



# Involved, Invisible, Ignored:

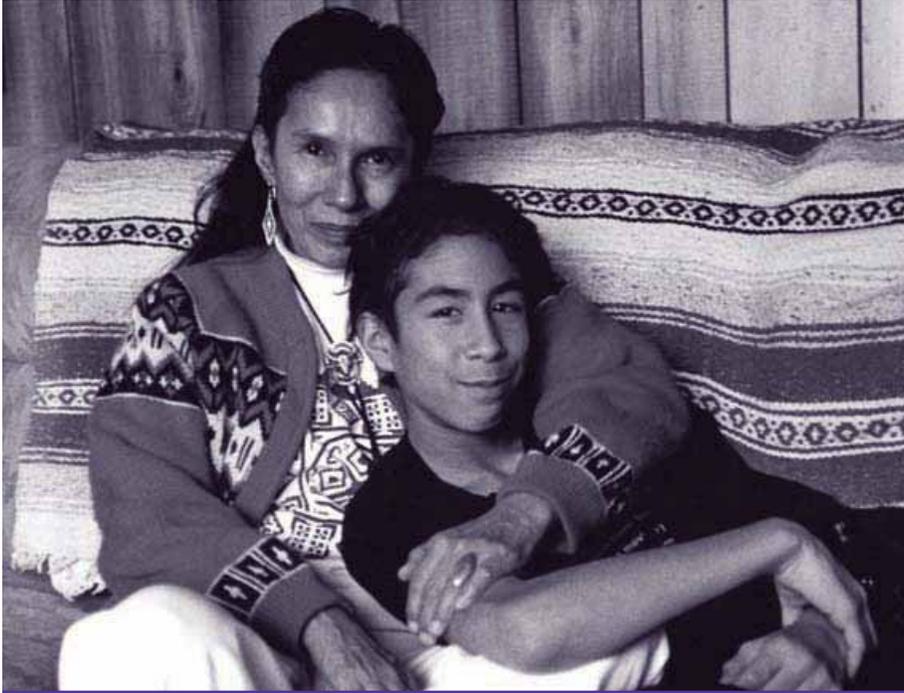
**The Experiences of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and  
Transgender Parents and Their Children  
in Our Nation's K-12 Schools**



**Executive Summary of a Report  
from the Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network  
[www.glsen.org](http://www.glsen.org)**

**In Partnership with COLAGE and the Family Equality Council**





On any given day in elementary school classrooms across the country, students are engaged in conversations and activities about their families. Yet not all discussions of family are equally welcome in schools. In 2007, when a nine-year-old girl at Tucker Elementary School in Milton, MA told her fellow third-graders that her mother is a lesbian, she was verbally abused and physically threatened by her classmates. Sadly, this third grader may not be alone in her experiences of a hostile school climate. Current estimates indicate that there are more than 7 million lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) parents with school-age children in the United States, yet little is known about the experiences of this growing number of LGBT-headed families in schools across the country. Incidents like that faced by the Milton third grader indicate that this is an area in urgent need of attention. In order to fill this crucial gap in our knowledge of LGBT issues in schools, GLSEN undertook this study to examine and highlight the school experiences of LGBT-headed families in partnership with COLAGE and the Family Equality Council.

This report, *Involved, Invisible, Ignored*, reveals a complex picture of experiences for both students and parents. The LGBT parents we surveyed are more likely than other parents to be actively engaged in the life of their child's school—more likely to volunteer, to attend parent-teacher conferences or back-to-school nights and to contact the school about their child's academic performance or school experience. Such findings suggest that LGBT parents are, as a group, potential assets for any school community, engaged and concerned

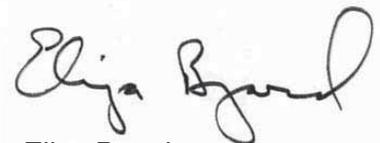
about the quality of their children's education and the school of which they are part. Yet many LGBT parents report feeling neglected, excluded or even mistreated by other members of their school communities, especially other parents. Students with LGBT parents also report school experiences that indicate that action is urgently needed—nearly a fifth of the students in our survey report hearing negative remarks about having LGBT parents from other students, and, even more disturbingly, nearly one-third hear such comments made by school staff.

Results from this study also provide insights into solutions to make schools safer and more welcoming for all members of the school community. Professional development for school staff must include multicultural diversity training, that incorporates accurate information and representations of all family constellations, including LGBT families. Schools must also have comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-discrimination policies that protect all students from harassment and include clear and effective systems for reporting and addressing incidents that students experience. Given that the number of supportive faculty and staff available to students has a direct correlation to how safe students feel in schools as well as academic achievement, it is imperative that school staff are trained on effective interventions regarding bullying and harassment. And given that LGBT parents and their children often report that harassment or mistreatment at school comes from the parents of other students, parent-teacher associations must more diligently recognize the diversity of their school communities and ensure that all parents, in addition to students, feel welcome and respected in their school.

LGBT parents must, and often times do, work harder than other parents to ensure safe and effective learning environments for their children. This study reveals that LGBT parents are highly engaged in their children's school experiences, qualities which can be of great benefit to teachers, school administrators and parent-teacher associations in America's schools. When LGBT parents are made to feel invisible in their children's school, schools risk alienating these parents and risk losing the rewards of actively engaged school community members. And when children from LGBT families are subjected to harassment and other mistreatment at school, schools are not providing a safe learning environment and are failing an entire community of students.



Kevin Jennings  
Executive Director  
GLSEN



Eliza Byard  
Deputy Executive Director  
GLSEN

Dear Readers,

From classrooms to courthouses to Congress, people who may have no experience with lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or queer (LGBTQ) families have debated what's best for children with LGBTQ parents in the United States: Will they "turn out" all right? Don't they wish they had "normal" families? Don't the children need a mother and a father? In the face of such constant public debate about us, there has sadly been very little dialogue *with* us about what it's truly like to have one or more LGBTQ parents, much less about the extent to which anti-LGBTQ bias and discrimination in American schools hurt us and our families. Therefore, COLAGE warmly welcomed the opportunity to partner with GLSEN and the Family Equality Council on this landmark research project to document the actual perceptions of middle school and high school students with LGBTQ parents about their school environments.

*Involved, Invisible, Ignored* provides an unprecedented window into the experiences of COLAGE youth. Students with LGBTQ parents face harassment and bullying each day when they go to school. Although this should never be the case, school staff and administration are often part of the problem.

COLAGE works with thousands of youth like those surveyed for this report. Youth such as Alex, who was left no choice but to transfer to a new middle school in California after facing relentless bullying about his lesbian mothers and gay fathers; and Caroline, a student in Massachusetts who is a leader in her school's Gay Straight Alliance and speaks out about her experience of having LGBT parents in order to create a safer school environment. In all their personal diversity and complexity, these young people are resilient, and have tremendous capacity to heal from such attacks, prevent future harm and be vibrant contributors to their communities. They are also driven by an inspiring vision of strong families, safe schools, and supportive communities. COLAGE is dedicated to bringing their voices and perspectives to bear in every American school.

We hope this report will spark dialogue and lead to more community-based research and action to create safe school environments across the country for all students. We also hope that this report will contribute to greater opportunities for the experiences of youth with LGBTQ parents to be reflected and understood. We encourage you to share these findings with your own community to begin or deepen the conversation.

In solidarity,



Beth Teper  
Executive Director  
COLAGE



Meredith Fenton  
National Program Director  
COLAGE

Dear Readers,

When I began as the executive director of Family Equality Council, I knew we had to get serious about collecting, disseminating, and encouraging more research on lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer-parented families. To that end, the Family Equality Council and others convened the *Real Families, Real Facts* academic symposium in May 2006. More than 120 researchers across disciplines shared 25+ years of scientifically valid research available on LGBTQ-parented families. We learned that LGBTQ parents are as capable in raising children as are non-LBGTQ parents, and the children of LGBTQ parents fare just as well as their peers in all key areas of social development.

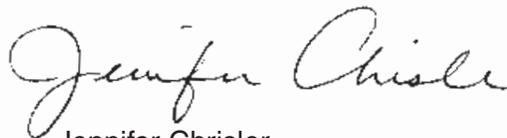
The research gathered at the symposium has already impacted legal fights around the country. Judges, legislators, and others are swayed by the facts we present. By and large, these decision makers want what's best for each and every child. The better educated they are about our community, the better the decisions they can make.

The study before you takes this research-based approach to the next level by examining the experiences of LGBTQ families in our nation's K through 12 schools. LGBTQ-parented families go to great lengths to ensure their children's health and safety, especially in schools. Yet too often these families are harassed, discriminated against, and marginalized in their own communities. This pattern of prejudice and exclusion has real consequences for the quality of education *all* children receive.

*Involved, Invisible, Ignored* speaks directly to the experiences of LGBTQ-parented families in schools, providing a rich resource. I encourage you to share these findings with principals, teachers, PTA leaders, school board members, legislators and more. The knowledge we gain in research is only as helpful as we make it.

I'm proud of the Family Equality Council's involvement in this groundbreaking study and I thank GLSEN and COLAGE for their collaboration in this very important work.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jennifer Chrisler". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, looped initial "J".

Jennifer Chrisler  
Executive Director  
Family Equality Council



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For more than a decade, GLSEN has been documenting the problem of anti-LGBT bias in our nation's K–12 schools, particularly the school-related experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students. GLSEN's on-going research about the experiences of LGBT students has proved important in its efforts to make schools safe for all students, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression. Through its research, GLSEN has been able to identify some of the issues LGBT students face in school—such as hearing derogatory language from other students and faculty, being subjected to harassment and assault because of their sexual orientation or gender expression—as well as important resources for improving school climate—such as supportive faculty, Gay-Straight Alliances and comprehensive safe school policies.

Students with LGBT parents may also be subjected to and negatively affected by anti-LGBT bias in schools. For some, being open about their family structure may result in bullying, harassment and other negative repercussions. LGBT parents of children in K–12 schools may face difficulties in their school communities related to their own sexual orientation or gender identity, difficulties which non-LGBT parents may not encounter. However, little is known about the school-related experiences of LGBT parents and their children. Although some prior research has examined whether children with same-sex parents are different from other children on school-related outcomes, there is limited research that explores the family-school relationship, school climate and other school-related experiences for LGBT parents as well as their children. For this reason, GLSEN worked with

two national LGBT family organizations, COLAGE and the Family Equality Council, on this current study. The purpose of this research was to document the school-related experiences of both LGBT parents and students with LGBT parents, including parental decision-making about school enrollment, the family-school relationship, parent-child discussions about school, negative experiences of both parent and child at school, and the presence and potential benefits of LGBT-related supports in school.

The results are intended to inform educators, policymakers and the general public about the school-related experiences of LGBT parents and their children, as part of GLSEN's on-going efforts to ensure that schools are places in which all students are free to learn in a safe environment. Results from this study demonstrate the urgent need for action to create safe and inclusive schools for all students and their families, and provide insight into ways in which this can be accomplished.

## **METHODS**

We obtained national samples of children of LGBT parents currently enrolled in middle school or high school, and of LGBT parents of a child currently enrolled in a K–12 school. Two methods of obtaining participants were implemented: participation of community groups and organizations for LGBT families and Internet surveying. For both methods, data collection was conducted from May to August 2005. Community-based groups and service organizations serving LGBT parents and their children were contacted and paper versions of the surveys were sent to them. Both the parent and student surveys were also made available on the Internet via GLSEN's website. Notices about the on-line survey were posted on LGBT community listservs and electronic bulletin boards, emailed to GLSEN chapters and to national LGBT organizations addressing family issues. A total of 588 surveys from parents with a child in K–12 school were obtained and 154 surveys from students in middle school or high school with an LGBT parent.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

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### ***Parental Involvement in School***

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Results from this study illustrate that LGBT parents are highly involved with their children's education and may be even more likely to be involved than the general population of parents. Compared to a national sample of K–12 parents, LGBT parents were more likely to have volunteered at their child's school (67% vs. 42%) and attended events such as Back-to-School night or parent-teacher conferences (94% vs. 77%). LGBT parents of high school students were more likely than a national sample of parents to be members of the school's parent-teacher organization (41% vs. 26%). In addition,

LGBT parents reported a higher level of contact with school personnel regarding their child's future education, school program and information about how to assist their child with specific skills and homework. For example, 68% of LGBT parents reported contacting their child's school about his or her school program for that year, compared to 38% of parents nationally.

LGBT parents were often proactive in addressing issues related to their family constellation. Almost half (48%) of parents reported that at the start of the school year they had talked with school personnel about their family. About two-thirds (67%) of parents reported that they had spoken with teachers at their child's school about being an LGBT parent and 45% had such discussions with the principal during the school year. In addition to communication with school personnel, a majority (56%) of LGBT parents reported having discussions with their child about what he or she was learning in school related to LGBT people.

## **Experiences of Students and Parents in the School Community**

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### ***Biased Language in School***

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Hearing biased language at school is an important indicator of the nature and quality of a school's environment for students. Sexist remarks (e.g., hearing someone called a "bitch" in a derogatory way) and homophobic remarks were the most frequent types of biased language that students reported hearing at school. Almost three-quarters (72%) of students reported hearing sexist remarks "often" or "frequently" at school. Three-quarters of students heard the expressions "that's so gay" or "you're so gay" frequently in school, and 65% heard blatantly derogatory homophobic remarks, such as "faggot" or "dyke." A smaller number of students (17%) reported hearing negative remarks specifically about their family and having an LGBT parent.

Unfortunately, intervention by school personnel when biased remarks were made in their presence was not common—only 38% of students said that staff frequently intervened when hearing negative remarks about LGBT parents and less than a third (28%) reported frequent staff intervention with homophobic remarks. Even more disturbing, school staff were identified by some students as being perpetrators of derogatory remarks—49% heard sexist remarks and 39% heard homophobic remarks from teachers or other school staff in their schools.

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### ***Student Experiences of Harassment, Assault and Other Mistreatment in School***

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For many students with LGBT parents, school is not a very safe environment. Half (51%) of all students in our study reported feeling

unsafe in school because of a personal characteristic, such as their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender, or race/ethnicity. The most commonly reported reasons for feeling unsafe were because of their family constellation, i.e., having LGBT parents (23%) and because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation (21%).

Although most students in our study did not report being victimized in school, a not insignificant number reported that they had been verbally harassed in school because of their family (40%). In addition to experiencing harassment based on having LGBT parents, some students from LGBT families also experienced difficulties in terms of their peers' assumptions or perceptions about their own sexual orientation, that is they were presumed to be gay or lesbian simply because they had a parent who was LGBT. Although the vast majority of students in the study identified as heterosexual, 38% reported being verbally harassed in school because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation.

Mistreatment did not always come from other students but also from adult members of the school community. Nearly a quarter of students had been mistreated by or received negative comments from the parents of other students specifically because they had an LGBT parent (23% for both).

A small percentage of students reported being directly mistreated by or receiving negative comments from a teacher because of their family (11% and 15%, respectively). However, many students with LGBT parents may experience more subtle forms of exclusion from their school. More than a quarter (30%) of students in our study reported feeling that they could not fully participate in school specifically because they had an LGBT parent, and 36% felt that school personnel did not acknowledge that they were from an LGBT family (e.g., not permitting one parent to sign a school form because he or she was not the student's legal parent or guardian). In addition, about a fifth of students reported that they had been discouraged from talking about their parents or family at school by a teacher, principal or other school staff person (22%) and felt excluded from classroom activities because they had an LGBT parent (20%). For example, some students described incidents in which representations of LGBT families were not included in class activities, such as when constructing a family tree.

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### ***Reporting Incidents of Harassment and Assault***

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Most students did not tell school authorities when they experienced harassment and assault in school. Less than half (48%) of students who had experienced harassment or assault in school said that they ever reported the incident to a teacher or other school staff. Students were more likely to report incidents to family members—66% of students who experienced school-based victimization told their parent or guardian about the incident, and 43% told another family member. Among LGBT parents, over half (58%) reported that their child had

ever told them about being harassed in school for any reason, and 28% had been told about harassment that was specific to their family constellation. The majority of parents also reported that they intervened with school personnel after having learned about harassment their child experienced.

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### ***Parent Experiences of Harassment, Exclusion and Discrimination***

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Parents were asked whether they had experienced any mistreatment or heard negative comments from various members of the school community: teachers, principals, other school staff, other parents at school and students at school. Overall, parents in the survey reported a relatively low incidence of negative experiences from school personnel. However, LGBT parents were more likely to report that they had been mistreated by other parents at school (26%). In addition, a fifth (21%) reported hearing negative comments about being LGBT from other students at their child's school.

As we found with students, LGBT parents had at times experienced more indirect ways of exclusion from their children's schools. Almost a fifth of parents reported that they felt that school personnel failed to acknowledge their type of family (15%) or felt that they could not fully participate in their child's school community because they were an LGBT parent (16%). Parents described events in which they were excluded from the school community, subjected to hostile behaviors from school staff and other parents, having to deal with general discomfort and ignorance, or having their parenting skills called into questions because they were LGBT.

Results from the survey of parents demonstrated how feeling excluded from the school community might have negative implications for the quality of the family-school relationship. Parents who felt that they could not fully participate in their child's school were much less likely than parents who did not feel excluded in this way to have been involved in a parent-teacher organization (44% vs. 63%), to volunteer at school (47% vs. 72%) and to belong to other community groups (e.g., neighborhood associations) with parents from their child's school (25% vs. 40%).

## **School-Related Resources and Support**

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### ***Access to Information about LGBT Families and Other LGBT-Related Topics***

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GLSEN asserts that curricula and other school-based resources that provide positive representations of LGBT people, history and events are important indicators of school climate and positively affect students' experiences at school. Unfortunately, less than a third of both students (27%) and parents (29%) reported that the school curriculum included representations of LGBT people, history or

events in the past school year. When asked specifically about the inclusion of representations of LGBT families in classroom activities, less than a third (31%) of all students said that representations of LGBT families were included when the topic of families came up during class activities.

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### ***Supportive Student Clubs***

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Student clubs that provide support to LGBT students, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), may also be a resource and source of support for youth from LGBT families. However, only about a third (34%) of the students in our study reported that their school had a GSA or other kind of student club that provided support to LGBT students and their allies.

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### ***Supportive Members of the School Community***

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For students, having a supportive adult at school can benefit their academic experience and may be particularly important for those who receive negative reactions from other members of the school community because of their family. For LGBT parents, as with any parents, positive family-school communication is also beneficial for the child's educational attainment. The vast majority (87%) of students reported that they had at least one teacher or other school staff member who was supportive of LGBT issues, such as students with LGBT parents, and more than half (55%) said they had six or more supportive school staff people. The majority of LGBT parents also reported that there were at least a few supportive teachers or school staff at their child's school (67%).

The presence of supportive school staff was, in fact, related to students' academic achievement. For example, students in our survey who could identify many (six or more) supportive staff at their school reported a GPA half a grade higher than students with no supportive school staff (3.4 versus 2.9). A greater number of supportive educators was also related to fewer missed days of school due to safety concerns.

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### ***Training for School Personnel***

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Another consideration for LGBT parents in assessing their child's school climate would be whether school personnel had had any training on LGBT issues. Parents were asked whether such trainings had occurred at their child's school, and few parents (10%) reported being aware that school personnel had any training on LGBT issues. However, LGBT parents who said their child's school had trainings on LGBT-related issues for school personnel were less likely than other parents to report that their child had been bullied or harassed in school, both in general (14% vs. 31%) and specifically related to their family (7% vs. 20%). In addition, parental reports of educator trainings were associated with a more positive response from school personnel when parents addressed their child's harassment. These parents

were also less likely to report that they themselves had experienced mistreatment in school related to being LGBT.

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### ***Safe School Policies***

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Comprehensive safe school policies that enumerate categories of protections, such as sexual orientation and gender identity/expression, may provide students with greater protection against bullying and harassment in that they offer explicit protections. Although three-quarters of parents (75%) and students (73%) reported that their school had some type of policy for dealing with incidents of harassment and assault, far fewer reported that the school's policy explicitly mentioned sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression (42% of parents and 35% of students).

Students whose school had a comprehensive safe school policy reported fewer negative experiences in school, particularly with regard to being mistreated by teachers and other students at school because of their family constellation. Parents who reported that their child's school had a comprehensive policy were more likely to report that addressing their child's harassment was an effective intervention (89%), compared to parents who said their child's school had a generic policy (72%) or no policy at all (62%). Parents themselves reported a lower frequency of mistreatment in school when the school had a comprehensive policy, and were less likely to feel unacknowledged as an LGBT family.

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### ***State-Level Comprehensive Safe School Legislation***

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A growing number of states across the country have added explicit protections for LGBT students in their state education anti-discrimination and harassment statutes. As with school-level policies, whereas such laws perhaps have primary importance for protecting students from bullying and harassment, they may also afford protection to the children of LGBT parents with regard to harassment related to their actual or perceived sexual orientation and harassment related to their family constellation. Currently, ten states plus the District of Columbia prohibit discrimination or harassment on the basis of sexual orientation in schools and four of these states also include protections on the basis of gender identity. State-level comprehensive safe school legislation was associated with better school climate for LGBT families. Students in these states were less likely than students in states with generic "anti-bullying" laws or no laws at all to hear certain types of biased language in school, such as homophobic remarks (73% versus 92% and 95%, respectively). Parents from states with comprehensive legislation were least likely to report not feeling acknowledged by the school community as an LGBT family and were most likely to report that the school was inclusive of LGBT families (9% versus 15% and 20%, respectively).

Results from this study provide no evidence that generic "anti-bullying" or safe school legislation has any benefits over having no

legislation on these indicators of climate. Although there may be many contributing factors that might result in differences across states by type of safe school legislation, these findings nevertheless lend evidence to the claim that comprehensive safe school laws may be more effective than generic laws or no law at all in creating safer schools for LGBT students and families.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Results from this survey highlight the experiences of LGBT parents and their children in K–12 schools, and the need for schools to understand school climate and school safety for both students with LGBT parents and LGBT parents themselves. Educational experts maintain that the family-school relationship is an important factor in academic success for the student. To the extent that certain parents are excluded or not welcome in school activities or are mistreated by school staff and other parents, they may feel that they have less access to school information or educational resources for their children or may not have the same rights to voice problems or concerns than other parents, which in turn, could have negative consequences for student academic performance. It is important for school personnel to understand that harassment of anyone in the school community, whether it be a student or a parent of a student, should not be tolerated. Furthermore, school personnel must consider that their responsibility for maintaining a safe environment for all members of the school community extends beyond students, teachers and staff.

The findings from the survey remind us that school climate is much more than a safety issue; it is also an issue of a student's right to an education. Students in our survey who experienced frequent harassment in school reported skipping classes and missing more days of school than other students. Thus, steps that schools take to improve school climate are also an investment in better educational outcomes. Results from this study also highlight the important role that institutional supports can play in making schools safer for these students, especially supportive faculty, school personnel trainings and comprehensive safe school policies.

It is clear that there is an urgent need for action to create a safer school climate for all students. There are steps that all concerned stakeholders can take to remedy the situation. Results from this study illustrate the ways in which the presence of effective legislation or policy and in-school resources and supports can have positive effects on school climate, students' sense of safety, and, ultimately, on students' academic achievement and educational aspirations. Furthermore, these results show how such school resources also enhance the family-school relationship, which in turn could further benefit student achievement. Therefore, we recommend educators and education leaders and policymakers:

- Advocate for comprehensive anti-bullying and anti-discrimination legislation at the state and federal level that specifically enumerate sexual orientation and gender identity/expression as protected categories alongside others such as race, faith and age;
- Adopt and implement comprehensive anti-bullying policies in individual schools and districts, with clear and effective systems for reporting and addressing incidents that students experience;
- Provide training for school staff to improve rates of intervention regarding bullying and harassment and increase the number of supportive faculty and staff available to students;
- Include multicultural diversity training into professional development that includes information about LGBT families;
- Support student clubs, such as GSAs, that address LGBT issues in education; and
- Increase student access to appropriate and accurate information regarding LGBT people, history and events.

Parent-teacher associations must also acknowledge the diversity of their school communities and take steps to ensure that no one experiences mistreatment—students and parents alike. Thus, we advocate that they:

- Endorse policies and practices about appropriate and acceptable conduct for parents at school, and
- Offer educational programs for parents in the school community that include information about LGBT families.