birth and list the sanctioned event(s) in which the student would like to participate. The consistent gender identity as stated in the school letter will be the gender recognized for the entirety of the students participation in CHSAA athletics/activities. A transgender student shall participate in accordance with their gender identity. The school may use the following criteria to determine participation:

- Current transcript and school registration information, or
- A written statement from the student affirming their gender identity.

The school may consider but may not require the following information, if it is voluntarily provided by the student or their parent/guardian:

- Documentation from individuals such as, but not limited to, parents, friends, and/or teacher, which affirm that the actions, attitudes, dress and manner demonstrate the student's gender identity,
- Written verification from an appropriate health-care professional (doctor, psychiatrist, psychologist) of the student's gender identity, or
- Medical documentation (hormonal therapy, sexual re-assignment surgery, counseling, medical personnel, etc.).<sup>21</sup>

**Florida:** Florida has a similar policy to Colorado. Per 16.8 of the Florida High School Athletic Association (FHSAA) Bylaws, all eligible students should have the opportunity to participate in interscholastic athletics in a manner that is consistent with their gender identity and expression, irrespective of the gender listed on a student's birth certificate and/or records. Should a situation arise regarding a student's request to participate in a gender-segregated athletic event consistent with his/her gender identity and expression, a student may seek review of his or her eligibility for participation from the school and FHSAA.<sup>22</sup>

Because of the positive impact sports and school activities have on youth, all Hoosier youth, including transgender and non-binary, students should have the same access to school activities, including athletic participation. The Indiana High School Athletic Association (IHSAA) requires surgery required for a transgender youth to participate in a sport.<sup>23</sup> Adopting a policy similar to Colorado and Florida may create a more inclusive environment for all youth to participate in activities. Another way for the IHSAA, schools, and community-based sports teams to foster inclusive sports programs is to ensure that a student's gender identity, gender affirming health related documentation, and other highly personal information. Additionally, athletic directors and coaches can clearly communicate with the student athlete and seek their feedback about what information can be presented in communication with other schools/teams and maintain informative communication with opposing athletic teams to protect the students' confidentiality. By doing so, these discussions can clarify and establish expectations for treatment including the use of locker/shower facilities, names, pronouns, etc.<sup>24</sup>

- **Dedicate portions of the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds to specifically address marginalized student populations, including LGBTQ+ students:** State education agencies should consider using emergency funds to:
  - Provide equitable access to technology (directly or through LEAs, including devices and high-speed internet), with a primary focus on students from low-income and rural communities;
  - Provide high-quality, affirming, and accessible professional development opportunities, materials, and resources for educators and mental health providers to address heightened traumas that students, including LGBTQ+ and other marginalized students, may be facing because of the pandemic, and barriers they may face in distance learning and returning to school buildings;
  - Coordinate the sharing of high-quality resources and practices across school districts, especially those practices and resources related to social, emotional, and academic development of students, addressing cyberbullying, and maintaining connectivity to students; and
  - Ensure that their policies on nondiscrimination, bullying, harassment, suicide prevention, school health and counseling services, supporting students experiencing homelessness, and other key topics, are updated to address situations that may arise during the pandemic (e.g., such as Zoom bombing and other forms of cyberbullying).<sup>25</sup>

## Sources

<sup>1</sup> GLSEN (2019). Safe Space Kit: A Guide to Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Students in Your School.

<sup>2</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (n.d.). School Connectedness.

<sup>3</sup> Welcoming Schools (n.d.). Research Connections: Equity, School Climate and Academic Achievement.

<sup>4</sup> Journal of School Nurses (2021). The Impact of Positive School Climate on Suicidality and Mental Health Among LGBTQ Adolescents: A Systematic Review.

<sup>5</sup> GLSEN (2019). School Climate for LGBTQ Students in Indiana.

<sup>6</sup> Human Rights Campaign Foundation (). LGBTQ Youth Are Living in Crisis: Key Findings From HRC Foundation Analysis of CDC Data

<sup>7</sup> GLSEN (2019). School Climate for LGBTQ Students in Indiana.

<sup>8</sup> Human Rights Campaign Foundation (n.d.). Talking About Pronouns in the Workplace.

<sup>9</sup> Center for Inclusion and Social Change at University of Colorado (). Pronouns.

<sup>10</sup> GLSEN (2019). School Climate for LGBTQ Students in Indiana.

<sup>11</sup> GLSEN (n.d.). Respect for All: Policy Recommendations to Support LGBTQ Students A Guide for District and School Leaders.

<sup>12</sup> GSA Network (n.d.). What is a GSA club?

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<sup>14</sup> GLSEN (2019). School Climate for LGBTQ Students in Indiana.

<sup>15</sup> GLSEN (n.d.). Model School Anti-Bullying and Harassment Policy.

<sup>16</sup> GLSEN (2019). Safe Space Kit: A Guide to Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Students in Your School.

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<sup>19</sup> GLSEN (2020). The 2019 National School Climate Survey: The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Youth in Our Nation's Schools.

<sup>20</sup> Clark, et. al. (2021). Engaged or excluded: LGBTQ youth's participation in school sports and their relationship to psychological well-being. Psychology in the Schools.

<sup>21</sup> Colorado High School Athletic Association (n.d.). CHSAA Transgender Inclusion Bylaw & Policy, Bylaw 300.

<sup>22</sup> Florida High School Athletic Association (2019-2020). Bylaws.

<sup>23</sup> Indiana High School Athletic Association (n.d.). Gender Policy.

<sup>24</sup> GLSEN (2021). Gender Affirming and Inclusive Athletics Participation.

<sup>25</sup> GLSEN (n.d.). Nondiscrimination Protections And Inclusion Of LGBTQ+ Students In K-12 Learning Communities.

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