



From Teasing to Torment: A Report on School Climate in Illinois



A Report from GLSEN's Research Department

From Teasing to Torment: A Report on School Climate in Illinois

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When referencing this document, we recommend the following citation:
GLSEN (2006). *From Teasing To Torment: A Report on School Climate in Illinois*.
New York: GLSEN.

The **Gay, Lesbian and Straight Education Network** is the leading national education organization focused on ensuring safe schools for all lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students. Established nationally in 1995, GLSEN envisions a world in which every child learns to respect and accept all people, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity/expression.

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KEY FINDINGS

Biased language was both commonly heard and pervasive in Illinois schools.

- A vast majority of Illinois students reported hearing homophobic remarks such as “faggot” or “dyke” (74%), or the expressions “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay” (83%) from other students in school.
- Over a third (36%) of students who reported hearing homophobic remarks said that they heard them from most or all of the students at their school.
- Sexist remarks and negative comments about someone’s gender expression (e.g., saying a male student acts “too feminine”) were also commonly heard – 81% of students heard sexist remarks and 59% heard remarks regarding gender expression.
- While less frequent, Illinois students also reported hearing racist (44%) and negative religious (19%) remarks at school.
- Intervention by school personnel when hearing students use biased language was not universal. Many Illinois students reported that teachers and other school staff rarely or never intervened when homophobic, racist or sexist remarks were made in their presence (48%, 30% and 29%, respectively).
- Students heard biased language from teachers or other school personnel as well – about a fifth (19%) reported hearing school staff make sexist remarks, 12% racist remarks, 11% homophobic remarks and 7% reported hearing negative religious remarks.

Bullying, name-calling, and harassment were serious problems in Illinois schools.

- Over a third (38%) of Illinois students said that bullying, name-calling and harassment were serious problems in their schools.
- Students reported that physical appearance, sexual orientation and gender expression were the most common reasons other students at their school were bullied or harassed. A substantial percentage of students reported that their peers were frequently bullied or harassed because of their physical appearance (40%), sexual orientation (35%), or gender expression (34%).

Many Illinois students did not feel safe in their schools. Experiences of verbal and physical harassment and assault often went unreported.

- Only half (52%) of Illinois students reported that they felt very safe in their schools.
- Over a third (37%) of the students reported that they felt unsafe in school because of one or more personal characteristics, such as their physical appearance or sexual orientation.
- Half (52%) of Illinois students reported that they had been verbally harassed and nearly a quarter (23%) of students reported that they had been physically harassed or assaulted in school in the past year.
- The majority (59%) of students who experienced harassment and assault at school never reported the incidents to a teacher, principal or other school staff.

LGBT students lacked access to resources and supports.

- Less than a quarter (22%) of Illinois students reported that their school had a GSA or other type of student club addressing LGBT student issues.
- Less than half (45%) of Illinois students reported that they were protected by a school anti-harassment policy that specifically mentioned sexual orientation or

gender identity/expression. Almost a third did not know if their school had a policy of any kind.

- Students in schools with GSAs or other supportive clubs reported that teachers and other school staff intervened more often when homophobic remarks were made than students in schools without such clubs.
- The frequency of biased remarks such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay” as well as negative remarks about nontraditional gender expressions was higher at schools without comprehensive anti-harassment policies. For example, 75% of students at schools without comprehensive policies reported that they heard homophobic remarks often or very often from other students, versus 54% of students at schools with comprehensive policies.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Illinois teachers and other school staff need training to address the inconsistency in their responses when hearing students make derogatory remarks and when learning of incidents of harassment and assault in school. In addition, schools should establish and enforce “no tolerance” policies regarding the use of biased language by school staff.
- Given that less than half of Illinois students reported being protected by comprehensive anti-harassment policies in their schools, state-level school legislation that provides specific enumerated categories, such as sexual orientation and gender identity, must be adopted.
- School staff and administrators must ensure that students are made fully aware of any anti-harassment protections provided by their school.

INTRODUCTION

In 2003, GLSEN conducted its third national survey of LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender) youth—the 2003 National School Climate Survey (NSCS), the only national survey to document the experiences of LGBT youth in school. Results from this survey revealed that school can be an unsafe and hostile environment for many students, particularly those who are LGBT. Name-calling, harassment and bullying, as well as the use of derogatory language by students were common occurrences in our nation’s schools and were often not properly addressed by teachers and other school staff.¹ Given the limited attention paid by federal, state and local policy makers to LGBT youth, and because GLSEN’s work to make all schools safe for LGBT students is on-going, it is important to keep informed about the experiences of LGBT students in their schools. Understanding the experiences of the general school population, regardless of sexual orientation or gender identity, is key to meeting this challenge. GLSEN hoped to broaden the scope of its research by documenting the attitudes and experiences of all students in secondary school, particularly their attitudes toward and experiences with anti-LGBT behavior at school. For this reason, GLSEN commissioned Harris Interactive to conduct a national survey of secondary school students and teachers. Topics covered in the survey included exposure to biased language, the frequency of bullying, name-calling and harassment, and students’ personal experiences with harassment and assault at school. The full report from this study, *From Teasing to Torment: School Climate in America*, also includes results from a national survey of secondary school teachers, and can be found on GLSEN’s website (www.glsen.org). The following is a report of findings based on the responses of youth who were attending schools in Illinois at the time of the survey. Data collection and analysis of the national survey of students and teachers was conducted by Harris Interactive. Analysis of state oversampled data in this report was conducted by GLSEN’s Research Department.

RESULTS

A total of 216 respondents were attending schools in Illinois at the time of the survey. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, more than half of the students were white, male, and most were in high school. Nine percent of students in Illinois identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual or transgender (LGBT).² The vast majority of respondents attended public schools. Of the 11% who reported attending private schools, nearly all were in religious-affiliated schools (see Table 2).

Biased Language in School

Biased Language from Students

Hearing derogatory remarks about oneself or others contributes to a hostile school environment for students. Thus, it is important to examine the frequency and pervasiveness of biased language in school. Students were asked how often they heard homophobic, racist, sexist and religiously-biased remarks from other students. Homophobic and sexist remarks were the two most commonly reported types of biased language in Illinois schools and were heard significantly more often than racist or negative religious remarks.

¹ Kosciw, J. G. (2004). *The 2003 National School Climate Survey: The school-related experiences of our nation’s lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth*. New York: GLSEN.

² The category “LGBT” also includes respondents who identified their sexual orientation as “other.”

Table 1: Demographics of Illinois Participants

Gender

Female	43%
Male	57%

Race

White	61%
Black/African American	16%
Latino/a	18%
Asian/Pacific Islander	4%
Native American/Alaskan Native	<1%
Mixed racial background	1%

LGBT Status

Non-LGBT	91%
LGBT	9%

Grade

7th Grade	5%
8th Grade	12%
9th Grade	24%
10th Grade	20%
11th Grade	19%
12th Grade	20%

Average Age = 15.3 years

Table 2: School Characteristics

Grade Levels

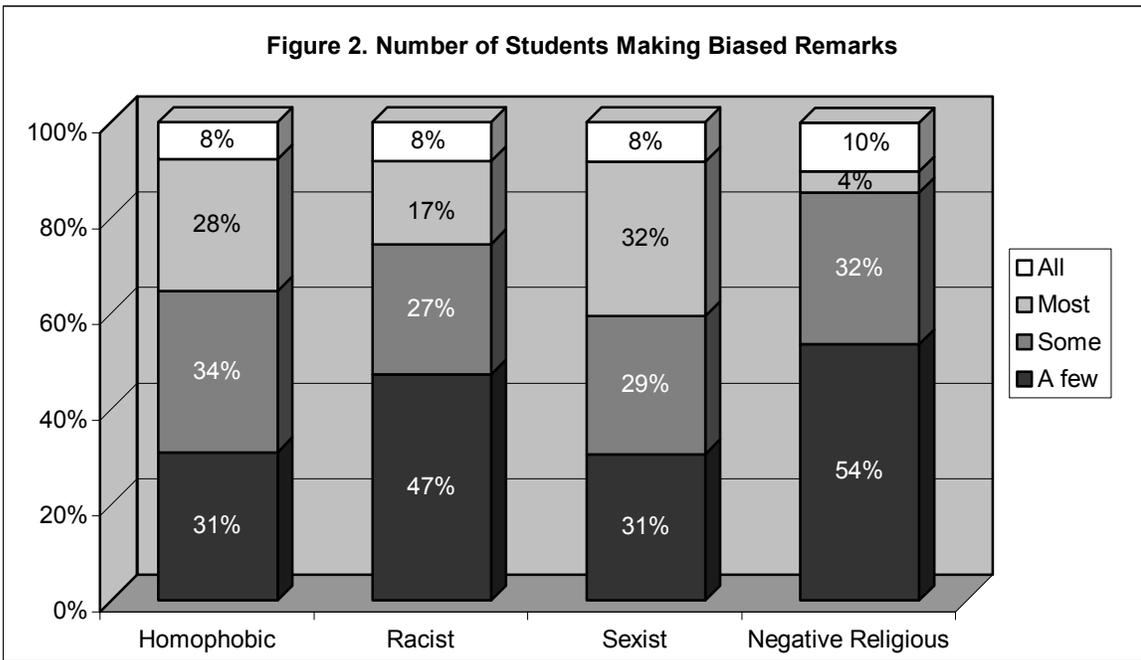
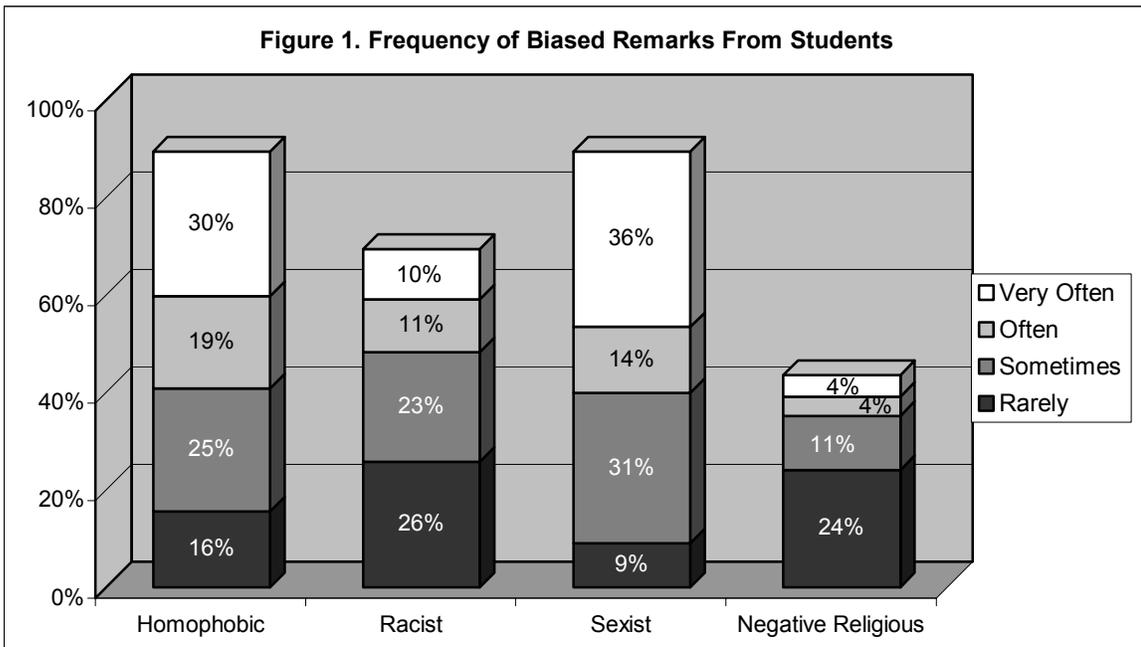
K through 12 school	2%
Lower school (elementary & middle school grades)	<1%
Middle school	17%
Upper school (middle & high school grades)	<1%
High School	81%

Location

Urban area	29%
Suburban area	56%
Small town or rural area	15%

School Type

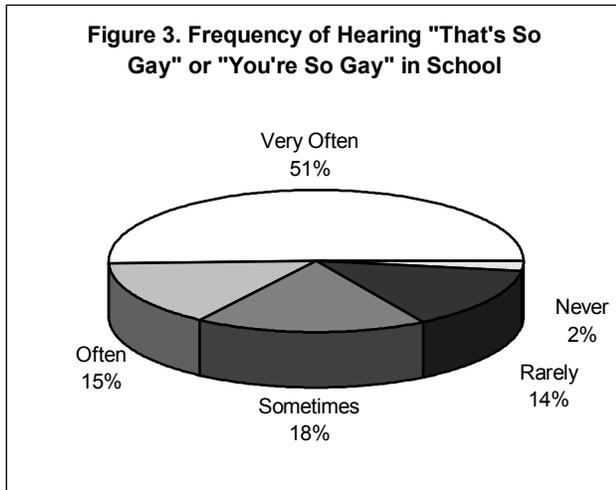
Public school	89%
Private or parochial school	11%
<i>Religious-affiliated</i>	99%
<i>Not religious-affiliated</i>	1%



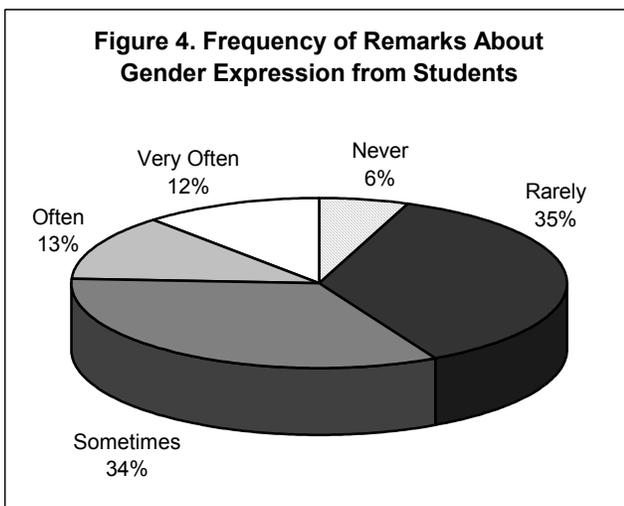
Homophobic Remarks

Homophobic remarks such as “faggot”, “dyke”, or “queer” were pervasive in Illinois schools. As Figure 1 illustrates, approximately three-fourths (74%) of students reported that they heard homophobic remarks from other students at least some of the time and about half (49%) said that they heard such remarks often or very often. Use of such language was

not limited to a few students – 36% of respondents who reported hearing homophobic remarks said that they heard them from most or all of the students in their school (see Figure 2).



An even larger number of Illinois students reported hearing homophobic expressions such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay” in which the word “gay” is used to mean that something or someone is “stupid” or valueless. As shown in Figure 3, 4 out of 5 students (83%) reported hearing these comments at school at least some of the time.



Negative Remarks about Gender Expression

Youth who do not express themselves in ways considered by others to be gender-appropriate must often contend with negative experiences, such as being called names and being harassed, particularly at school.³ Respondents were asked how often they had heard remarks about a person’s nontraditional gender expression, such as a male student acting too “feminine,” or a female student acting “too much like a boy.” Well over half (59%) of students reported hearing these remarks at least sometimes and a quarter (25%) heard such remarks even more frequently (see Figure 4).

Sexist Remarks

Sexist remarks, such as calling a girl a “bitch,” calling a boy a “girl” or statements that girls are not as capable as boys were also heard quite frequently in Illinois schools. As shown in Figure 1, 81% of students reported that they heard sexist language at least some of the time and half of respondents reported hearing these remarks often or very often. Additionally, 40% of the respondents who reported hearing sexist comments said that they heard them from most or all of the students at their school (see Figure 2).

³ Kosciw, J. G. (2004). *The 2003 National School Climate Survey: The school-related experiences of our nation’s lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender youth*. New York: GLSEN.

Racist Remarks

Although racist remarks were heard less frequently than homophobic or sexist remarks, they were not uncommon in Illinois schools. As Figure 1 illustrates, 44% of respondents reported hearing racist remarks from students at least some of the time, and about a fifth (21%) said they heard these remarks often or very often. Furthermore, a quarter (25%) of the respondents who reported hearing racist remarks said that they heard them from most or all of the students at their school (see Figure 2).

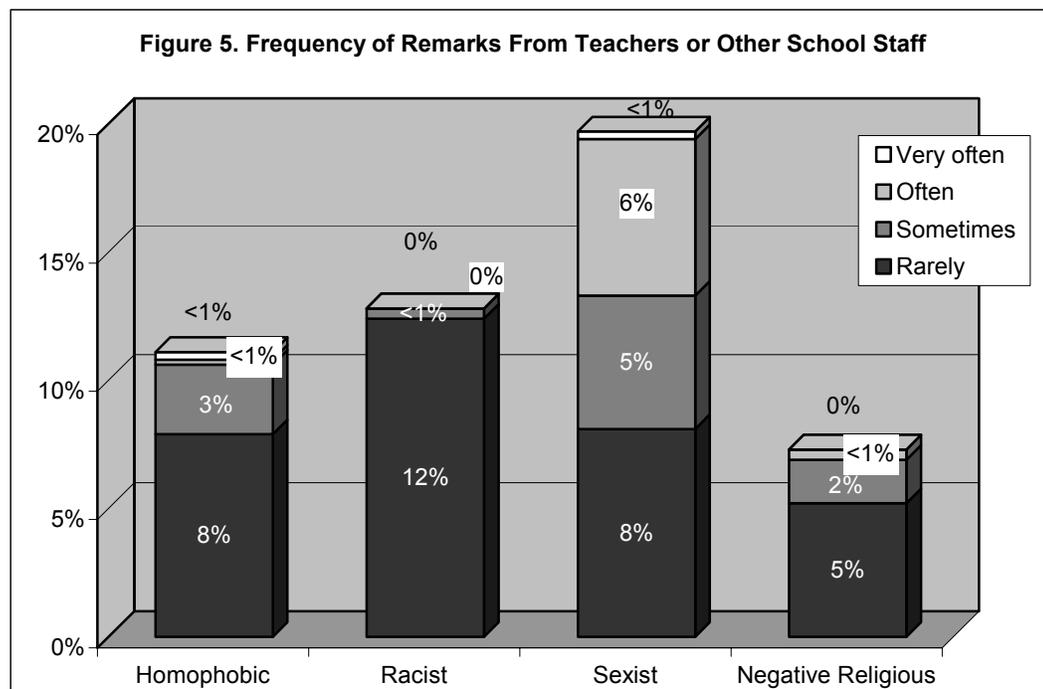
Negative Religious Remarks

Students reported hearing negative remarks about a person's religion least often. As shown in Figure 1, about a fifth (19%) of students reported hearing such remarks at least some of the time, and less than 10% heard them often or very often. Less than a fifth (14%) of Illinois students heard these remarks from most or all of their peers (see Figure 2).

Biased Language from Teachers and Other School Staff

Respondents were asked how often they heard homophobic, sexist, racist or negative religious remarks from teachers and other school staff. As shown in Figure 5, sexist remarks were the most frequently heard biased language – about a fifth (19%) of students reported hearing school personnel make sexist comments. A sizable percentage of students also reported hearing homophobic (11%), racist (12%), and negative religious (7%) remarks from school personnel. Although the incidence of these types of remarks from teachers and school staff was relatively low, it is troubling that any educators would make these types of remarks in school in front of students.

Hearing biased language from authority figures, such as a teacher or school principal, may send a message to students that use of such language in school is permissible. In fact, students who reported that they heard teachers or other school staff make homophobic, racist, sexist or negative religious remarks were more likely to report hearing other students

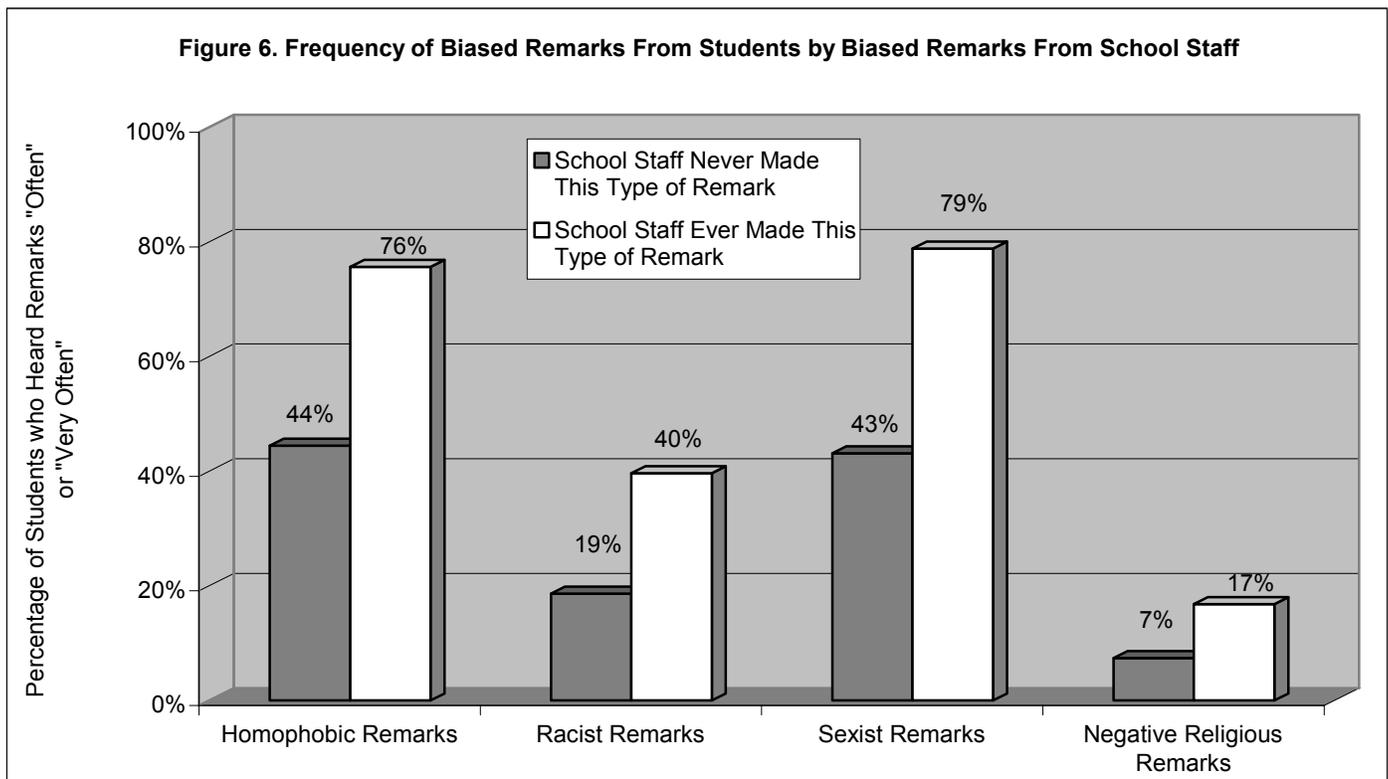


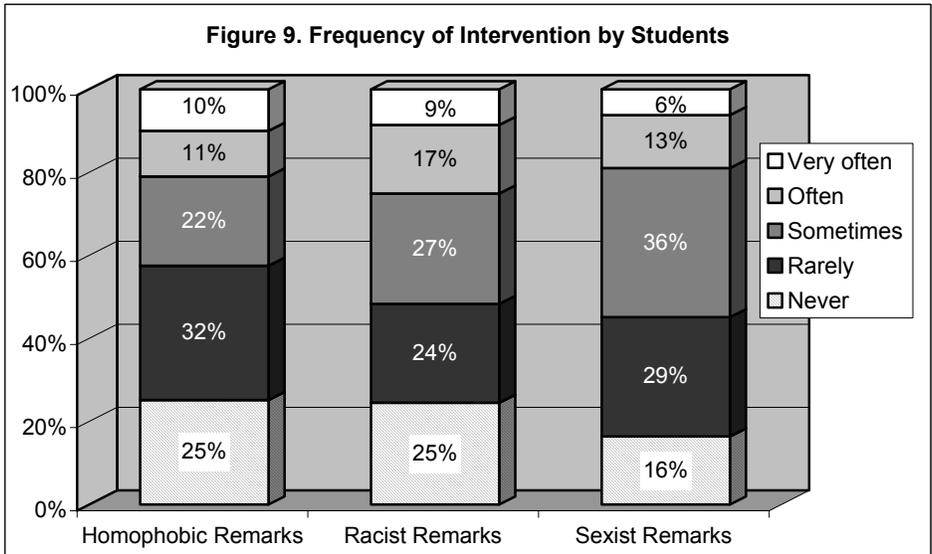
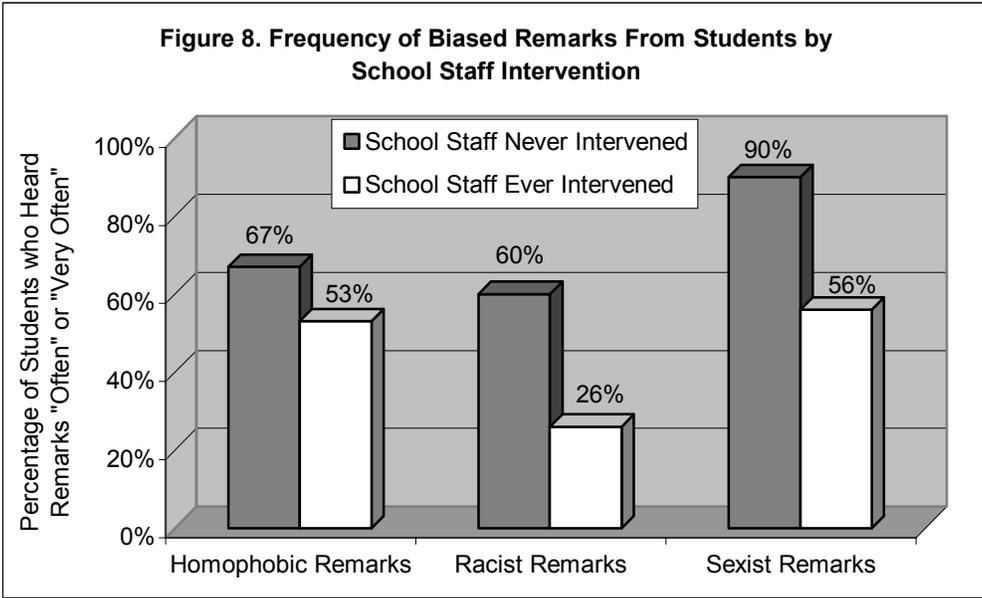
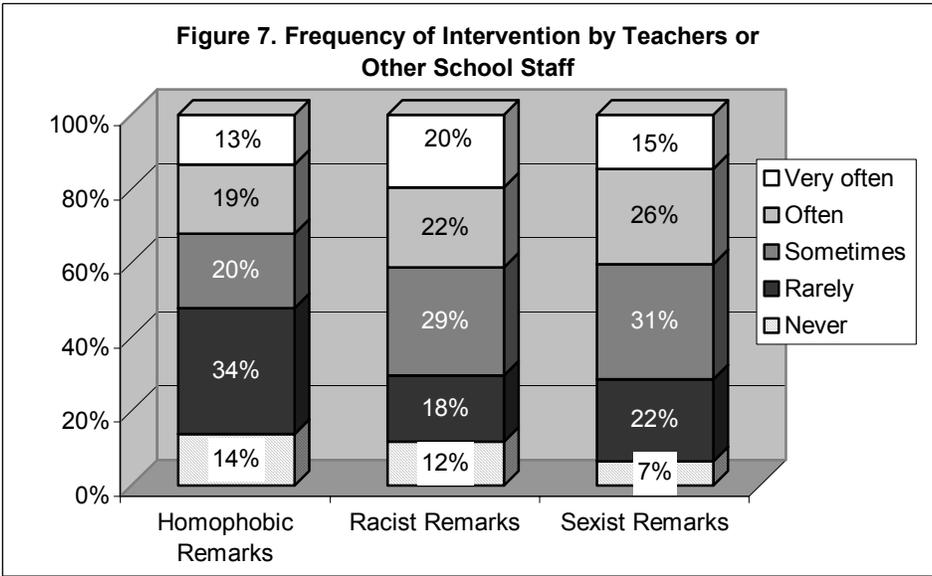
make these types of remarks as well. As shown in Figure 6, respondents who reported that school staff made homophobic remarks were more likely than respondents who said that school staff never made such remarks to report that their peers frequently (“often” or “very often”) made homophobic remarks at school (76% versus 44%). There were similar relationships with regard to racist, sexist and negative religious remarks made by school personnel.

Intervention Regarding Biased Remarks

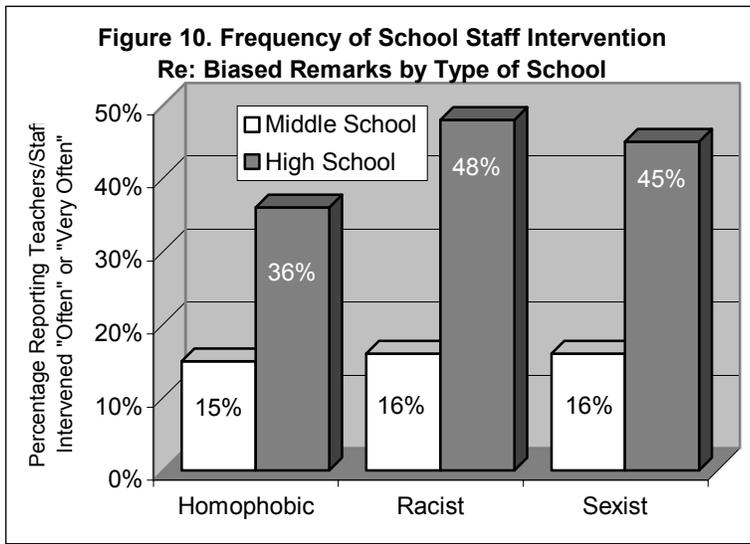
Respondents were asked how often teachers and other school staff corrected or criticized biased remarks made in school. Many students reported that school personnel did not intervene when hearing other students make homophobic, racist or sexist remarks in school. As shown in Figure 7, nearly half (48%) of Illinois respondents reported that teachers and other school staff rarely or never corrected or criticized homophobic remarks made in their presence. In addition, a substantial percentage of students also reported that school personnel rarely or never corrected racist (30%) or sexist (29%) remarks made in their presence.

The lack of intervention by school personnel in response to biased language may suggest to students that such language is not only tolerated but also acceptable in Illinois schools. In fact, as shown in Figure 8, students who reported that staff at their school intervened when hearing homophobic, racist and sexist remarks at school were less likely to report that students frequently made these kinds of biased remarks. For example, two-thirds (67%) of students who reported that teachers never intervened when homophobic remarks were made said that they heard homophobic remarks often or very often in their schools compared to only half (53%) of students who reported that their teacher had ever intervened. These findings suggest that school personnel may be able to combat the frequency of biased remarks if they consistently intervene when such remarks are made.





The degree to which students intervene when hearing derogatory language from their peers is another indicator of school climate. Students' own failure to intervene may be a reflection of a school environment in which use of such language is considered acceptable or one in which they do not feel comfortable challenging their peers' use of biased language. Thus, students were asked how often other students corrected or criticized biased remarks when they heard them at school. As shown in Figure 9, almost half of the respondents reported that other students rarely or never intervened in response to racist (49%) or sexist (45%) remarks. More than half (57%) reported that other students rarely or never intervened when homophobic remarks were made.

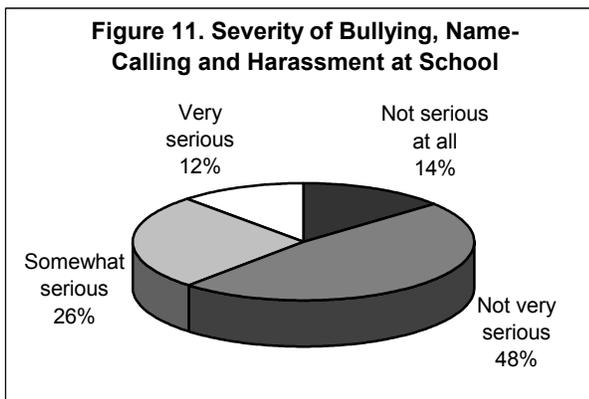


Although there were no differences in the frequency of biased remarks between middle schools and high schools in Illinois, there were differences in the reported frequency with which school personnel intervene in response to biased remarks. Specifically, students in high schools were more likely than students in middle schools to report that teachers and other school staff intervened frequently in response to homophobic, racist, and sexist remarks. As shown in Figure 10, while over a third (36%) of high school respondents reported that teachers and other school staff

intervened often or very often when students made homophobic remarks, only 14% of middle school students reported such frequency of intervention. In relation to racist remarks, about half (48%) of high school students reported frequent teacher and staff intervention compared to 15% of middle school students. Similarly, 44% of high school students reported that school personnel intervened frequently when hearing sexist remarks compared to 16% of middle school students. These findings indicate that middle school teachers and staff may seem more tolerant of biased remarks in the eyes of their students than high school teachers and staff in Illinois.

Severity of Bullying, Name-Calling, and Harassment in School

Although all students have the right to an education, many may not be able to exercise this right if schools do not provide a safe learning environment. Survey respondents were asked



about their perceptions of the severity of bullying, name-calling, and harassment at their schools. As shown in Figure 11, over a third (38%) of Illinois students reported that bullying, name-calling, and harassment were serious problems at their school.

Respondents were also asked about the frequency of witnessing other students being bullied, called names and harassed in school. Figure 12 shows that Illinois students were most frequently bullied, called names and harassed

Figure 12. Frequency of Bullying, Name-Calling and Harassment

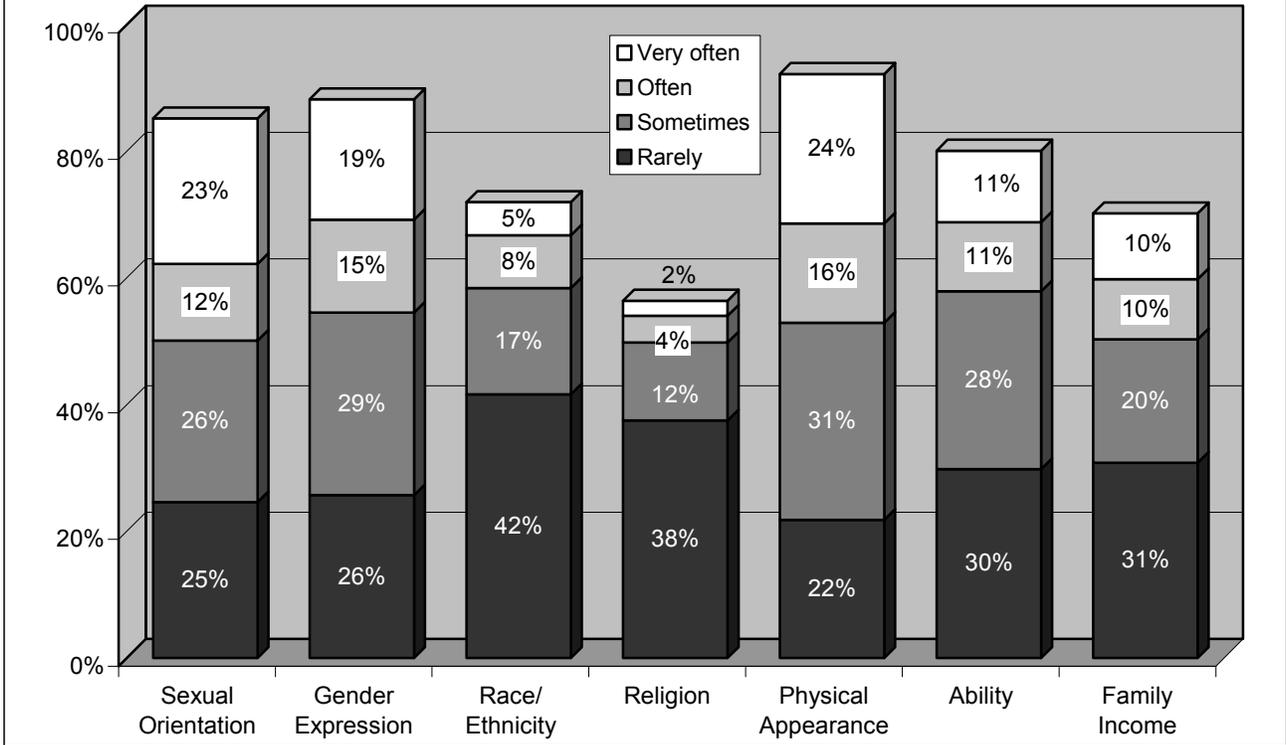
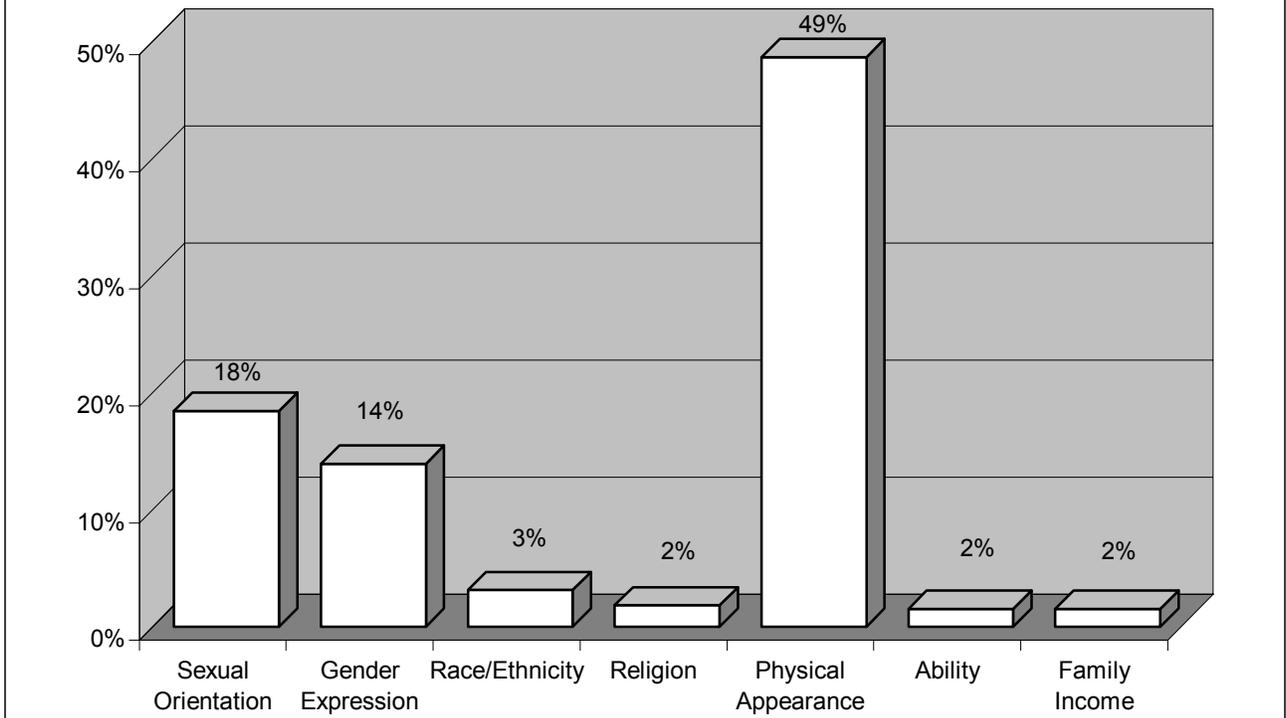


Figure 13. Reasons Students Were Most Often Bullied, Called Names and Harassed in School

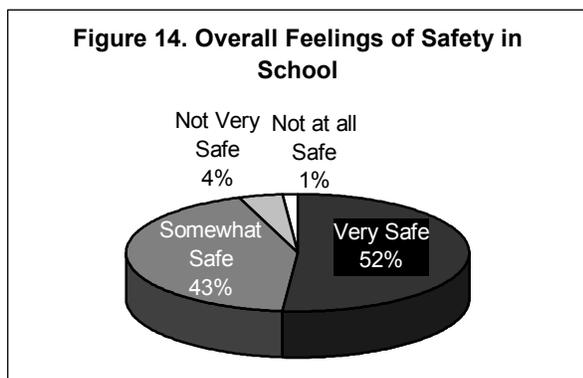


because of their actual or perceived sexual orientation, gender expression and physical appearance (looks or body size). A majority of respondents said that harassment occurred at least some of the time because of students' actual or perceived sexual orientation (61%), gender expression (63%), and physical appearance (71%). Moreover, a substantial percentage of students reported that these types of harassment occurred often or very often – 35% for sexual orientation, 34% for gender expression and 40% for physical appearance.

Although not as frequent, a sizeable percentage of respondents also reported that bullying, name-calling and harassment occurred at least some of the time because of academic ability (50%), family income (40%) and race or ethnicity (30%). Bullying and harassment based on one's religion was reported to occur least frequently.

Students were also asked which characteristic was most often targeted for bullying, name-calling and harassment. As shown in Figure 13, the largest number of respondents (49%) said that physical appearance was the most common characteristic, followed by actual or perceived sexual orientation (18%) and gender expression (14%). Few students in Illinois believed that race or ethnicity, religion, academic ability or family income were the most common reasons that students were bullied and harassed at their school.

Personal Experiences of Bullying, Name-Calling and Harassment



In addition to reporting the frequency of witnessing bullying, name-calling and harassment experienced by other students, respondents were also asked a range of questions regarding their personal safety in school and their own experiences of being verbally or physically harassed or physically assaulted in school. As shown in Figure 14, only half (52%) of Illinois students reported feeling very safe in their schools.

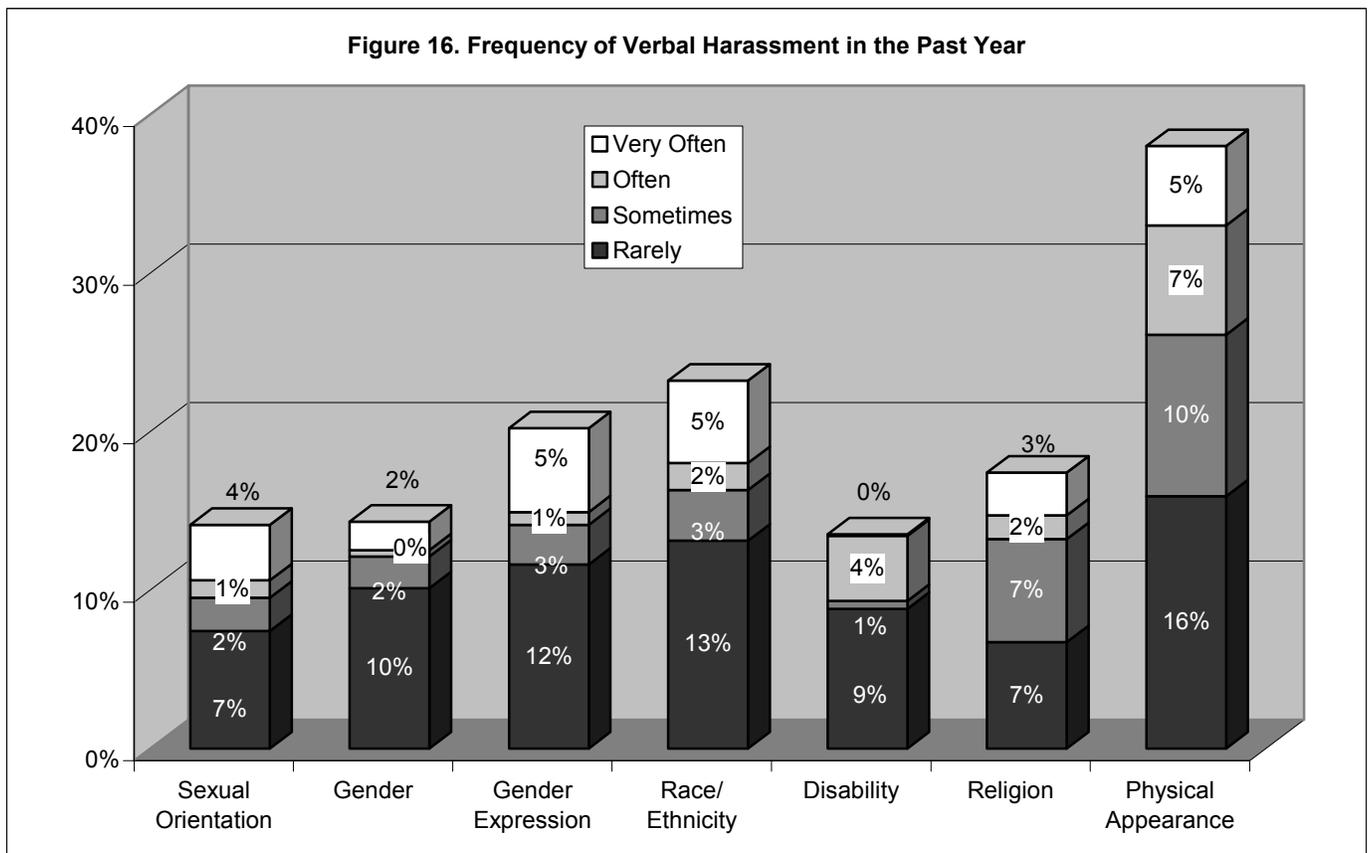
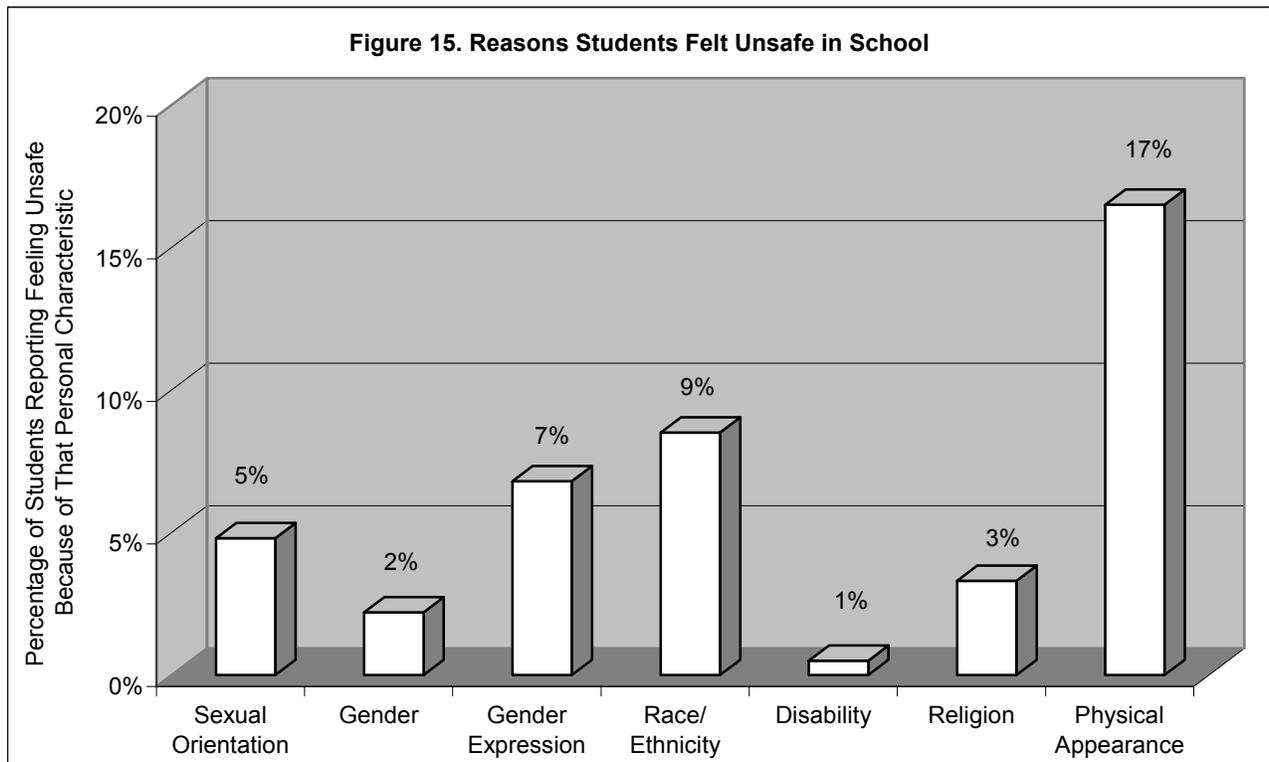
To further our understanding of why many students did not feel safe at school,

respondents were asked whether they felt unsafe because of one or more personal characteristics. Over a third (37%) stated that at least one personal characteristic made them feel unsafe. As Figure 15 illustrates, respondents most commonly reported feeling unsafe because of the way they looked or their body size (17%). Race or ethnicity was the second most common reason given by respondents for feeling unsafe – nearly a tenth (9%) reported feeling unsafe for this reason. Five percent of respondents reported that their actual or perceived sexual orientation made them feel unsafe at school, and 7% felt unsafe because of their gender expression.

Verbal Harassment

Survey respondents were asked how often they had personally been verbally harassed (e.g., called names or threatened) at school in the past year. About half (52%) of the respondents reported that they were verbally harassed during the previous year. As shown in Figure 16, the most frequent type of verbal harassment was related to a student's physical appearance, with more than a third (38%) having experienced this type of harassment at some time in the past school year. A fifth or more students also reported

being the target of verbal harassment based on their race or ethnicity (23%), gender expression (21%) or religion (19%). These results indicate that verbal harassment of all types is a problem for Illinois schools.

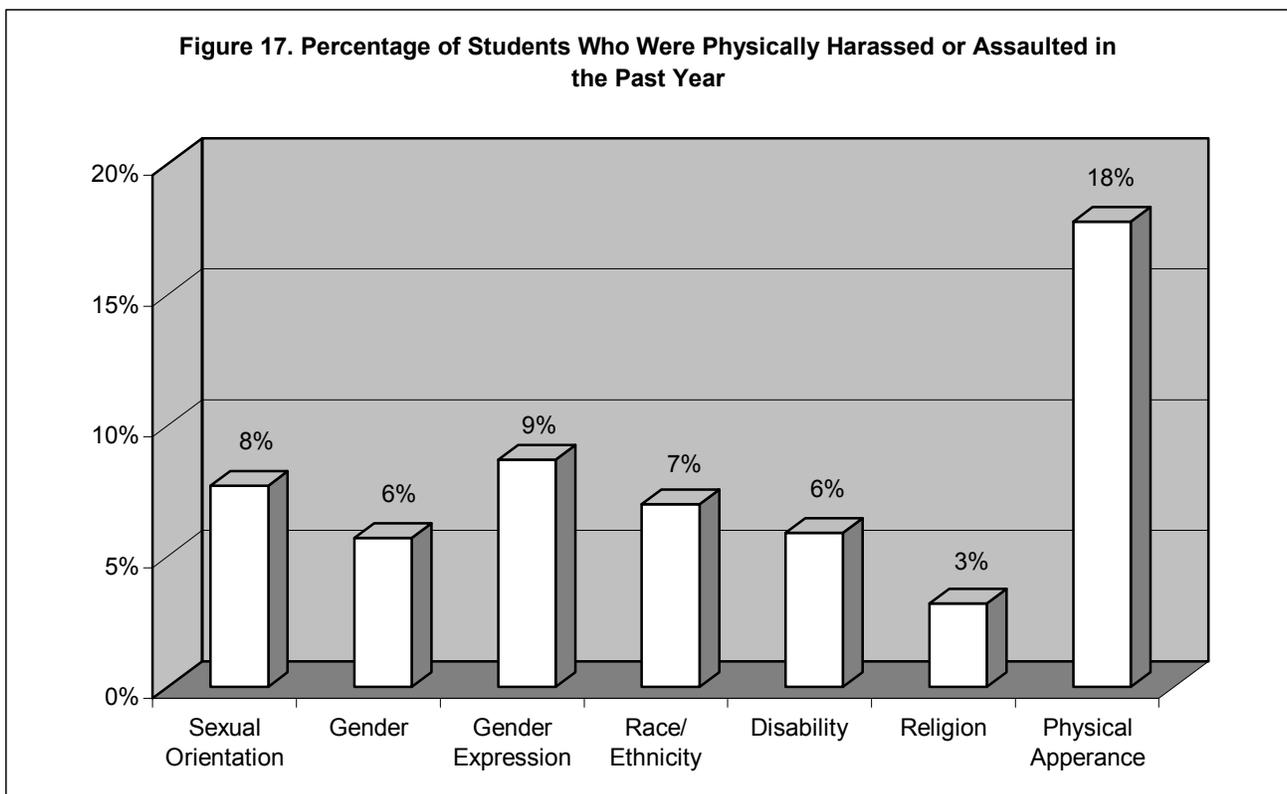


Physical Harassment and Assault

Survey respondents were also asked if they had been physically harassed (e.g., pushed or shoved) or assaulted (e.g., punched, kicked, or injured with a weapon) at school in the past year. Given the extreme nature of these forms of harassment, it is not surprising that both physical harassment and physical assault were reported to occur less frequently than verbal harassment. Nevertheless, such behaviors were not uncommon in Illinois schools. Nearly a quarter (23%) of students reported that they had been physically harassed or assaulted in the previous year. As shown in Figure 17, physical appearance was the most commonly reported reason for physical harassment or assault (18%).⁴ Respondents also reported experiences with physical harassment and assault on the basis of their gender expression (9%), sexual orientation (8%), race or ethnicity (7%), gender (6%), disability (6%) and religion (3%). Given the severity of these types of victimization, any occurrence of physical harassment or assault in school is unacceptable.

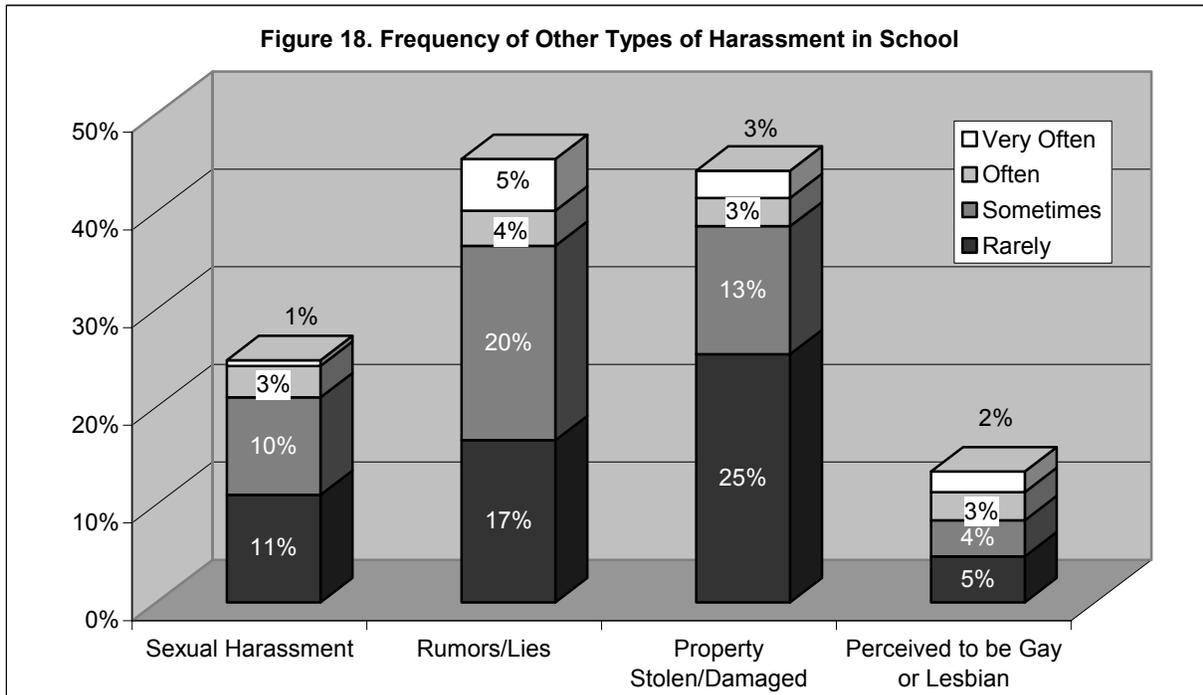
Other Forms of Harassment

Figure 18 illustrates other forms of bullying and harassment that students may experience in school.⁵ Of these types of harassment, students most frequently reported being the target of mean rumors or lies with almost half (46%) of the students reporting that it had occurred in the past year. Forty-four percent of students reported that their personal



⁴ Given the low incidence of physical harassment and assault, Figure 17 represents only whether students ever experienced the particular event, i.e., those who reported “rarely,” “sometimes,” “often” or “very often.”

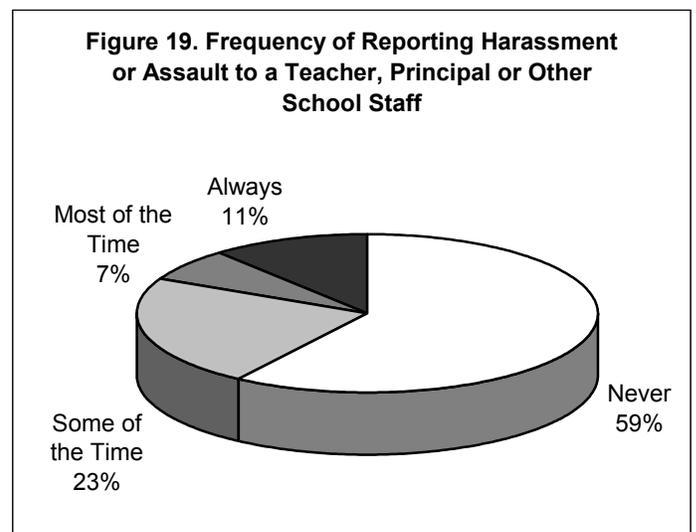
⁵ Unlike the previously discussed frequencies of verbal harassment and physical harassment or assault, students were not asked whether these types of harassment were specifically related to a personal characteristic. For example, students may be the target of mean rumors or lies because of their sexual orientation or religion or for no apparent reason.



property had been deliberately damaged or stolen at school. Fourteen percent of students reported that they had been harassed at school because others thought they were gay or lesbian. One-fourth (25%) of students also reported that they had been sexually harassed (e.g., someone touched their body without their permission).

Reporting Incidents of Harassment

Incidents of harassment or assault often went unreported to school personnel. Among Illinois students who experienced any form of verbal or physical harassment or assault, the majority (59%) said that they never reported the incident(s) to a teacher, principal or other school staff member (see Figure 19). Middle school students were even less likely to report an incident of harassment or assault than high school students – 64% of middle school students never reported an incident of harassment or assault compared to 43% of high school students.



Respondents who did not report the incident were asked why they had not done so. Nearly a tenth (8%) believed that reporting incidents would worsen the situation in some way:

It would have been all over the school and other students would have been mad at me for making a big deal about it.

I've found that in the past, telling a teacher will not solve the problem. Often, it just makes it worse, because in addition to other labels I have 'tattletale' to deal with.

Another student, an 11th grader, believed that reporting would cause the situation to escalate:

Usually it's completely useless as very few people are disciplined for it...if I were to get them in trouble, they might start a confrontation and I would have to hurt them. That would end up worse for both of us (especially them) than if nothing had happened.

A number of respondents (8%) did not report incidents because they felt that nothing would be done to address the problem. For example, one 12th grade student reported: "because my staff are not going to do anything good about it, but they will make it worse for me."

About half (52%) of respondents who had been harassed or assaulted at school said that they did not report incidents because they felt that it was "not a big deal" or serious enough to report, and 11% said that they addressed the situation themselves. For some students, it may be that the events were truly minor. For example, a 12th grade student did not tell school personnel because she felt that "it wasn't that big of deal, it was a disagreement between friends." However, some students may not report harassment or assault to school personnel because they have a high tolerance for harassment or they feel that it is not worth it because it will not prevent such events from occurring again:

It doesn't hurt for too long after being teased. No reason being a bother for someone who is bothersome.

It did not seem serious enough to bother and the report would most likely not lead to anything, given the knowledge I have of reports made in the past.

For many respondents, reporting incidents of harassment or assault to faculty or other school staff did not elicit a helpful response. Less than half (44%) of respondents who reported harassment to school personnel said that some sort of immediate action was taken (e.g., the perpetrator was talked to or suspended) to correct the situation or ensure that it would not occur again:

They never did anything about it, no matter how many times you tell the teachers or the principal.

Nothing at first, until I said I was going to the police and then suddenly they were going to take care of it and get the boy suspended.

These comments from students suggest that Illinois schools need to find more effective ways of addressing incidents of harassment and assault. Because students do not often report harassment to school staff, school staff may not be fully informed as to the dangers their students face in school. Yet students may not increase their level of reporting until they see that teachers and other staff consistently address these problems when they arise. In order to break this cycle, schools must take the first step by implementing effective school policies around safety issues and trainings for school personnel on how to address incidents of harassment and assault.

School Climate and Academic Indicators

Students' school attendance, level of engagement and educational aspirations may be affected by the frequency of negative experiences such as harassment or feeling unsafe at school. When asked about their school attendance, 7% of respondents had missed at least one day of school in the past month because they felt unsafe at school or going to or from school, and 6% had skipped a class at least one time due to safety concerns. Over a tenth (12%) of respondents also reported that they had friends who had skipped class in the past month because they felt unsafe and about a fifth (21%) had friends who missed an entire day of school for this reason.

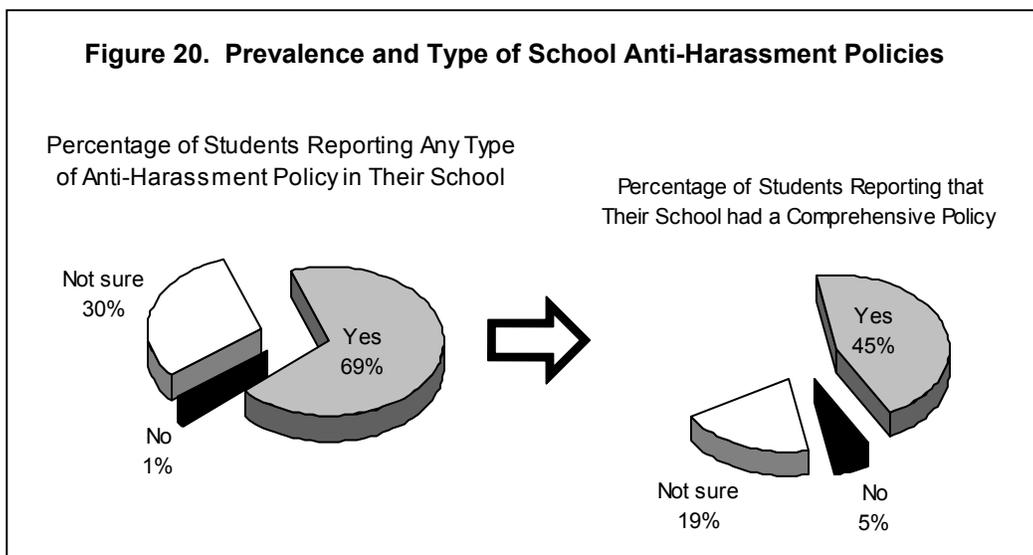
Students who felt safe at school were six times more likely to report that they liked school than other students (61% vs. 10%). Students who felt safe at school were also more likely to have college plans than those who reported feeling unsafe at school (86% vs. 64%).

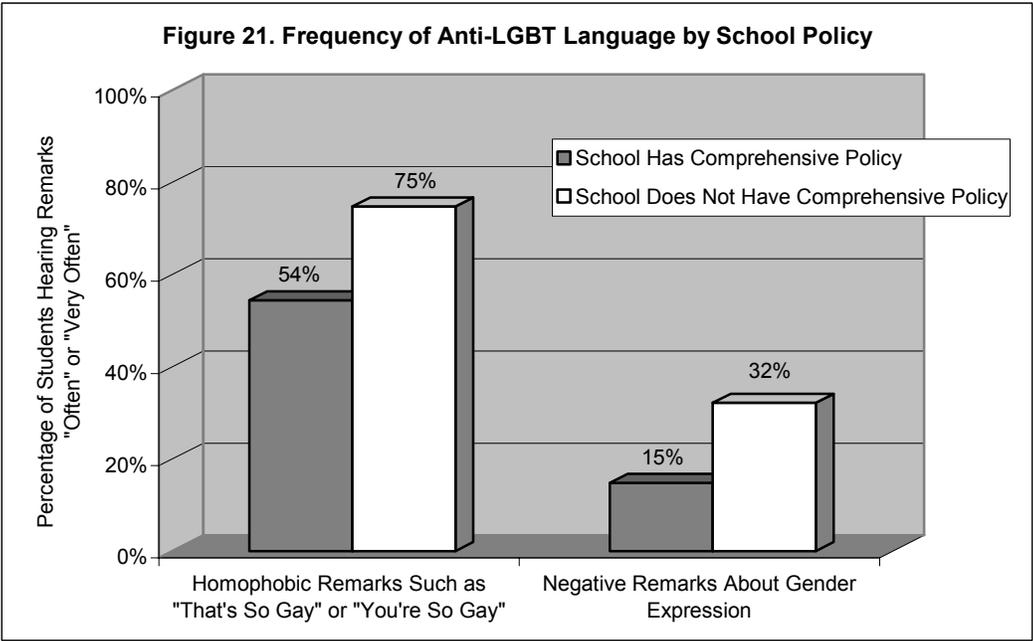
LGBT Resources and Supports in Schools

School Anti-Harassment Policies

Given the high frequency of homophobic remarks, bullying, and harassment, it is essential for LGBT students to have resources and supports in schools that they can access. One potentially important source of support is the existence of safe school policies for reporting incidents of harassment and assault that provide explicit protection for LGBT students by specifically mentioning sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. As shown in Figure 20, the majority (69%) of respondents believed that their school had some type of safe school policy. Two-thirds (66%) of those respondents also believed that their school's policy specifically mentioned sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression. Thus, less than half (45%) of all Illinois respondents reported that they were protected by a comprehensive safe school policy – a policy that enumerated sexual orientation and/or gender identity/expression as protected categories.

It is important to note that almost a third of all respondents were unsure whether or not their school had any type of policy (see Figure 20). While it is possible that these students were not aware of a policy because one did not exist, it is also possible that the students were not informed about existing policies and that Illinois schools need to do a more comprehensive job of informing their students.



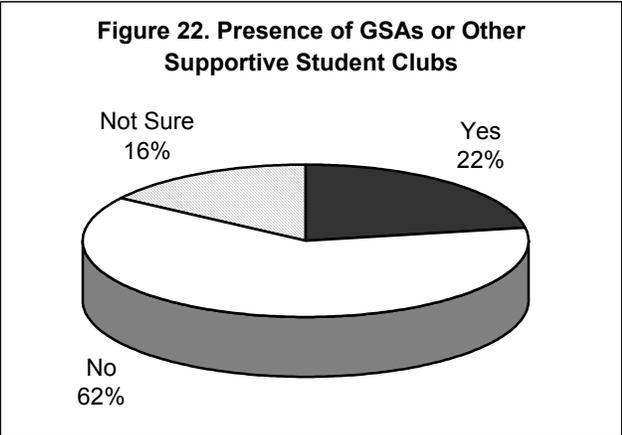


As Figure 21 illustrates, the reported frequencies of homophobic remarks such as “that’s so gay” or “you’re so gay” as well as negative remarks about nontraditional gender expression were higher at schools without comprehensive policies. Three quarters (75%) of respondents from schools without comprehensive policies reported that they heard homophobic remarks often or very often from other students, versus 54% of respondents from schools with comprehensive policies. About a third (32%) of respondents who attended schools without comprehensive policies reported that they heard biased remarks about gender expression often or very often from other students, versus 15% of respondents from schools with comprehensive policies. These findings suggest that anti-harassment policies that explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity/expression may help lower the frequency of biased remarks in schools.

Supportive Student Clubs

Supportive school clubs that address LGBT student issues, such as Gay-Straight Alliances (GSAs), are another potentially important source of support for LGBT students in particular. Unfortunately, less than a quarter (22%) of respondents reported that their school had this

type of resource for LGBT students (see Figure 22).



Having a student club that addressed LGBT issues was related to increased school staff intervention regarding homophobic remarks. Nearly half (45%) of respondents from schools with a supportive student club reported that teachers or other school staff intervened often or very often when homophobic remarks were made, whereas less than a third (27%) of respondents from schools without supportive clubs reported frequent intervention by school staff.

Summary and Recommendations

The results from this study indicate that issues of safety, bullying, name-calling, and harassment were serious for many students in Illinois. Biased language, especially homophobic and sexist remarks were commonly heard among students and often went uncorrected by teachers and other school staff. Biased language was even heard from some teachers and school staff. Respondents reported that students were frequently bullied and harassed because of their personal characteristics, especially their physical appearance, actual or perceived sexual orientation and nontraditional gender expression.

It is particularly disturbing that half of Illinois students reported that they had been verbally harassed in the previous year, and a quarter of students reported that they had been physically harassed or assaulted in the previous year. A majority of students did not report the incidents to a teacher, principal or other school staff.

The results of this study indicate that much work needs to be done in Illinois to ensure that all students have access to a safe and supportive learning environment. Given that less than half of Illinois students reported being protected by comprehensive anti-harassment policies in their schools, it is imperative that lawmakers and school officials create state-level safe school legislation that offers explicit protection to students who are targets of bullying, harassment, and assault based on personal characteristics such as sexual orientation and gender identity/expression. Findings from this report suggest that comprehensive anti-harassment policies which explicitly include sexual orientation and gender identity/expression may help lower the frequency of biased remarks in Illinois schools. Almost a third of Illinois students did not know if their school had an anti-harassment policy of any kind, an indication that school staff and administrators must ensure that students are made fully aware of any anti-harassment protections provided by their school.

Illinois teachers and other school staff need training to address the inconsistency in their responses when hearing students make derogatory remarks and when learning of incidents of harassment and assault in school. In addition, schools should establish and enforce “no tolerance” policies regarding the use of biased language by school staff. Teachers and staff who understand their role in and responsibility for enforcing protective policies are more likely to do so effectively, thereby improving the safety and quality of the school environment for all students.

About the Methodology

Student interviews were conducted online by a nationally representative sample of 3,450 public and private/parochial students ages 13 to 18. Within this sample, an oversample of students was drawn from Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Missouri, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Texas and Virginia. Interviews averaged 15 minutes and were conducted between December 15 and December 20, 2004. Sample was drawn from the Harris Poll Online (HPOL) multimillion member online panel of cooperative respondents from over one hundred countries. Invitations for this study were emailed to a selected sample of the database identified as residing in the United States and being a student between the ages of 13 and 18. Data for the national survey were weighted to reflect the national population of children ages 13 to 18 for key demographic variables (gender, age, race and ethnicity, size of place, region, and parent's education). Demographic weights were based on U.S. Census data obtained via the March 2004 Current Population Survey. For the national survey, a post weight was applied to the student data to adjust for the twelve state oversampling so that the regional distribution reflects the nation as a whole. State-specific data, including that which is presented in this report, does not reflect this postweight.