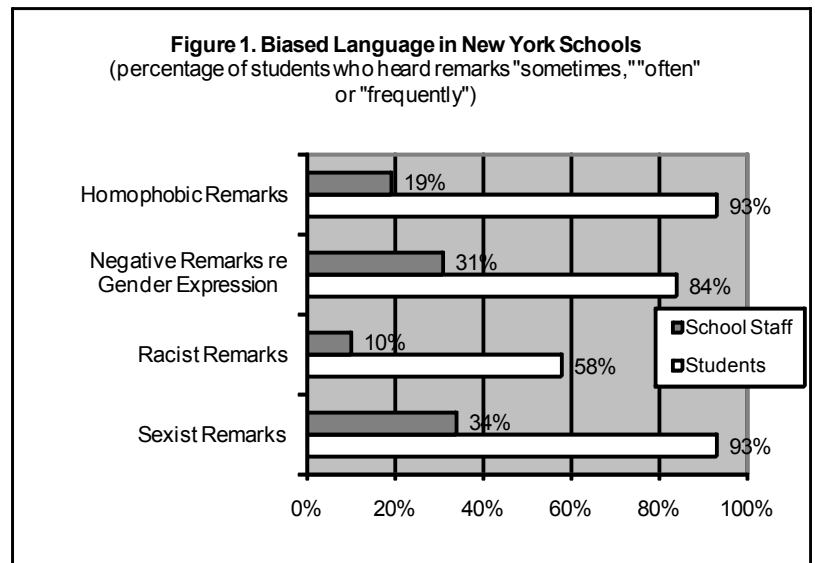


## INSIDE NEW YORK SCHOOLS: THE EXPERIENCES OF LGBT STUDENTS

Findings from the 2005 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 bullying and harassment at school, often because of sexual orientation and gender expression. In addition, most LGBT youth in New York lacked access to important school resources, such as Gay-Straight Alliances, and were not protected by comprehensive safe schools policies.

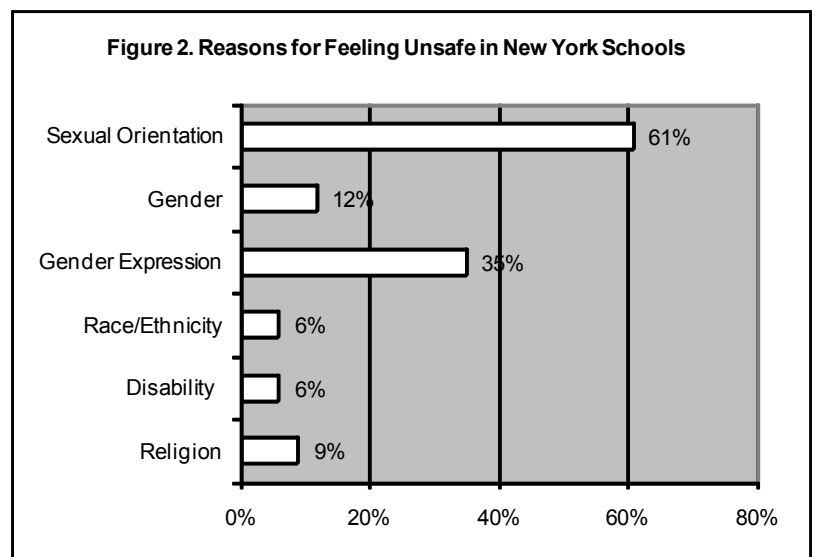
**MAJOR FINDING 1. The use of biased and derogatory language was a considerable problem in New York schools. New York students commonly heard various types of biased language in school -- homophobic and sexist remarks were most common. Furthermore, a sizable percentage of New York students heard these types of remarks from school staff.**

- Almost all students (93%) reported hearing homophobic remarks at school, including remarks like “faggot” or “dyke” or the expression “that’s so gay” (see Figure1).
- Most (84%) students heard negative remarks about gender expression at school, such as someone not acting “masculine enough” or “feminine enough.”
- About a third of students reported that teachers or school staff made negative comments about someone’s gender expression (31%) or sexist remarks (34%). A fifth (19%) of students also heard teachers or school staff make homophobic remarks (see also Figure 1).



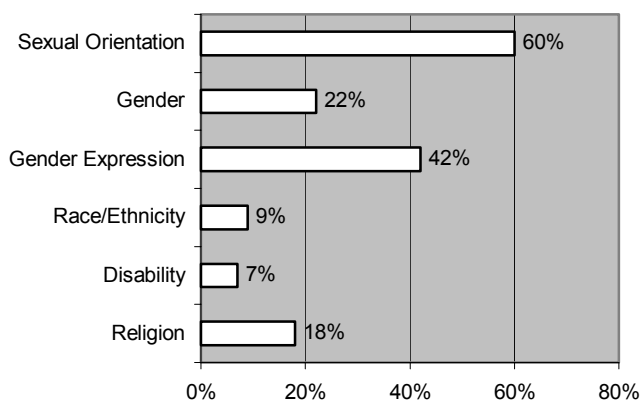
**MAJOR FINDING 2. Most LGBT students in New York state did not feel safe in school. Many experienced harassment, both verbal and physical in nature, most often based on their sexual orientation or gender expression. Students rarely, if ever, reported these incidents to adult authorities.**

**General Safety in School:** The majority of LGBT students in New York felt unsafe in their schools (68%). Students were most likely to feel unsafe at school because of their sexual orientation or because of how they expressed their gender (see Figure 2).



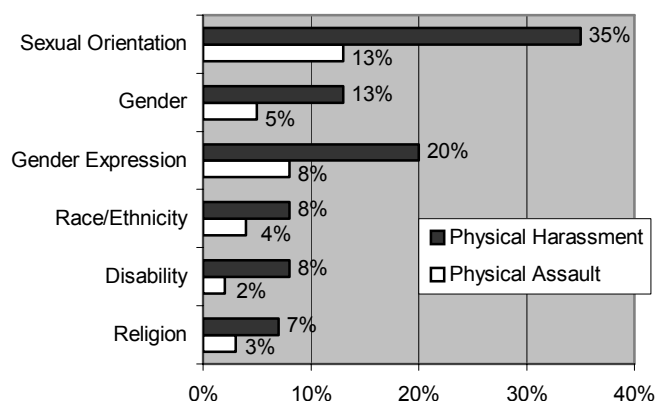
**Figure 3. Verbal Harassment in New York Schools**

(percentage of students who were verbally harassed "sometimes," "often" or "frequently")



**Figure 4. Physical Violence in New York Schools**

(percentage of students who were ever harassed or assaulted in the past year)



**Experiences of Verbal Harassment:** Sexual orientation and gender expression were the most common reasons that LGBT students reported being verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) at school. In the past year, three out of five LGBT students in New York schools had been verbally harassed at least some of the time in school because of their sexual orientation and almost half (42%) because of how they expressed their gender (see Figure 3).

**Experiences of Physical Violence:** For many LGBT students in school the harassment went beyond verbal taunts as they faced physical violence in school, such as physical harassment and assault. As with verbal harassment, students were most often targeted for physical violence because of their sexual orientation and gender expression (see Figure 4). In the past year, over a third (35%) of LGBT students in New York schools were physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) at school because of their sexual orientation, and a fifth (20%) of LGBT students were physically harassed because of how they expressed their gender. Additionally, as shown in Figure 4, about one in ten students were physically assaulted (e.g., punched or kicked) at school because of how they expressed their gender (13%) or their sexual orientation (8%).

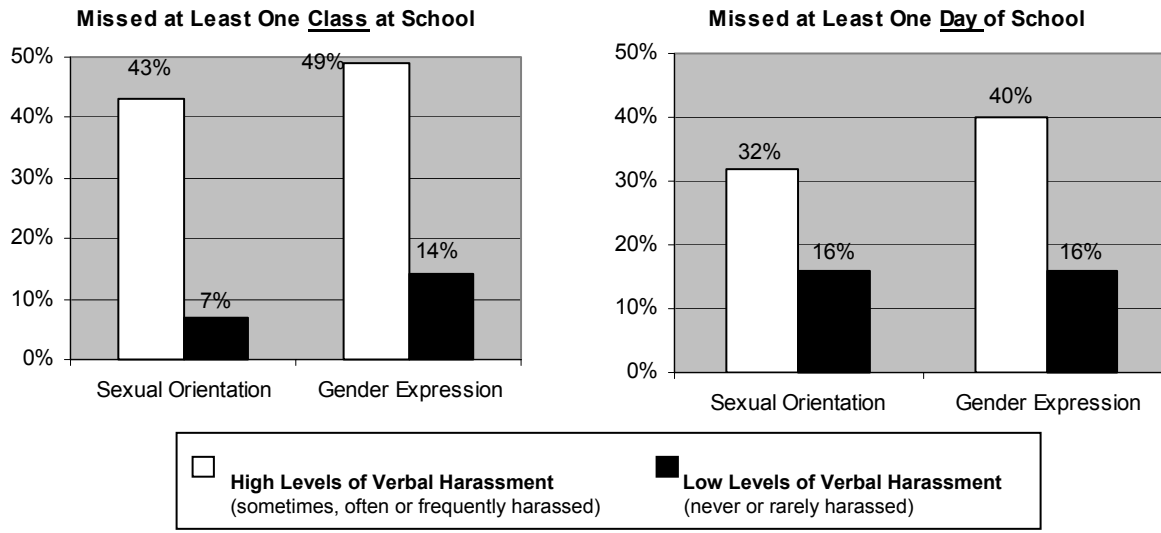
**Reporting Harassment and Assault:** Nearly half of those LGBT students in New York who experienced harassment or assault at school *never* reported the incident to school staff (47%), a parent or guardian (42%), or to another family member (31%). Of those students that did report incidents to school staff, less than half (40%) believed that school staff responded effectively.

**MAJOR FINDING 3. Negative school climate for New York LGBT students was associated with restricted access to education.**

- Compared to the general population of New York students, LGBT students in New York were three times more likely to miss school because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. More than a quarter of LGBT students had missed at least one class (29%) or missed at least one entire day of school (27%) in the past month because they felt unsafe or uncomfortable. In contrast, findings from a recent study of New York secondary school students showed that only about a tenth of the general student population reported missing a class (9%) or a day of school (10%) because they felt unsafe<sup>1</sup>.
- For LGBT students in New York, high levels of harassment in school were associated with more missed school (as shown in Figures 5 and 6). For example, as shown in Figure 5, 40% of LGBT students experiencing high levels of verbal harassment related to their gender expression reported missing at least one day of school, compared to 16% of LGBT students who were rarely or never verbally harassed.

<sup>1</sup> Harris Interactive and GLSEN (2005). From teasing to torment: A report on school climate in New York. New York: GLSEN.

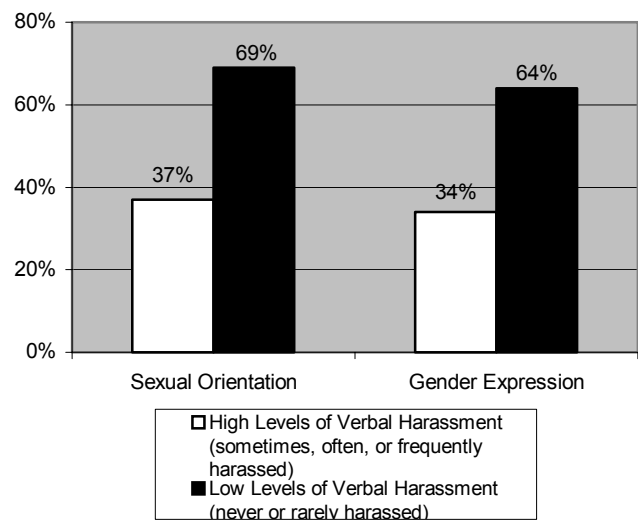
**Figure 5: Missed School Because of Feeling Unsafe or Uncomfortable**  
(percentage of students by level of verbal harassment experienced)



**MAJOR FINDING 4. Harassment in school had negative implications for LGBT students’ school attitudes and performance.**

- Feelings of school belonging were related to academic achievement, in that students who expressed a high degree of school belonging<sup>2</sup> had higher grade point averages (GPAs) than their peers (3.5 vs 2.9). Yet the greater the level of harassment faced by LGBT students in New York, the less connected they felt to their school. Feelings of school belonging were also associated with levels of harassment, in that students who experienced high levels of harassment felt less connected to their school than their peers (see Figure 6). These findings suggest that LGBT students facing high levels of harassment may be at risk of lower academic achievement.

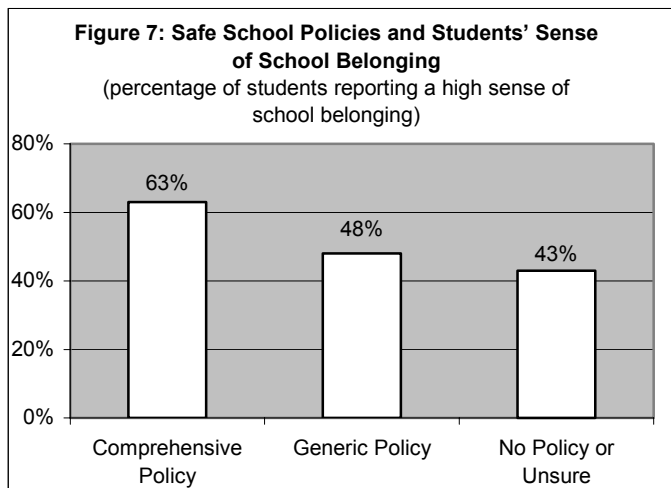
**Figure 6: Verbal Harassment and School Belonging**  
(percentage of students feeling a high degree of school belonging)



**MAJOR FINDING 5. Comprehensive safe school policies, ones that include specific protections based on sexual orientation or gender identity/expression, may offset the negative effects of harassment on achievement. Yet, the majority of LGBT students in New York attended schools that did not have these comprehensive policies.**

- About half (54%) of New York students believed that their school had some type of safe schools policy for reporting incidents of in-school harassment and assault. However, less than a fifth (16%) of students reported that their school had a comprehensive safe schools policy, one that included specific protections based on sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

<sup>2</sup> School belonging was assessed by the Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale. This scale is described in Goodenow, C. (1993). The psychological sense of school membership among adolescents: Scale development and educational correlates. *Psychology in the Schools*, 30, 79–80. The sample was split into high and low school belonging with scores above the median (the midpoint) score on the scale categorized as "high belonging" and those below categorized as "low belonging." Scores represent the mean (average) of the responses to all items of the scale. Scores on the scale ranged from 1 to 4 (strongly disagree to strongly agree) and the median was 2.7.



- New York students who had a comprehensive safe schools policy were much more likely to feel a part of their school. As shown in Figure 7, the percentage of students who reported feeling a high sense of belonging at school was significantly larger for those at schools with comprehensive safe schools policies (63%) than for those at schools with only generic policies (48%) or those who said their school had no type of policy or who were unsure (43%).
- Given that students who expressed a high degree of school belonging had higher grade point averages (GPAs) than their peers, as previously mentioned, the presence of comprehensive safe schools policy may indirectly affect the ability of LGBT students to succeed in school.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Schools were not a safe place for many LGBT youth in New York state. Biased and derogatory language, especially homophobic and sexist remarks, were very common in schools across New York. Students reported hearing biased language not only from their peers but from teachers and other school staff as well. LGBT students also faced verbal harassment, physical harassment and physical assault in New York schools, with sexual orientation and gender expression being the characteristics most commonly targeted for harassment. Thus, it is not surprising that LGBT students commonly reported feeling unsafe because of their sexual orientation or gender expression. This lack of safety led many students to miss classes or entire days of school. Furthermore, LGBT students experiencing high levels of harassment were particularly at risk in that they missed school more often and felt less connected to their school. As low levels of school belonging were associated with lower academic achievement, a negative school climate may hinder students' ability to succeed academically.

Although many LGBT students experienced harassment and assault, these incidents often went unreported to school authorities and students' families. If students do not trust that school authorities will take action to curb the harassment, they may choose not to report these incidents. Therefore, New York schools should provide training to teachers and other school staff to ensure that they respond to incidents of bias and harassment appropriately.

Comprehensive safe schools policies may be key to creating safe and inclusive school environments in which students are able to succeed academically throughout New York. Although being in a school with a comprehensive safe school policy was associated with higher levels of school belonging, few LGBT students in New York state reported that their school had such a policy. As high levels of school belonging were related to higher academic achievement, these policies may indirectly serve to help LGBT youth succeed in school. All New York schools should have comprehensive safe schools policies that offer explicit protection to students who are most often the targets of bullying and harassment based on personal characteristics, such as sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. A state law mandating schools to implement comprehensive safe school policies may assure that all students in New York have access to a safe educational environment.

### About the Research

In 2005, GLSEN conducted the fourth 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, in particular documenting anti-LGBT bias and behaviors that make schools unsafe for many of these youth. The national sample consisted of 1,732 LGBT students, who were from all 50 states and the District of Columbia. A total of 113 respondents were attending schools in New York state at the time of the survey. Two-thirds of the sample were white (67%) and about a tenth were Latino/a (12%) and African American (8%). A little more than half were female (57%), almost a third were male (31%) and less than one tenth identified as transgender (7%). Almost all (89%) attended public schools and were primarily in high school (74%). About a third of students attended schools in rural areas or small towns (34%), suburban areas (27%), or urban areas (39%). For the national NSCS report or for any other GLSEN research, go to [www.glsen.org/research](http://www.glsen.org/research).